

"A GIRL OF GRIT."

CHAPTER III.



and she could not afford a cab.

When she reached the village which lay in the valley which Mount Rule House overlooked, she stopped at a little white-washed cottage and knocked. The door was wide open, so Helen walked in before the woman, who was washing at a tub which stood on a chair, had time to answer. When the woman saw her, she dropped the shirt she was washing, and held on to the tub as if she had been shot.

"Well, Miss Helen, if that isn't your sweet self. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw you standing there; but, sakes alive, how hot and tired you look! Sit down, miss, sit down!"

She dusted a chair for Helen with her apron and asked her if she would like a glass of milk. Helen gladly accepted the offer, and in a minute or two she was making a good lunch off some fresh girdle cake and milk. After answering a marvellous flow of questions, Helen got to the point she had come for.

"Is Davis in, Mrs. Leith?"

"He'll be here in less than five minutes, miss, he always comes home for a bit of something hot at one o'clock."

The words were no sooner spoken than Davis appeared at the door. He was as much astonished to see Helen as his wife, but, man-like, he was less eloquent.

"And what may you want, miss?"

"I want you to come up to Mount Rule House with me, Davis."

"And what can I do for you there, Miss Helen?"

"Davis, do you remember a hole in the floor of the lumber-room that you mended about a year before we sold Mount Rule? It was a big hole made by the rain dropping through the skylight that was always open."

"Indeed I do, miss, and I remember how angry Master Harold was when it was mended, young man though he was. He said that that there hole had been his best friend when he was a little chap. All sorts of things used to get brushed in that hole, and what a child is tired of one day, he thinks a powerful lot of two days after."

"Well, Davis, it's one of the things that got put in that hole that I want to get now. Will you come up as quickly as you can and open the floor? You can do it, can't you?"

"Yes, miss. I can do it, but what about the master?"

"Oh, I have got his leave! I asked him yesterday."

"Then I'll come, miss, for I'm right glad to see you back in the old place."

As Helen passed through the village with

Davis, her progress was impeded by kindly greetings from all the villagers. There was a word to be spoken here, and a friendly hand-shake there, and Helen's impatience to get to work was so great that she had no little difficulty in hiding her desire to hurry on. One thing she gladly accepted, a large bunch of flowers from a well-stocked cottage garden.

"It will be a bit of country to take back to Master Harold," the woman said as she gave them to Helen, who was still in their eyes the daughter of the "big house." When Davis and Helen passed through the gates of her old home they stopped talking. The rough working joines saw and understood, with the fine feeling that often lies under rough clothes, the girl's emotion. There were the dear apple-trees she had climbed as a child, and there the smooth grassy lawns stretching as far as the eye could reach, and over yonder to the left the cherry orchard ripe with Kentish White Hearts. Helen clenched her hands tightly and closed her eyes a moment, for the sight of her mother's bedroom window had blinded them with tears. At last they came to the front door, and the great bell pealed through the desolate house. When the caretaker came—she was a stranger to Helen—she showed her cousin's card with his permission to go where she pleased and do what she liked.

"Come straight upstairs to the lumber-room, Davis," Helen said. "I have no time to spare, though I should like to look over the dear old place." As she walked up the wide oak staircase followed by Davis, she noted the old familiar landmarks of her childhood. There was the patch on the stair-carpet that no amount of clever manoeuvring would hide. How well she remembered her poor mother twisting it and turning it at every spring-cleaning to bring the best pieces to the front of the stairs, and there was the post still out of the bannister which had suddenly given way when Harold was hanging his legs through them. Not a single thing was altered, and there was the same horrible stillness in the big house that there had been the morning her mother had died. A little shiver passed through her, and she hurried up the long top flight of stairs. When they reached the old lumber-room which had been her play-room as a child, the room of all others which held all her happy childish memories, she stopped and told Davis to go first.

"It's like taking a step back in one's life, Davis," she said. "This room was made into a lumber-room when I was at college, and I've scarcely been in it since; but it was my castle when I was a little child."

When Davis turned the key in the door and opened it, a breath of fresh air greeted them. It came from the little opened skylight, right over the spot where the old hole in the floor had been. The new wood which had been put in to mend the hole was beginning to discolour, and a few dead leaves were lying on the floor.

"These come from the old copper-beech, Davis; they always used to blow in when the wind was this way."

She sat down on the top of a packing box and watched Davis begin his work, and while she watched him her mind travelled back to the day she had hidden her treasure in the floor. She had suddenly learnt that she possessed, unknown to any one, an object of some value, but of what value she did not understand.

A fear lest her cousin should see it and desire to possess it, seized her, and so prevented her telling anyone of the trophy she

had found amongst the things which were handed over to her as of no value in the legacy her uncle had left her.

Her meditations were suddenly broken by Davis exclaiming,

"There now, miss, I think I've done that there job pretty sharp, and I hope you'll find what you want."

Trembling with excitement Helen jumped down from her perch and knelt down on the floor. "Hand me that stick, please, Davis, I can't reach it with my arms." He handed her a stout walking stick she had taken from the hall downstairs for the purpose.

"There, I can't reach it even yet, I must get down as I used to when I was a child—flat on my face, or I shall never reach it."

Davis smiled kindly at the girl who was trembling with excitement, and wondered what on earth she had hidden in the floor all those years, and had only remembered now.

"It must be quite six years ago," he said, "since I mended this hole."

"Ah, I remember it was on this side I put it," and Helen pushed the stick along the opening, but she felt nothing.

"Can I do it for you, miss?"

"No, thank you, Davis, I know my position isn't a dignified one, but only I myself know where it is. Ah, there, did you hear the stick knock against something tin, that's it!"

With a good deal of skilful handling of the stick Helen at last managed to draw the tin box to the opening in the floor, and with trembling hands she lifted it out. She sat up with the box on her lap, and commenced untying the string with hot nervous hands. Just for one moment she looked up to the blue overhead, which showed through the skylight, and prayed that she might find her treasure safe. Quietly she sat beside the big hole in the floor with the treasure she had drawn out of it clasped in her hands, just as she used to sit when she was a little child. Even at that moment she remembered the day she had put in her hand and had drawn out the beautiful fair-haired wig off her favourite doll. She recalled how bitterly she had cried when one day she found her elegant lady doll minus her hair. Her cousin had skilfully dislodged the beauty's fair wig from her waxen head, and the wig was nowhere to be found.

"Now, Davis, you must share my secret. Come and see!"

The lid of the tin box was a tight fit, and Helen's fingers were too nervous to unfasten it, so Davis took it from her. When it was opened Helen lifted off some paper and looked in.

"Ah, Davis, thank God, it's all safe and sound! Look, that's what was hidden here all these years!"

Davis looked, and an expression half of pity, half scorn, came into his eyes. "Well, miss, I did think as it would be a piece of jewelry, or something of that sort. But I never see'd such a thing to take on like that about. It ain't no interest to me, miss, but I'm glad I've done the job for you, and now I suppose I must fix up the hole again."

Helen thanked him and offered to pay him, but he refused to take any money. "It's been real pleasure, Miss Helen, but I wish it had been som't of more value." Helen smiled and said to herself—"Ah, he doesn't know, he doesn't understand, but I had to show it to him, and now I'm free to keep the real surprise for Harold." So with a kindly farewell she left Davis to do over again the job he had done six years ago.

(To be concluded.)