

Love's Awakening

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Indeed, Miss Theodosia hated anything like personal adornment, and had waged such a life-war against beauty of every kind that it was a wonder she let the flowers grow in the vicarage garden, and didn't have the robins shot to a bird, for wearing red waistcoats.

Now, seeing us—six of us, chattering and laughing and making as much noise as a flock of starlings, coming towards her, I suppose that all her nature rose in protest against our light-heartedness. The path through the fields was narrow and we could only walk two abreast, I, as the heroine of the hour being one of the first couple.

I am inclined to think that there was always something peculiarly aggravating to Miss Theodosia in my appearance, and peculiarly obnoxious to her ideas of the training suitable to youth in the way in which the gentle sisters Jane and Mary spoilt me. Now, noting the extra rigidity of her always upright figure, and the stony stare of her colourless eyes, despair claimed me for its own.

"Out walking by yourselves, young ladies, eh?" she said, standing there right in our way, and looking, in her tedious tea-green dress and granny bonnet, like a blot upon the beauty of the fair summer day.

"We're allowed to walk by ourselves through the fields any time when we're out of school," said I, feeling by the sudden grip of my companion's hand on mine that she was quite incapable of holding parley with the enemy.

"Umph I shouldn't let you go out alone if I had the management of you," said Miss Theodosia.

The body of the force following in our wake were now huddled one against the other, listening eagerly to what was going on, and glancing back, I felt that the credit of the Vansitars was at stake.

"But, you see, you haven't the care of us," said I showing a bold front to the enemy, but feeling my heart beat to my finger ends for all that.

"You're a very rude little girl," said Miss Theodosia, getting an unwholesomely green in the face as the shade of her bonnet-ribbons; and a very untidy one too! she added. "If you were my little girl I should have all this cut off and done up in a crop."

"This," was my brown mane that Miss Mary had never yet had the heart to turn up high with a comb, or prison in a net after the hideous fashion of that day, and, oh horror—the bony fingers of the vicar's sister clutched a bunch of the locks that papa's dear hand had touched so lovingly only the day before.

"But I'm not your little girl," I cried, struggling against the loathing of her touch that possessed my soul; "you haven't got any little girls, not one; if you had they wouldn't love you—not a bit!" I added, with that air of entire conviction that is always exasperating. Indignation held Miss Theodosia silent from sheer breathlessness, while with no fear began to take the place of courage, and yielding to the impulse of flight, I sped like a lapping, the upper class of the lower division of Summerfield Academy for Young Ladies following in much haste and dire disorder.

In all my life at school I had never yet had a secret from Miss Mary. Even when in days that now seemed long ago I plucked some tempting little bright green balls from the fruit-trees on the kitchen-garden wall, and was straightway overwhelmed by a sense of my wrong doing, my first impulse was to seek out that dear instructress, and lay on her lap a little guilty hand, upon whose open palm lay the unlawful spoil. And now, conscience warned me that I had broken the laws of courtesy, that I had been less than a gentle-woman—that good old-fashioned title that meant so much and that all our training at Summerfield aimed at making us worthy of.

Well, it was all told before I had been home an hour, and if the secret sympathies of the mother-confessor were inclined to side with the penitent, that fact—which I was furtively and tenderly conscious—was allowed to avail me naught as to the reckoning to be paid.

Which heart, I wonder, was the heaviest, Miss Mary's or mine, as hand in hand we went upon our way towards the vicarage, with its many gables and its marvellous old yew-tree pruned into the semblance of an arch above the gateway?

Whose eyes were most prone to glisten with tears, hers or mine, I wonder, as the moment of my self-abasement drew nigh?

I almost fancy as I write that I can hear her sweet low voice, trembling a little yet—as I know—full of resolve that I shall do what is the only right thing, as she leads me to Miss Theodosia's side, and says:

"I have brought a little girl to tell you how sorry she is for her rude word

yesterday."

The pride of the Vansitars is not in a very flourishing condition as I stand there blushing up, the parting of the hair that Miss Theodosia so highly disapproves of, and down to my chin that is shaking with nervousness; but the clasp of the hand that holds mine gives me courage. I look the offended dame in the face, and speak out clearly enough as I own myself wrong.

How well I remember it all—and the good vicar coming in, seeing me in tears—for now the ordeal is over I have melted into limp distress—saying as he pats my little hot hand:

"Put, tut, tut what's all this, eh?"

Papa came to see me many times after that and the golden days of my life came round in happy succession. I little thought then, dearly as I loved him, how his memory would shine one day with a new and exquisitely tender light—the light that shines for all of us on the things that we have loved and lost; but I was very happy, and grew tall and stately with the passing of the years.

At last I was considered old enough to go home to Hazeldene for the holidays, and when I got there found that Roderick was not by any means so big as he had seemed to be in the days when Terence carried me into the yard to look at him.

CHAPTER III.

Eulalie.

Among other precious relics now in my possession, of her who gave her life for mine are some paintings of exquisite finish and design. One is a landscape with the yellow light of the hidden sun catching the edges of the haystacks in a farmyard, and glancing on the figure of the goodman coming home to the low-roofed rose wreathed cottage where his wife and child are keeping watch at the open window; another shows the sea sparkling beyond the hills, and a tiny craft, all black and silver in the moonlight. These, and such-like kindred subjects had warmed into appreciative love the sensitive nature of Alice Vansitar, my unknown unseen mother.

Not only these, for, traced and colored upon ivory, I have here a friend of fern crossed by a solitary heather-bell, there an autumn-tinted leaf with red berries, round and ripe. Flowers and leaves are so skillfully drawn that they almost look as though some careless hand had dropped and left them lying there.

They are to me the records of a beautiful mind—a link between the dead mother and the living child; for have I not inherited that passionate love of nature and of the beautiful that these dear records tell of?

During the first days of my happy life at Summe field I discovered, in the hedge that bordered our vast old rambling garden, a gap—a delicious gap—just wide enough to let my little body creep through, carefully guarding against thorns in the process.

This gap of mine led into a wood, a wood so lovely in its miniature hills and dales, its tiny, trickling, tinkling brook that sped along its shallow bed so blithely it seemed to be laughing at the flowers upon its banks in ripples of merriment, that I thought it quite a fairy-land.

There was such moss, too, in that wood! Moss like pearls, moss like cups, moss like miniature trees. For the spears, green and rose-tipped, my fancy called into existence a fairy army for the cups, white-chaliced and green stemmed, a host of fairy revellers. Great fungi, too, grew here and here, and these I thought must surely be the fairies' tents, under which they held nightly merry-makings when I was fast asleep in my cot beside Miss Mary's bed.

How I loved my world—with all its wild, uncultured loveliness! Now, looking back, I know that the joy that filled my little heart as I looked upon these things was a heritage—part of that awful and mysterious sympathy that exists between the mother and the child, for good as for evil, not only to love what was beautiful—but to love it blindly and passionately as a part of my nature; and that the word beauty as applied to things, is mental as to its nature and action. I loved with devotion Miss Mary's placid gentleness; I saw and recognized with marvellous intuition for so young a child, the tenderness of the three sisters for each other—the common sorrow, borne as a common burden.

I was, in a word, like the unknown person who sent Polly to Summerfield, full of impulses—some good, as witness my outbreak of passion to Miss Theodosia in the barley-field.

"That child has a terrible nature," I once-overheard Miss Mary say to Miss Jane; "she will be prone to idolize all her days."

I had been talking to her about papa—about all I meant to be and do for him when I should go to live always at

Hazeldene and had worked myself up into a state of trembling excitement.

Soon after this Mr. Staveley—the old gentleman whom I had laughed at and felt sure would look amusingly ugly in his barrister's wig—died suddenly. He was pleading a cause, when all at once he threw up his arms and fell back dead. His daughter was sent for that night, and it fell to Miss Mary's lot to break her sorrow to her. I saw the poor girl come out from this interview, her eyes swollen with weeping, her face pale and tear-stained.

She went away, and together with the blow that had befallen her, was soon forgotten by those who had been her companions. Not, however, by me; I went to my wood—the gap was a stile now, and there was no need to creep through it—and sat by the murmuring stream, thinking, pitying, sobbing to myself. It was not Louisa Staveley exactly that I was pitying, thus, but myself, as a possible mourner. "Whatever should I do if my papa were to die?" That thought was the root of all my sadness. I knew that mothers died, for had not mine? but hitherto I had hardly realised that fathers too were mortal.

I should not be able to look at the flowers, or listen to the birds. I should lie down somewhere on my face where no one but God could find me.

And then with a rush of consolation intense enough to hold an element of pain, the thought of papa's grand stature, hearty ringing voice, and perfect health came across me, and I felt infinitely glad that such a sorrow as Louisa's Staveley's was safe not to come near me. I had now reached the age of thirteen years, and my appetite for reading was insatiable; my love of music a passion. Miss Jane, herself a fine performer on the piano and the harp, did not disdain to play duets and concerted music with me. The occasion of our annual examination-day and its attendant festivities was a triumph for me, the sweetness of which not even Miss Theodosia's sour visage watching me from her place of honour beside our principal could blight.

One source of satisfaction may have soothed her somewhat, for my long locks were no longer flowing about my shoulders as of yore, but decorously as their curly nature would permit of.

And now I came to an eventful period in my life, for a new influence, an one that was destined to be a fateful one for me, crossed my path, Eulalie Le Breton came to Summerfield, and that love of the beautiful, that worship of perfection in any form of which I have already spoken as being a characteristic of mine, led me to fling my heart into her lap, as it were, and rejoice greatly in all the close companionship of a school friendship.

Hitherto, beyond my dear Miss Mary, I had had no chosen friend. Now I walked with Eulalie, talked with Eulalie, nay, dreamt of Eulalie.

Such girl-loves are but the shadows of coming loves still deeper and more absorbing; the outcome of the awakening romance of the awakening woman in the child's nature; but they are oftentimes real and true, and full of the holiest lesson love in any form can teach, namely, the lesson of self-forgetfulness, training the mind to think of and for another, moulding the character that will one day find its highest development in wifehood, and the still more unselfish love of the mother.

In these days few tasks would have seemed so me too hard to be undertaken for love of my school friend.

I was more vain of her beauty than of any personal gifts of my own. For anyone to admire her was a sure passport to my goodwill; the hand that could strive to injure her would have belonged to my bitterest enemy. There even seemed a sort of shame to me in the thought that I was rich while she was poor; that I was a wealthy baronet's daughter, while she must one day face the world single-handed, and earn a bread before she ate it.

Have I not well said, then, that in such attachments lies the very shadow of love in its fullest and deepest sense?

Eulalie was five years my senior, and had come to Summerfield partly as a pupil, partly as a teacher. She had had great sorrow, and knew great reserves, my dear Miss Mary told me, with a tearful mist in her own dark eyes. These sorrows naturally enlarged my sympathies for the new pupil-teacher even before I looked upon the lovely face of which, throughout all the years of my life since, I have never seen the equal.

The first time I saw her she was sitting at the end of the long, low school-room by the window through which came the level golden rays of a summer's day fall; a child stood at her knee, who, by her aid, was stumbling through that first step to learning—the alphabet. Small and finely cut as some rare cameo, Eulalie's face had that appealing grace of expression that draws out the sympathies of the beholder in one look, a glance doing the work of years.

Her eyes, dark and deeply fringed, were soft, pathetic, sad, the close rolls of her bonnet hair twisted into a classic knot low on her neck, the chiselled mouth, the finely pencilled brows, all combined to form a perfect picture of the highest and most refined order of beauty; and when she spoke her voice was in keeping with the rest—soft and low, that most excellent gift in woman.

She was slight in figure, yet rounded in all the curves that I still lacked, and her hands were a marvel (so were mine, but rather one of redness and roughness than of beauty). They were exquisitely white, and each slender finger tapered to a tiny oval nail, rose-tinted.

"Oh, Miss Mary, how beautiful she is!" I said that night, still true to the old habit of telling every thought of my heart to that good friend.

"Yes, poor child!" said Miss Mary with a sigh, and said no more.

"Was it a sad thing, then, to be beautiful?" I wondered, as I lay awake and heard the swallows who lived beneath our wide eaves, disturbed by troubled dreams, twittering in their sleep. "How could it be a sad thing?"

At all events in Eulalie's case people seemed to think so; for, replying to some comment on the girl's exceeding loveliness, I heard Miss Mary say, "It would be better for her if it were not so. Life is an easy enough thing for some women, indeed it would be hard for them to step aside; but to others life is difficult, and of these I feel Eulalie will be one."

Later on I learnt that through a train of sad misfortunes and still sadder sins, my school friend's father had perished in the wreck of the chances fortune had given him. From one step of degradation to another had been an easy descent, and at last he perished weak in health at all times, succumbed under this heavy load of trial; and thus my pretty Eulalie was left utterly alone in the world. Ever ready to help and comfort those in adversity, those three dear sisters, joint mistresses of Summerfield, offered the advantages of studying under their roof in return for what aid she could give with the little ones of the household. More than this, between them they supplied her with every luxury in the way of dress that her slender purse could ill afford.

I am glad to be able to help the dear child, I heard Miss Jane say to the vicar for her mother was once kind to my dear Charley."

It was only screwed up his mouth, and looked so like Polly with his hands held all on one side. "Just so," he replied; and I remember that at that moment he might have been more than ever with advantage. My letter came at this period of my life when some song with an ever recurring refrain, "Eulalie, Eulalie" was the burden of mine.

When my birthday came round, papa sent me a little cross of massed turquoise upon a gold chain of the finest workmanship.

"My cross is lovely," I wrote to him; "I send you a thousand kisses for it, but I should like it better if my dear Eulalie had one too."

A day or two later the Misses Sylvester had a small and select tea-drinking, and there to my unspeakable delight was Eulalie, her slender throat crossed by a cross and chain so like that of the one from the other when I saw her side.

Miss Theodosia, appalled in a cold and rigid proportions and mortified, gave a sort of snort through her nose as she saw our ornaments.

"I give, if she tried, she could trumpet through that nose of hers like the elephants do through their trunks," she said to Eulalie, as I stood flushed and indignant in the dormitory afterwards.

She sat on the edge of her bed in her pure white dress, looking, I thought, like a saint. She was not angry with Miss Theodosia in my hot, indignant outspoken fashion; she only smiled as her pretty hand toyed with my gift, and raising two soft sweet eyes to mine she brought calm common-sense to bear upon my unseemly warmth.

"Does it matter what she says, Nellie, so long as she can't take our crosses and chains from us?"

Her placid gentleness so reproved me that I mentally prostrated myself anew before her little slippered feet, and felt as though one of them might well be set upon my neck.

"How will she ever get through the world, my sweet gentle Eulalie?" I thought as I unclasped my chain, kiss the cross for the giver's sake, and laid it in its velvet bed.

But in time to come I learned that there are other ways of opening that oyster the world than by main force; and that by virtue of her very gentleness, Eulalie could mould others to her will far more certainly than I—with headlong impulses and ready tongue.

That was not the only lesson either that the stern schoolmaster Time was to teach me. If anyone had told me in the days upon which I am now dwelling that because I was a baronet's daughter, because I had wealth, position, and influence, Eulalie set me even one step higher in her estimation than otherwise she would have done, I should have scorned such base insinuations and flung them back in the speaker's face with my wonted impolitic candour.

Well, well, I am not the only mortal who has made an idol but to find it clay."

Soon a golden day would dawn for me again. Not that all my days were not all more or less glad and happy; but the occasions of papa's visits to me stood out, as it were, in shining relief amongst the rest.

This visit, too, was to be a memorable one; for had I not my new ides to display in all its treasure of loveliness before his wondering and delighted eyes? The night before the day that was to bring him I could not sleep for joy; a long while I lay awake, wide-eyed, looking into the soft gloom of the summer night; then, setting Summerfield rules at defiance I slipped from my bed, stole into the dormitory next to mine, and perched myself like a little white owl on Eulalie's.

She was fast asleep, the long dark lashes resting on her cheek, and a smile upon her lips. How much I wanted to say to her! Half the happiness of pleasure is in someone's sympathy in it; but I could not find in my heart to rouse my friend from her calm, placid rest. Somehow, why or wherefore it was hard to say, I let myself glide gently to my knees, laid my hands palm to palm as Miss Mary had taught me long ago, and—prayed.

Prayed for what? That Heaven would watch over Eulalie and make the life that I had heard it said would be full of difficulties, a happy one.

CHAPTER IV.

At the Falls.

We had driven from Bromley to a waterfall some five miles distant.

The day was perfect. Our party numbered three; papa, myself, and Eulalie. Eulalie in a wide-brimmed hat that cast a shadow upon her eyes, giving a deepened intensity to their soft appealing glances.

There is a picture by Thomas Gainsborough of a girl in just such a hat, with just such a shadow over her lovely eyes—a picture very fair to see, but not one whit fairer than the living picture made by Eulalie that day. She had gathered a deep red rose, and set it in the fastening of the tippet that showed the fall of her graceful shoulder leaving the slender circle of her waist visible. She was very simply dressed, but the hat with its shadow, the sweet face beneath, the red, red rose, nestling against the delicate white throat—how perfect it all was.

I had wanted her to sit beside papa in the carriage, but she was quite shocked and troubled at the idea; I saw her lip quiver as she took her place opposite to us.

"You are too kind to me, Nellie dear," she said in a low voice, as if she did not wish papa to hear.

At all events he and I were the gainers by her persistency, for had we not a lovely picture to look at as we passed along between the summer-decked hedges and under the shadows of the trees?

I have said that my school friend was always quiet and retiring; but on this particular occasion she seemed so much more timid even than her wont that a droll thought came into my mind, and I half turned round so as to have a good comprehensive stare at papa, and see if I could find out why Eulalie was afraid of him. For that was the droll thought that her confusion had called up. I saw much to admire, but, or so it seemed to me, nothing to fear.

Papa had been many years older than my mother, and was now a handsome man of forty or thereabouts. The hair upon his temples was a little thinned, but that only added to the noble candour of his face; his eyebrows, like his dark curly locks, were slightly grey, his mouth was as sweet as a woman's and his smile—oh, no one ever had such a smile, I think. When he was thinking deeply his eyes, dark grey, not brown like his daughter's, had a look of gravity that some might think stern, but the moment he smiled this shadow of sternness vanished.

Today his eyes seemed always smiling as they dwelt long and often on the face beneath the shadow of the broad-brimmed hat.

There was triumph in my heart and in my eyes too, I daresay, as I noted this; for what is so pleasant as when you have helped to lead anyone to form a certain ideal, to see that reality equals fancy?

Eulalie was never a chatterer. I had been one from the day that I could make any practical use of my tongue at all; and now, our drive over and the footpath to the falls gained, I could hardly get the words out quick enough to express my delight. Sure-footed as a young goat I climbed here and there, leaving my more staid companions to follow or not as they saw fit. Now I discovered some lichen marvellously tinted orange and crimson and fled to papa's side with my treasure; now some rare flower, and added it to the posy in my hand but not before it had been held up for a word of admiration from him.

"You're like a bird let out of a cage, my darling," he said, as I came suddenly down a bank and lighted just in the pathway of the other two. I had been singing for joy, or perhaps because I hated to be silent, and this is what I sang:

"Te souvenirs tu Marie
De notre enfance aux champs?
Des jeux dans la prairie—
(J'avais alors quinze ans)
La danse sur l'herbette,
Egevait nos loisirs—
Le temps que je regrette,

C'est celui des plaisirs

I forgot the words of the verse that followed, so hummed the sweet plaintive air until I came to the refrain at the last;—

"Ma bouche en van repeto
Des regrets superflus—
Le temps que je regrette
C'est le temps qui n'est plus?"

Music at all times had a mighty power over me, and I possessed that capability that alone gives true passion and pathos to song—the capability of identifying myself for the time being with the sentiment expressed.

Now, the very beauty of all that surrounded me, the happiness of my own heart in the nearness of the two human beings dearest to me, made me realise with a strange intensity what it would be to look back upon such golden days when they were lost for ever. . . .

With all my soul in my voice, I sang again the last two lines of that wonderful song, a song full of the very spirit of a loving passionate regret, sweet as the scent of dead flowers;—

"Le temps que je regrette
C'est le temps—qui—n'est—plus!"

"Why, Nellie!" said papa's voice close by me, and I started from the fit of musing into which I had fallen. He took my hand in his and held it close. "What a sad song! you might be Undine the spirit of the waterfall weeping over her lost love; what does my little girl know of regrets that she should sing so pitiful a ditty con amore!"

"I, dear papa, nay, I have no regrets, I was only thinking how terrible it must be for those who have—"

Eulalie's face was turned, away and I say her bosom heave.

"Oh, I should not have said that! I should not have sung that song—I was cruel—I did not mean it; I did not think Eulalie, forgive me, dear."

The sobs rose to my throat and choked me. Papa looked in some dismay from one of us to the other. It was really hard upon a man who had brought two young damsels out for a pleasant country drive to find them suddenly turned into a pair of Miobes; and it was my fault, too—my wicked thoughtless words had brought it all about. When I cry my nose gets red in a few seconds, and my face puckers in most unbecoming fashion; but Eulalie in tears was as beautiful as Eulalie under any other circumstances. The drowned eyes looked like diamonds in water, and the sweet, sad mouth trembled like that of a troubled child.

"How unkind of me to spoil your happy day together with my foolish nonsense!" she said at last, dashing the drops from her long, wet lashes and looking up at papa with a smile like the gleam of an April sun.

So the cloud of sentiment that had threatened to spoil our day of pleasure passed away, leaving its only trace in the closer pressure with which I held my friend's hand, and the redoubled kindness of papa's manner to her.

"And how is Mr. Twinkler getting on?" said papa, willing to lead us to cheerful topics.

"Oh, charmingly," I answered, laughing; he still "hopes that his lordship is in the enjoyment of good health;" but I'm not such a good customer to him as I used to be, papa. I'm getting past the stage of sweets and steel-pens, you see, I added with an air of indescribable dignity that set papa laughing, and made Eulalie smile.

"It's all very well to laugh," I said, with some show of indignation, "but the next time you come to see me you'll find me in long dresses."

"Fully fledged, eh?" said papa, still failing to be impressed, "like a bird whose plumage has attained its full growth."

Eulalie said nothing, but looked from one to the other with a certain tender wistfulness like one who watches a drama in which she has no part, so that I felt half ashamed of our banter.

All at once I caught sight of a silvery gleam among the far-off trees.

"It is the falls!" I cried, and was off like a bird, never stopping till I reached the rocky basis into which the natural fountain tumbled amid a feathery cloud of spray.

Ferns grew all about it; some bending their graceful heads towards the water as if they strove to see themselves in its shining surface, others nestling low down in crevices, and there in the moist gloom, growing of a brighter, fresher green than their confères in the full light of day.

The silver birch, that lady of the woods, grew plentifully near the falls, and one adventurous tree had grown half way up the steep bed of the cascade, dropping its feathery branches almost across the stream. Here a thrush had taken its perch, and was singing in madest trills and gurgles as if to try and drown the song of the falling water. . . .

Just as I stood drinking in the beauty of the whole scene, the sun, that had been hiding behind a fleecy cloud, came forth, and poured his light upon the falls until each ripple gleamed like silver and the spray like diamond dust.

I uttered an exclamation of delight which the thrush heard, I suppose, for with a quick rush he spread his wings and I saw his dappled breast glances

To be continued