

ADA DUNMORE; OR, A MEMORABLE CHRISTMAS EVE.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

BY MRS. LEPROHON,

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"Ida Beresford;" "The Manor House of de Villerac;"
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PART SECOND.

CHAPTER VI.

This sudden, though favourable change, was of longer duration than I at first dared to expect, and though Fairy was still, of course, often restless and wayward, she became decidedly more obedient than she had ever yet been. Another source, however, of grave annoyance and anxiety to me, that more than counterbalanced any satisfaction I might have otherwise derived from Fairy's improvement, was the species of half patronizing, half admiring, and wholly impertinent attention with which Mr. Sherwin began to persecute myself.

Under plea of bringing Fairy to the school-room, a thing which he artfully contrived the child should always insist on herself, he would frequently make his appearance there, and lounging against my desk in his indolent, graceful way, inform me in low confidential tones how he had always thought clever or deeply read women were terrible inflictions till he had met me—that he hoped I would succeed in making Fairy as intellectual and charming as myself, with still more annoying compliments to my personal appearance. A little more, and I felt I would learn to hate Eden Sherwin with all my heart! This state of things was exceedingly perplexing, for I had no remedy beyond what my own repellent firmness of manner furnished me with. On such a subject I could not bring myself to complain to Mr. Ellerslie, whom I rarely saw alone—still less to Mrs. Sherwin, whose manner towards myself became more distant and exacting every day, prompted by her maid Croker's secret and malicious influence. At least, so I was led to infer from some careless remarks that had fallen from Fairy. One means that I had adopted of checking as much as possible, Mr. Sherwin's unwelcome intrusion into the school-room, was the practice of rising whenever he entered, and remaining standing till he had taken his departure. This proceeding greatly annoyed him, as well as did the marked but cold respect with which he was always treated, and, one afternoon, that he had entered with Fairy in his arms, and I had risen as usual, he impatiently exclaimed:

"I really wish Miss Dunmore, that you would not be so absurdly punctilious. 'Tis wearisome beyond measure. Where is the use of it?"

"Mr. Sherwin," I pointedly rejoined, "I never wish to lose sight of the respect due to your station, so that you may never forget what is due to mine."

"Considerate—prudent, indeed," he replied, with something like a sneer curling his handsome lip. "But, what if I prove sufficiently obtuse not to take the hint—what if I persist in telling you what ninety out of a hundred of your sex would like to hear, that you are one of the most interesting, *piquante*, fascinating women I have ever yet met?"

"I will leave the room then, Mr. Sherwin, at once," I angrily rejoined, turning to the door as I spoke, when I suddenly found myself confronted with Mr. Ellerslie.

"I beg pardon for my intrusion," he courteously said, directing at the same time a keen glance towards my flushed face. "Maggie told me I should find her master here. Sherwin, I want you, please, for a few moments."

"At your disposal entirely, my dear fellow, provided it be not to bore me with some wretched matter of business," he rejoined with the most perfect composure. "I get enough of that whilst on duty."

Mr. Sherwin held a very lucrative post under government, and because he sauntered in, between ten and eleven in the morning, to his elegantly furnished office in King street, and sauntered out again at three in the afternoon, chose to consider himself a victim to hard work.

"Fairy here, is such a little tyrant, that I have to bribe her sometimes into coming to her lessons by carrying her myself."

"I think that quietly asserting and enforcing your authority would be the most judicious way for a father!" drily returned the other.

"Oh! you are such a shocking martinet, Ellerslie. You are really only fit for a Colonel of Sepoys, or a Russian Boyard!"

Taking no notice of this impertinence, the object of it left the room, followed by the master of the house, and I resumed my seat, wearying and worrying myself with conjectures as to whether Mr. Ellerslie supposed I had tacitly encouraged, in any manner, his brother-in-law's presence in the school-room. I was led to think he understood somewhat better the true position of matters, for his manner towards myself became more gentle and kind, and I observed on one or two occasions, when Mr. Sherwin had followed Fairy and myself into the garden, under pretence, of course, of playing or talking with the former, Mr. Ellerslie quietly joined our party, addressing his remarks chiefly, however, to his brother-in-law, who seemed anything but grateful for his company.

'Tis but right I should here render a tribute to the character of Mr. Ellerslie. Quiet, gentlemanly, endowed with rare powers of conversation which, however, he seemed careless about displaying, he possessed a higher characteristic which attracted my admiration all the more, that it was displayed in so uncongenial an atmosphere. Rupert Ellerslie was a sincere though unostentatious Christian; and Mr. Sherwin never indulged in the flippant criticisms or sneering jests of which he was rather fond, either against virtue or religion, in the former's presence, without receiving an open and fearless rebuke from him.

Mrs. Sherwin, whose health at the present time was very delicate, was frequently confined whole days to her room, but, instead of enjoying the respite this should have afforded me, it only added to my troubles by leaving her husband more at leisure to annoy myself.

One memorable day—how little I foresaw that morning, when I left my lace-draped couch, what the day was to bring forth—I was seated in the school-room alone, Fairy having pleaded for permission to run to her mamma's room to show her a little bead chain she had made herself, promising to be back immediately—when the door opened and Mr. Sherwin entered.

"I have a new toy for Fairy," he languidly said, "if her governess can give me a good account of her!"

"She is in Mrs. Sherwin's dressing-room, Sir. You will find her there, and she really merits any little token of encouragement you may choose to give her."

"Then, she will be up in a moment, so I will wait for her here. Does any one else deserve a reward for good conduct?" he continued, fixing his earnest gaze upon my face, which instantly became crimson, one of the unpleasant consequences of my secluded bringing-up.

"See!" and he laid a richly gemmed bracelet on the desk before me. "The teacher surely deserves encouragement as well as the pupil."

"Thank you, Mr. Sherwin," I replied as firmly as my embarrassment would permit. "I will not accept your costly gift, nor have I earned it. My salary is liberal—indeed overpays me."

"How distressingly literal you are! If you will not accept it as a tribute to your own merits, as the gift of a friend, take it then as the gift of your patron and employer."

"Nor as that, either! I might, perhaps, receive it under such terms if I were your housemaid or under-nurse, but not in my actual position."

"Then if you will not accept what you are pleased to style my costly gift, take this one, which cost nothing beyond the trouble of gathering," and he placed beside the bracelet a bouquet of choice flowers.

"No! No! Mr. Sherwin!" I impatiently, vehemently exclaimed. "I shall take nothing from you but my salary, and that not long, for your ungenerous importunities will force me to seek without delay another situation and another home."

"You deserve to be punished for your childish obstinacy," he replied, as composed and unruffled in manner as if I had been lending the most favourable ear to his flatteries. "See how I deal with headstrong prudes like yourself," and seizing my hand, he carried it to his lips.

Insulted—terrified by his audacity, I made a desperate futile effort to free my hand from his clasp, and burst into a passion of indignant, bitter tears. At that critical moment the door which had previously been slightly ajar, was thrown violently open, and Mrs. Sherwin, in her white embroidered morning dress, appeared on the threshold.

Her husband instantly dropped his hand, muttering in a low tone, "Now for it!" whilst the lady advanced into the room, and with a cheek pale as marble and eyes literally blazing with passion—I never knew blue eyes could flash so fiercely before—confronted us both.

"Ah! I see!" she at length said in a voice trembling with passion, "I see that my suspicions were well-founded and just. Ada Dunmore, how dare you stand there and confront unblushingly the mistress you have so shamelessly striven to supplant?"

"I have done nothing of the sort, Mrs. Sherwin!" I proudly, indignantly rejoined. "Neither in thought, word, or deed."

"Silence! false, insolent girl! As if the proofs of guilt lying before you—that bracelet which I saw this morning in the secret drawer of his dressing-case—those flowers which I watched him gathering from the window, were not enough, I find him pressing your hand to his lips, whilst you stand in sentimental grief, doubtless weeping over the ill-starred destiny which keeps you apart?"

Advancing nearer and snatching up the flowers which yet lay on the desk where Mr. Sherwin had laid them, with such violence that I involuntarily recoiled, she continued:

"A nice bouquet truly for a married man to give his daughter's governess! Of course, young lady, you who are so entirely mistress of dead and living languages, can read the fervent sentiments expressed in this choice collection? Myrtle, Peach blossom, Indian Jasmine, Pansy," and she tore each flower to pieces as she named them, "with their eloquent significations of love; I'm your captive; I attach myself to you; think of me! I hope you are satisfied with such a declaration!"

It did not seem to strike Mrs. Sherwin that though I knew the Latin names, classes and orders of nearly all the blossoms in her gardens, I had scarcely heard of such a thing as the language of flowers, and was utterly ignorant of any of the significations attached to them. Too much agitated though to tell her this, to speak, to even think of a reply, I stood with beating heart and parched lips, listening to the false accusations thus heaped upon me, when Mr. Sherwin impatiently burst in:

"Nonsense, Helen! What ridiculous fuss are you making about a couple of trifling acts of gallantry such as are offered every day in our circle by married men to pretty women; aye, such as you yourself, fair wife, have probably not only permitted often, but actually encouraged?"

"Silence this minute! Do you dare to defend your conduct? Ah! Eden Sherwin, you are an ungrateful, false-hearted traitor; while that girl, Ada Dunmore, is —"

"Why, what is all this?" enquired the voice of the astonished Mr. Ellerslie, who in passing through the corridor had been attracted to the door of the school-room by the loud sounds of strife within. "Helen, tell me what does all this mean?"

"It means," she retorted, turning fiercely upon him, "that the innocent, inexperienced girl, as you were pleased to style her, the irreproachable young governess you introduced into your sister's family is plotting against that sister's peace—granting clandestine interviews, accepting clandestine gifts from her husband."

"I do not believe it!" he gravely, firmly rejoined. "Miss Dunmore has not acted thus. Eden Sherwin, if you have one spark of honesty or manhood in you, speak up at once and tell me your weak-minded suspicious wife the truth. Tell her that you have persecuted, annoyed, harassed this young girl with attentions alike unwelcome and hateful to her, done this so openly, too, that I would have felt myself called upon to interfere before this, had not her own natural good sense and strict principle rendered it unnecessary. Is not this the case? Speak up, man, and make the only amends in your power for the mischief you have wrought!"

"Of course it is the truth!" rejoined Mr. Sherwin in a peevish tone. "Had it been otherwise—had she given me one smile, one word of encouragement, I would have turned from her at once with indifference, but it was precisely her evident distaste to myself, her rigid merciless prudery that provoked, piqued me into persisting!"

"I believe you, brother mine," and Mr. Ellerslie's tone grew markedly significant. "Had I thought for a moment there was anything more serious in your folly—anything deeper than the silly attentions you feel yourself called on to pay the owner of every pretty face you meet, I would have interfered before this, to protect the young girl recommended to my care by a dying father."

"I don't believe a word you say, Rupert," retorted Mrs. Sherwin, still unappeased. "Tis all very well for you two

men to play into each other's hands, but you cannot deceive or blind me thus. Miss Dunmore may carry her valuable services—her wonderful lore—her knowledge of languages elsewhere, for I have no further need of them."

"I shall leave the house before her at any rate," exclaimed Mr. Sherwin, endeavouring to speak with his usual nonchalance, though his heightened colour betokened he was greatly excited. "Ellerslie, have you any commands for New York? I start for there without an hour's delay. I am getting tired of domestic felicity. Good-bye, Miss Dunmore, and pray accept, before we part, my sincere excuses and regrets for the annoyance I have caused you in so many ways!"

He bowed low to us all, and as he rapidly descended the stairs, we heard him loudly ordering his servant to pack up changes for two month's absence immediately, as they were to leave home that afternoon.

An ominous silence followed his departure, which was broken by Mrs. Sherwin's turning to me and asking with quivering lips "was I not satisfied with my work?"

Stunned, bewildered by the scene through which I had just passed, I still felt I must make some effort to reply, to justify myself, and clasping my trembling hands together, I panted forth: "You do me cruel wrong, Mrs. Sherwin! I call on heaven to witness I am innocent of all you charge me with!"

"Spare me your second-rate acting, Miss Dunmore. I want no scenes rehearsed from any of your elaborate Greek tragedies. I tell you the dissensions, the unhappiness that has fallen on this house to-day is entirely your work."

"And I tell you, sister Helen, that it is entirely your own and no other's!"

"Of course you will say so!" was the mocking reply, "for, like my too susceptible husband, you also have probably been smitten by this young lady's personal charms. Miss Dunmore, I congratulate you! You have made good use of your fascinations and your time. Two conquests in the space of a few months, a married man and an inveterate old bachelor, is not so bad for a mere novice. But as I have already said, you are really too irresistible for this household! You must carry your many gifts elsewhere."

"And will you at least honestly use your influence, Helen, to procure her a home instead of the one from which you are so cruelly and unjustly ejecting her?"

"I will be frank with you, Rupert. To any one who applies to me hereafter, for information concerning her, I will candidly state under what circumstances she left this house. It will be only doing my duty to society!"

"Some of you women are more merciless to each other at times than the wild beasts of the jungle!" he muttered between his teeth, losing for the first time some of his usual imperturbable self-control.

"Thank you, Rupert! I am happy to see that Miss Dunmore is already provided with another knight errant in the place of my fickle husband, who has so abruptly abandoned the post," and darting a last withering look towards myself, she swept from the apartment, her brother silently following her after giving me a look expressive of respectful sympathy.

CHAPTER VII.

ALMOST unable to realize what had passed, I yielded to the feeling of helplessness, of overwhelming illness stealing over me, and sinking into a chair, bowed my aching, throbbing head on the desk before me.

What was it all about? Was I really culpable in any respect? Had any act of mine, arising out of my utter ignorance of life, laid me open to reproach or blame? No, a thousand times no! Memory could recall nothing to regret, nothing to condemn. It was simply the same remorseless destiny that in punishment of a moment's passion had driven my generous, warm-hearted brother from home and country, robbing him of everything in life, even to his own name and identity. In what was I better than him that I should hope to escape my share of that birth-right of sorrow that seemed to belong to our house and name? Well, it was the will of my Father in heaven—nothing remained for me but humble submission.

I was roused from these reflections by a voice at my side, pronouncing my name. It was Mr. Ellerslie.

"This morning's occurrences have been very unfortunate!" he remarked.

"Very!" was my brief, languid reply.

"May I ask what you mean to do? 'Tis not idle curiosity, believe me, that prompts the question, but deep friendly interest."

"I cannot say yet. Leaving Mrs. Sherwin's roof under the circumstances I do, I would find all other doors closed against me, at least as governess. I know nothing of needle-work, so I cannot offer myself in that capacity. I may, perhaps, find a situation as nursery governess or something of that sort."

"Impossible, Miss Dunmore! Utterly impossible! You must not, you shall not throw yourself away in such a manner!"

"What alternative have I but starvation?" was my bitter query. "I would not live on charity if it were offered to me."

There was a long pause, and then he slowly, hesitatingly said: "Yes, you have another alternative. Shall I—dare I propose it to you?"

The sudden change of manner, the unusual tremor in the tones of his voice caused me to look hastily up, but something in the expression of his countenance, manly, honourable as it was, made my eyes droop again, whilst in a low agitated voice he went on:

"The alternative I would offer you, Ada Dunmore, is that of becoming my wife. I would never have made this proposal to you, young girl, had your lot in life been happier. I would never have asked you to link your dawning fresh womanhood—your beauty—your rare and wonderful mental gifts with my plain, unattractive middle age; but as you have no other resource, no other friend, no other home, I place myself and what I have at your disposal."

I felt my colour come and go, my heart bound wildly, and when as it were stand still, but at length I contrived to falter: "Mr. Ellerslie, I scarcely know what to say! This sudden proposal, so unlooked for, so undreamed of, fills me with overflowing gratitude to the generous friend who has made it, but at the same time that very gratitude reminds me I should give my heart where I give my hand."

"One word—one single word, Ada! Do you love another?"

"No, nor have I ever done so!"

"That is enough, enough!" he joyfully rejoined. "Think you, I expected to find love ready-made, lurking in your heart