

"A GIRL OF GRIT."

CHAPTER IV.



IT WAS eight o'clock in the evening of the same day when Helen climbed the little stair which led to her brother's room. She was footsore and weary, and exhausted for want of food. She had walked every step of the road back to the station with her valuable tin box and a large bunch of

flowers in her arms, and the excitement of the day with the tender associations it recalled had brought on to her

mental fatigue which was foreign to her healthy nature.

When she got to the back of the door she heard voices—it was the doctor, who was paying Harold one of his weekly visits. But this did not deter her from rushing into the room, for she felt that she must use her last ounce of strength for the supreme moment, for a feeling of faintness was coming over her. So, with a cry of joy, she flung herself on her brother's bed and held the tin box at arm's length above her.

"Harold, Harold, I've found it, safe and whole! You can go into the country for three or four weeks; and we can pay for the tonics, I know we can, for it's worth a lot of money. Harold, do you hear me?"

The doctor took the box out of her hands and laid it on the table, and lifted her off the bed and put her in the arm-chair. Her arms dropped loosely to her sides, and her head fell back, then a quivering sigh ran through her—she had fainted.

"Look, doctor, she has fainted! Oh, Helen, what is the matter? Doctor, is she very ill?"

"Keep in your bed, young man. You're not strong enough to help; but ring the bell."

In a minute Mrs. Larkin answered the furious peal which Harold had given the old-fashioned bell-rope.

"Here, Mrs. Larkin," exclaimed the doctor, "unfasten her dress; and have you any eau de cologne?"

When Helen's head had been bathed, and the doctor had held it well forward until it almost touched his knees, she began to recover consciousness, and she held out her hand as if groping for something.

"The tin box," she whispered. "Don't let it fall or you will break all our fortune."

The doctor smiled.

"It's quite safe, my dear child, and when you are better we will open it and see what treasure it contains."

"Harold must open it, please; and I'm nearly all right now, indeed I am."

Mrs. Larkin washed her face in cold water, and the colour returned to her pale cheeks.

"I must sit on the bed and watch him open it, doctor, and I'll not faint again, I promise you."

The doctor pretended to be cross, but at once helped her to the bed, where she sat down with a beautiful smile of satisfaction on her face. Harold's thin white hands opening the box were in striking contrast to the strong rough hands of the joiner who had opened it a few hours previously.

When the lid was open, Helen lifted off the paper and watched Harold's eyes. Her heart was beating with excitement. A terrible look of disappointment and fear came into her brother's face when he saw the treasure displayed, and almost in a whisper he said—

"Chum, dear, there's only a queer-looking egg in the box; what do you mean?" Hurdly he put his hand again in the box. "No, wait a minute," he said, "there is something else in it. Yes, here's a little agate cross; the one you used to wear as a child, Chum."

And he handed it to her. Helen took the little cross. She had forgotten she had hidden it with the egg. It was a little keepsake which a soldier friend, for whom as a child she had had a hero worship, had given to her many years ago. These were her two treasures, and she had hidden them away together from the weasel eye of her cousin. The soldier was a mere boy when he had said good-bye on the eve of his first departure from England; but in the story of Helen's after-life the little agate cross played a very important part.

The doctor took the egg from Harold and examined it.

"I have never seen one like it before," he said; "but for all that, what is the joke you are playing on us, Miss Helen?"

Helen held out her hand for the tin box, and Harold gave it to her; lying at the bottom of it, folded flat and very discoloured with age, was a letter. Helen took it out and handed it to the doctor. With some difficulty he read it through, and suddenly exclaimed—

"Dear me! dear me! The girl's not daft after all; it's the egg of the great auk, found by your uncle, Captain Churchill, in the year 1842 off the Faroe Islands. He leaves it, with his collection of birds' eggs and some other smaller legacies, to his niece Helen, only daughter of his favourite sister of the same name. He goes on to say that some day, when you are in need of it, you can inquire at the Natural History Museum what the value of the egg is, and turn it to account; but you are in no wise to part with it during your father's lifetime."

Harold pinched Helen's fingers. "Good old uncle, he knew it would go the same way as everything else. Can't you imagine father 'putting' the great auk's egg on 'Zingari,' or some other horse he believed in at the moment."

"Hush, Harold, don't," Helen was on the verge of tears. The doctor put the letter back in the box, and also the wonderful egg, and congratulated the youthful pair, who were already building wild castles in the air.

"How did you come to get the letter and the egg, my dear; didn't anyone know the value of it?"

Helen told the long story in a few words. "When uncle's legacy came, father was away, and mother, who was always an invalid, was easily coaxed into letting me have my own way; so when all the things which seemed to her of value were taken away from me (I was twelve at the time), I insisted on having the collection of birds' eggs, which she had not the slightest idea were of much importance,

and I only coveted them to add to my own poor little collection; so I was given the box of eggs, and one day when I was tidying it, as you know children love to tidy, at the bottom of the box, which was beautifully made, and which, of course, my cousin now possesses, I found this letter, telling me about the great auk's egg. As a child I thought it was the egg of a solan goose, and imagined it very valuable if worth a few shillings; but I determined that as it was left to me by my dead uncle, I would never part with it. Then my cousin came, who robbed me of everything, and one by one the eggs my uncle had left me changed hands. In a year's time he possessed every one except this. One night I hid it with the little agate cross, where I thought he would never find it."

"It was very successfully hidden, my dear child; and now let me advise you to put it away safely, and have some supper."

"Oh, I must show it to Mr. Larkin first; it was he who put me in mind that I had once had one, and where I had hidden it."

Mrs. Larkin had been standing open-mouthed in utter amazement at all that had happened. "I'll go and call Larkin, miss, he'll be that proud to see it, for he'll feel as if he'd had a hand in bringing you good fortune."

She called downstairs for her spouse, who was, as usual, sitting in the most comfortable seat in the kitchen smoking.

"I was just coming up, missis, for there's a letter for missie," and Mr. Larkin came leisurely upstairs.

"Here, Mr. Larkin," said Helen, "you mustn't touch, but you may look. This is an egg just like the one the gentleman paid two hundred and fifty pounds for at Christie's sale."

Mr. Larkin threw up his hands and used an expression more graphic than polite. Helen took the letter from him and opened it.

"It looks dreadfully like the chemist's bill," she said to herself, "but never mind, we can afford to go on tick now."

When she had opened it, she sat down suddenly, and put her hand before her eyes. "Am I blind, Harold, or is it true? Read it. . . . The editor of the *Motor* has accepted all your sketches I sent him except one, and he will give you plenty of work to do whenever you are well enough. Things never come singly, not even good fortune!" and with a cry of delight she threw herself into her brother's arms. "Oh, Harold, dear, our dawn has broken. I knew it couldn't always be night!"

The doctor and Mrs. Larkin felt their presence was no longer required, so they slipped out and left the brother and sister locked in each other's arms.

Do you care to peep, dear reader, at the happy couple I passed the other day on the sands of Deal? The girl's face is familiar to me, but the look of anxiety has gone from it, and when I look again more closely at the young artist who is sketching by her side, I recognise him also, but his face is full of healthy interest in his work. It is only a parting glimpse of them, for we must say farewell at the beginning of the girl's life as a woman. My story dealt with the trials and crosses she endured before the dawn broke and the shadows flew away.

[THE END.]