

Love's Awakening

Continued from last issue

vexed she'd have been! She couldn't have done anything—not a thing—to shorten it one inch! was my next not very amiable reflection.

Then I reached the village, and saw a little worn white face lifted from its pillow to smile at the pretty yellow jelly that quivered on the willow-patterned plate I set on it.

'I have brought it with Miss Mary Sylvester's love,' I said to the sick child's mother, and I felt proud and glad to see how she smiled at the sound of the dear donor's name.

'She knows how to comfort a poor creature that's full of sorrow, does Miss Mary—God bless her gentle ways!' said the woman. 'There's them as means well, I make no doubt, but harasses a body dreadful with their pryin' ways.'

'Ah, thought I to myself, 'the scarcrow has been here hurting other people as she's been hurting me.'

As I went towards home again, my basket empty this time, a sudden squall of wind and rain came on, driving in my face, and wetting me through to the skin.

I had no umbrella with me as it chanced; but even if I had it would have been of little use. The wind seemed to have gone wild, and was tearing like a mad thing at everything within its reach.

Not only did it sway the poor trees earthwards but gave them a wrench round when it got them down; and as to my hat, which came loose in the melee, I saw it disappear aloft with its strings streaming out behind like the legs of a bird.

My head was stung, and my uncovered head—rain—fell straight along the ground—the little pools in the path—returned them into me.

All this while I was thinking of the three days when I was able to sit up and look through my window at a white world, snow-clad even to the tiniest twig upon the bare boughs of the hawthorn bushes.

'The wedding must wait till you are better, Nell,' he said; and then he added, 'Eulalie has been in dreadful trouble about you, dear; she has written nearly every day.'

'Thank her for me,' I said; and then I put my face up to his, and kissed him: 'Give her that for me,' I whispered shyly. I did not like that idea of the wedding being put off.

I took Miss Mary into my confidence in the matter, and she, calling to mind that Eulalie had no home of her own, and was obliged to remain in kind of a false position at Mrs. Langley's until papa took her away, came round to my view of things, and between us we persuaded him to let things take their course.

'I can wear the long dress another time,' I said, smiling, when this was settled. Yet I only spoke thus lightly to hide from him the pain it was to have to give it all up. As to spending my Christmas at Summerfield there was no hardship in that. The old place was like a cage from which five and twenty chattering magpies had flown, and its perfect quiet was very grateful to me in my weakness.

The wedding day was the fifth day of the new year; and the world was still as white and glistening as if it were a huge wedding-cake.

'See,' I said to Miss Mary as the hour appointed for the marriage drew on, 'the sun is shining his best for them that are in love.'

'I shall shut my eyes,' I heard the bells of the church sound so sweetly as I went to the altar, and I felt as if I were in a dream.

My eyes were closed, and I was in a dream, when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I opened my eyes to find that I was looking into the face of my father.

'I have been at Hazeldene ten days or was it ten years?' Lettie is good enough to look after the household matters for me occasionally,' said my stepmother with a slight heightening of the delicate colour in her cheek.

'There can be no need for anyone to worry about me,' I began; and then I heard a hearty voice, and a firm quick step.

'Nell, Nell! where is she?' said the voice. 'Oh, it is papa!' I cried with a great gasp and fled along the corridor into his arms at the end of it.

He was the same, thank God! let who might be changed; as 'fain' to see his 'little girl' as ever; and a little, just a little surprised, I think, to see the years shining in her glad eyes.

Clinging to his arm, I came along the passage and there, at the drawing-room door stood Eulalie with both her hands stretched out. I had never now filled the rôle of the lady and the old doctor, their great friend—were all mad about Lady Vansittart's charm and her gentleness.

The people in the county round had followed suit, and I was congratulated upon my own good fortune in having such a delightful stepmother until I lunched to pack up my things and flee the hills, and felt as if I would have given all my little world to have found myself sitting in the garden at Summerfield, with the rooks cawing above my head, and the whistling herself.

My father was sad within me, and I found myself looking upon my shoulders, and beginning to let off my rising irritation in energetic brushing. 'I love idleness; I like to sit with my hands before me in a room where there is only firelight.'

'But time is a talent to be accounted for,' said the young oracle in the arm-chair solemnly. 'And do you think tating with pink and white silks—' I began, with my usual indiscretion.

'This is for a Dorcas basket,' put in Miss Dove reproachfully. Then she changed the subject promptly, feeling I suppose, that I hadn't a leg left to stand upon. 'You and I must try and be good friends; the other two are so absorbed in each other—as it is only natural and right they should be—that I was really glad to hear you were coming. Sir Charles was quite kind about it, and said you would be a nice companion for me, and I for you.'

'Did papa say that?' My hair had fallen over my eyes, and I had to shake it back before I could look at her as, in sore amazement, I asked the question. 'Why not?' she said, raising her weak and watery glance from the pink silks destined for the Dorcas basket.

As I could not say why not, I said nothing. 'I like this place thoroughly,' was the next remark my companion made, and the old impulsiveness caused me to blurt out.

'That's a comfort!' after which impulsive rejoinder I saw myself flush furiously. But my arrow missed its mark.

'Yes, certainly it is,' sighed the gentle ring-dove. 'And I quite like the rest of the dear old parish church; he is perfectly sound, I find.'

'Sound!' I repeated, puzzled at the waters into which we had drifted. 'Why I never heard of there being anything the matter with Mr. Langstumpy Shetland that he rides all over the country. What has been the matter with him—heart—or lungs? My hairbrush was held poised in one hand as I waited her reply.

'I was speaking of his doctrine,' said Miss Lettie demurely. 'I don't know what possessed me, but all at once a feeling as if I were sitting came over me; I flung down the hair-brush, threw up the wide old-fashioned window, and leaning, my eyes upon the sill looked out towards the blue line in the distance longingly.

'Oh dear!' cried the gentle Lettie, 'you'll get your death of cold and bring on my neuralgia again.'

'But I saw fit to be deaf to all sound save that of dear old Roderick's bark.'

'Why, I was nearly forgetting Roderick!' I said, as I draw my head in. 'I must run and see him.'

'It rained this morning, and the yard is dreadfully damp,' objected my companion.

'I'd my boots are dreadfully this I answered, taking my rebellious locks in both hands and twisting them up as promptly as possible. It would be my duty to leave Miss Dove in solitude, but I was past being polite to anyone just then.

'You don't mean to say you are going out without your hat?' 'Yes, I am; I shall have plenty of time to beautify before the dinner-time to-day.'

'I am almost wishing you were not here,' I said, as I looked at her. 'I had been at Hazeldene ten days or was it ten years?'

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that all my belongings were strewn about, half in, half out of my boxes, I set off down the corridor; but when I had way down the stairs I found that I was left my handkerchief on the dressing-table, and turned back, reaching my room door to discover Miss Dove bending absorbedly over the Bible that had been papa's last birthday gift to his 'dear Nell.'

'Alas! what she perused so earnestly was not the contents of the sacred book itself, but a letter that I had laid with loving care between the leaves—that letter in which my father had told me of his engagement to my school-friend. As she turned, and saw me glaring at her with indignant eyes, Miss Lettie had the grace to blush and in hurriedly trying to replace the letter she let it flutter to the floor.

'I was just going to put your things to rights a bit,' she stammered. 'Thanks,' I said, picking up the fallen paper replacing it in the Bible, and closing the clasp with a snap; 'you are very kind, but the maid can do all that quite well.'

A moment we stood looking at each other in silence, my opponent now by far the cooler of the two. Then I said my say, declaring war to the knife.

'Miss Dove, I have always lived among gentle people; consequently I have not been in the habit of having my letters read. Will you bear in mind for the future that I object to have them meddled with?'

She gathered up the tangle of silk that was one day to adorn the Dorcas-basket, and with as much dignity as she could manage to summon up, departed.

How glad Roderick was to see me! Terence catching sight of me through the pantry window, came out and told me how all the pretty speckled guineas had died that winter; and how Frizzle the black and tan terrier had got caught in a gin, and was as lame as lame could be, the crater!

'But Terence was not at his ease; every now and then he cast a furtive glance at the upper windows. How side, and all his restless glances merged into a smile as papa came through the gate leading from the grounds, Frizzle Roderick lay down like a lion couchant raised his golden-brown eyes to his master's face, and whined suggestively.

'Let Terence loosen his chain, papa give him a run round the paddock?'

'Terence had stooped to lift the hook from the staple, Roderick had given a loud yelp of delight, and I was patting thought the best welcome he could give me was to stand on his hind legs as continuously as possible, when there was a soft rustle of silk, and Lady Vansittart was in our midst.

'Don't let the dog loose,' said papa quickly; 'Lady Vansittart is afraid of him.'

'Afraid of Roderick!' Were the wonders prepared for me never come to an end? yet, as my father and his bride went slowly to allow the garden, I was almost ready to groundless. For Roderick's upper lip was drawn to one side showing his long, white glistening teeth in a manner that was anything but pleasant, and he gave a low growl that changed into a whine as I laid my hand upon his great wrinkled head and called him by his name.

'Does Roderick often behave in this way, Terence?'

'The old man bent down and fumbled with the chain as he answered. Slowly and again, Miss Ellen, while and again. He's a terrible rogue is Roderick, a terrible rogue entirely.'

So it seemed that the old dog as well as his betters had taken to developing new and strange phases of character.

The story of my first day at Hazeldene was in all essential points the story of the days that followed. Slowly but surely I felt myself drifting—or rather, being drifted—from papa, and from my rightful position as the daughter of the house.

My steps were dogged; my outgoings and my incomings were watched by Miss Lettie until the spirit of rebellion within me prompted me to oppose cunning to cunning, and to convey myself surreptitiously away into old and well-known haunts along the shore or in the woods behind the hall.

Meanwhile, the visitor that came to Hazeldene in having such a delightful companion as my father's elder sister, a step-mother, said Mrs. Langley ecstatically, 'and then that sweet girl, Lettie Dove; such a nice, judicious, prudent young creature.'

I knew that this last remark was meant to have a sting in it; a sting aimed at my boyden ways, more especially those before-named solitary rambles by flood and field.

But I loved the fresh bracing air and the sound of the sea—not only for the sense of freedom that I found in both, but because that prudent young creature, the gentle Dove seldom cared to climb up the steep cliffs or penetrate into the lonely caves along the shore I loved.

Did papa see and note how the heart of his little girl was being pressed to death between the iron walls of two designing women, who each played into the hand of the other? I hardly think so. He was absorbed in his love for that fairest of women, Eulalie, his wife. He hardly seemed to live out of her presence; and she on her part was equally devoted to him.

'Well, well,' I used to think to myself, 'what matters it after all? He is the light that has shone upon my life. If I am put "out in the cold," perhaps it is only natural. Yes; I suppose this is what Miss "Dostia" meant when she said my "nose would be put out." It's not a pleasant process, and I suppose that pain at my heart that comes now and again is jealousy—just the thing in all the world I most cordially hate. And yet, oh! what would I not give for one of the old rambles with papa—Roderick lumbering along among the "fairy's peesies" and the gold-starred bed-straw that grows about down to the water's edge, or standing

now and again to bark at the gulls as they sweep past him to the sea. But the remembrance too vivid; all at once the sobbings my throat, and the hot tears bit me.

'Might I not well sing the old now!'

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

Besides these bitter moments, I got other trials beset me. I tried my temper as only a son can try the temper of those single out as victims. She had a soft and appealing voice that I have made a saint swear—and I was no saint.

One day she saw fit to make moan over the brogue of our fairer retainers Terence Mahaffy. She tattling—when was she not engaged in some charitable work?—for the benefit of that Dorcas-basket that I tested so unutterably, and looked on as an unconscious of the imperance of her remarks that I was near dumbfounded in spite of the indignation that half choked me.

'I do not speak of this for myself,' she said, searching for a thread in which to wander from the way in which she should go; 'I look upon these people as things sent to us as wholesome ferent disciplines. But Eulalie is abnormally sensitive to such things; she grate upon her nerves in a most remarkable manner, I have seen her shiver actually shiver, when Terence has handed her a dish.'

'I should think it must have gratified her nerves a good deal more when she had no one to watch upon her at a and very likely no dishes at all—empty ones.'

I was standing with my back to the breakfastroom window that opened to the ground as I uttered this impulsive and most injudicious rejoinder, the fair Lettie's words; and a look of spiteful triumph that came across her face as she raised her clear eyes to the window behind me brought me to the sudden halt.

The glass doors opened upon the lawn; the soft turf made a sound beneath the pressure of a footfall; and I saw as I turned that papa stood looking in upon us both. His flashing eyes, the burning colour in his cheeks, might well surprise him.

'Nell, Nell!' he said, coming to my side, and laying his hand upon my shoulder, 'what is all this?'

I knew his hatred and contempt of all petty bickering; I knew that I had spoken unadvisedly with my tongue; but besides all this, I knew what I could never tell to him—the bitter provocation I had received.

'Your daughter was speaking of the poverty from which you rescued your wife, my cousin Eulalie. I fancy Nell thinks that both she and I should be more sensible of our indebtedness to you than we are. I think she looks upon me as an intruder where I am not wanted. I cannot stay where I am not wanted. I know that Eulalie will miss me, but—'

'If he had raged at me—if he had reproached me—I could have borne it better; but he only stood there looking at me in silent, loving amazement. He only said.

'Can it be Nell that treats her father's guests like this?'

She knew she was sure of me. She sat there looking like a statue for a martyr's tomb, and knew I should not say a word to implicate her and—Lady Vansittart.

Without a word I fled from the presence of the two both, but in my flight I heard the false voice say.

'Do not be hard on Nell; dear Sir Charles, you must take allowances.'

'Allowances for what?'

'I knew—I knew the tale she was about to tell; the story of his little girl's jealousy of the woman he had married; of the changes in his life that had made his daughter no longer all in all to him; of his divided love, that once had been her sole and dear possession.'

If Eulalie and her cousin had schemed to prevent me from ever being alone with papa before, they redoubled their efforts now. I often caught his eyes resting on me with a wounded questioning expression that I could scarcely endure to meet; he redoubled his courteous kindnesses to Lettie; and if that were possible, encompassed Eulalie with a greater tenderness. And the holidays drew to a close.

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