

Love's Awakening

Continued from last issue

the glass-door of the teachers room. She had a shawl folded over her head, and looked wonderfully lovely with that simple coiffure framing her faultless face. Prayers and supper were over and I was just going up to bed when Mam'zelle asked me to fetch her netting from the teachers' room, and that was how I chanced to encounter Eulalie.

'Out so late?' I said, setting down the candle I held upon the table and forgetting all about Mam'zelle's behest.

'Yes,' she said; 'the night is so lovely and I have a weary headache; I thought the cool air might do it good.'

She sat down by the table resting her head upon her hand—and oh, what a white, wan, hopeless face the light of my candle showed me.

I knelt beside her and took her hand. It struck cold to mine.

'You have been worrying yourself too much about Mrs. Langley,' I said, frightened by her looks. 'It is all over now, dear, and you must not worry any more.'

'Yes,' she said, echoing my words, 'it is all over now; and I should be glad, should I not? Glad—and content.'

But her lip quivered as she spoke and her eyes, dim and heavy, seemed to be looking at all things through a mist.

'Are you ill, dear Eulalie—shall I call Miss Mary?' I said, alarmed. 'Do let me fetch her.'

'No, no; fetch no one,' she answered hastily. 'I'm not ill, Nell—only tired—tired out, dear.'

'Tired with telling fairy tales?' I began; then I broke off suddenly into a new subject. 'All this time I had held her hand in both my own, gently chafing it to try and warm the poor chilled fingers. Now I noticed that the little hoop of wax was gone, leaving a tiny red mark around the finger where it once had been.'

'Oh Eulalie—your ring—see it is not there.'

'No,' she said speaking in a tired and weary voice the like of which I had never heard from her lips before; 'it is—gone—there. I have lost it.'

'Lost it. Well that's a pity; but it was not of much value was it dear?'

'No it wasn't of much value,' she answered once more like an echo. 'But 'twas a pity as you say—'Oh the pity of it' as some one says somewhere.'

'Did you lose it while you were out now?'

'Yes—I dropped it—I was standing by the pool in the coppice—at the deepest side—under the alders.'

'Then you will never see it again.'

'No—I shall never see it again. This time she gave a quick sharp shudder as she played the part of echo.'

'Never mind—don't mind—don't think about it,' I said eagerly. 'I'll ask papa to give me a better one for you—a golden serpent with a diamond eye.'

Something in my words wrought a strange change in her mood. She laughed a hard laugh that had a mocking sound and pushed me from her.

'That would be a good exchange for my poor little gold hoop,' she said with something like a strangled sob; 'wouldn't it Nell?'

At that moment the sound of tapping heels and a shrill voice came along the passage.

'Que faites-vous donc—ademoiselle Nelles. Depeches-vous—depeches-vous mon enfant.'

'Run away,' don't let her come here whispered Eulalie; and I picking up Mam'zelle's netting hurried to meet that irate personage carrying my candle with me and leaving the teacher's room lighted only by the shadowy haze of the star-shine outside.

But Mam'zelle seemed suspicious as to my long delay and cast long glances towards the closed door at the end of the corridor right in the middle of which I stood.

'But was it that mademoiselle could not find the netting?' she asked in her own fluent tongue; 'and truly here is a thread broken.'

'Doubtless' said I boldly and not budging an inch from my central position 'it was a mouse that gnawed it for the work lay on the floor.'

At this Mam'zelle gave a little shriek that none but a Frenchwoman could have achieved.

'But is it true that those frightened animals inhabit that delightful chamber?' she said blinking her sharp eyes like an owl in the light.

'Yes,' I said; 'one crossed the floor but now.'

Happily I could say this with truth and I was grateful to that tiny soft-skinned creature for taking this evening promenade in the 'paradis' that Mam'zelle had loved but would now love no more. It is an unpleasant experience if a common one to find a mouse in some self-constituted paradise and I pitied Mam'zelle as she turned her back on that garden of

Eden in which a serpent had been discovered.

But I was glad that knowledge served to keep her out of it for this once and spared the wan weary face beneath the folds of the shawl the scrutiny of her bead-like eyes.

I went up to bed and there lay still but widely awake. I slept in a small room leading off the large dormitory and could hear the subdued chatter and flutter of the girls a sound that died away at last as if a flock of birds had gone to roost and settled down after many chirpings and rustlings on their several perches.

The old house was so still that I could hear muffled by distance the clock of Bromley church toll out the hour of ten.

At eleven Miss Mary would come up stairs, look in upon me from sheer force of the habit of old times, and so pass to her room on the other side of the passage. How I could look back to the days of my babyhood—for I was little more than a baby when I first came to Summerfield—and remember the soft touch of her long ringlets on my cheek as she bent over my pillow to kiss me good-night.

That time seemed very far away now, for the weight of my first perplexity was heavy upon me; the crowd of thoughts, and fears, and strange surmises that could not be spoken of to her, that could not be told to papa, seemed to bow my young head as with the burden of years.

Night and solitude are strange magnifiers, and I soon felt that I was thinking myself into a fever. 'I will go to sleep, and forget it all till to-morrow,' I resolved. But, as we all know, to resolve to sleep is inevitably to lie awake and find oneself in the clutch of demon restlessness; so after tossing about for half-an-hour longer I slipped out of bed and took up a wholly unlawful position, namely, a corner of the low seat in the window of my room. All the windows at Summerfield had those dear devices, cushioned with crimson chintz, very havens of rest and delight in the summer-time; but I had no manner of business sitting there at that hour of the night.

Perhaps for that very reason, like a true daughter of Eve, did I enjoy it the more. To pull up the little blind with its running pattern of ivy-ovae was the next step I took, and I had my reward in the sight of the loveliest of night landscapes. The moon had risen, paling the star-shine with its brighter radiance, and now sized among a thousand tiny ripples of clouds light and fleecy as a bride's veil. My room looked out at the back of the house on to the wide garden, and between that and the wood lay the coppice. Under the alder-trees was a black, shiny patch just now bridged by a line of light, for the fair young moon was making a mirror of our pool and turning to silver the rushes that fringed its margin. The whole world looked ghostly in the shimmer, and full of mysterious shadows wherein might lurk, I fancied, elves of various kinds. I was just calling to mind my stock of fairy lore when lo, a veritable ghost—a restless, wandering shade—came out from the shadow of the alders; a tall, slight figure, with its bowed head shrouded in white folds.

Slowly up and down by the margin of the pool this figure paced, then to my affright and sore amazement, it raised its clasped hands aloft, and wrung them as in the throes of some ineffable despair.

The next day I was almost fain to persuade myself that I had fallen asleep in the wide old window seat of my room and dreamt of that weird figure on the margin of the pool; the figure that wrung its hands, and that I knew to be—Eulalie.

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After the manner of school girls, her companions and pupils presented her with many parting presents; and if being amply provided with pin-cushions, pen-wipers, book-markers, and such-like gear could ensure a happy future for Miss Le Breton, she would assuredly have never known 'a carking care.'

I gave her no parting gift. I was waiting until I should see my father, and find a fitting opportunity to broach the subject of the serpent with the diamond eyes.

Gradually the events of that strange evening when I had seen Eulalie come in from the garden to the teachers' room, seemed to grow less vivid to me; and even the piteous spectacle of poor Mam'zelle seated in her 'paradis' with her feet on a tall stool and her petticoats twisted tightly round her little sticks of legs, for fear of

animal affreux,' the mouse that her imagination multiplied a hundredfold, failed to keep them distinct in my mind's eye.

I was, after all, more child than woman still, and impressions glided off me like the figures that came and went in the surface of the old round mirror that had reflected Eulalie's wrong-doing. I was very miserable when the actual parting with my school-friend came, very damped and limply sentimental; and, as we all stopped out work to kiss and say 'Good-bye' to the pupil-teacher, and I caught a glimpse through the window of the drooping head of the fly-horse from Bromley Inn, my young heart seemed well-nigh ready to burst with grief.

Eulalie, perfectly beautiful in her plain new travelling-dress and little snood-like bonnet took a quiet farewell of each, and kissed little solemn-faced Amy twice over. Then came my turn; but, with a pleading look at Miss Mary, I slipped my hand through her arm, and went with her out on to the hall-steps. There stood Miss Maria, with the key-basket shaped like a boat on her arm, and 'ce gentil—onsieur Jose,' with his little fiddle in his hand, to assist at 'speeding the parting' traveller.

I caught through my tears a glimpse of the sweet face smiling from the fly window at our assembled group; saw Miss Maria wave her key-basket; Miss Mary kiss her hand, and Monsieur Jose perform a series of bows of ideal grace, and then—

My school-friend was gone, the bell rang for the dancing-class to assemble and squeak, scrape, squeak went the little fiddle as its owner glided down the passage towards the lower school-room. I was very lonely for lack of her, and used to sing the song that always seemed to be associated with my thoughts of her:

'Te souvenirs tu Marie
De notre enfance aux champs?'

throwing all my heart and soul into the last refrain.

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

One night when the Christmas holidays were drawing near, and Eulalie's departure had become but a misty recollection to the rest of my companions, I was sitting by the schoolroom fire poring over Madame de Staels Corine lost in the beauty of those glowing descriptions of scenery that seem to bring the very place before us, when Miss Mary came into the schoolroom, looked round to every group, and then crossed over to my side.

As she laid her hand upon my shoulder I felt it tremble, and looking up, I met her eyes, filled with what seemed half pity and half love that held a mother's tender yearning. 'Nell,' she said—and how strangely her voice sounded as she spoke—'the snow being so deep has delayed the post-boy until now; there is a letter for you, love, on the library table.'

'Is it from papa, Miss Mary?' I said starting up and laying (A) ** upon the mantelshelf.

'Yes, Nell.'

She said no more, and turned away and left me—left me to make the inevitable reverence at the schoolroom door with impatience at my heart, and then to hurry to the library with more speed than grace. I was hungry for a letter from papa; for of late those dear epistles had been few and far between.

It struck me afterwards though not at the time, that it was by design I was sent to read my letter alone in that quiet room. I read it—all its loving expressions of tenderness—all its bright, happy anticipations of sunny days to come for him and for 'his little girl'; but of all the words I read, the only sentence that seemed real to me was this—

'And the name of my wife that is to be, dear Nell, is—Eulalie.'

CHAPTER VIII The Dream-Child.

I could not realize it. Eulalie—my school-friend—the girl whom I had asked papa to help—his wife!

I have always counted jealousy the meanest of all passions; and I am glad to look back now with the full knowledge of the things that time had in store for me, and be able to say that not a shadow of its blighting influence once touched me in this sudden knowledge of a strange turn of fate.

But this strangeness almost dazed me. The thought that papa could love me, Nell, his own 'little girl' less, because he loved my beautiful Eulalie never—I thank God for it—crossed my mind.

Why should it, indeed? Are human hearts so constituted that one love must cast forth another? I trow not.

How changed must Eulalie's life seem in her own dazzled eyes! No more of 'One, two, three; one, two, three; the cat's in the cupboard and can't see me!' That was all over now for ever and for aye, and instead, there was my own stately home—hers to be.

How perfect she would look as the mistress of Hazeldene! How well her beauty would become the grand old

rooms and the terraces in the gardens from whence you could catch a glimpse of a soft blue line of sea, and hear the faint far murmur of the waves upon the shore! How proud she would be of papa, and he of her, and I of both of them—but, oh, how strange it all was! She was so young—only three years and a half older than I who had struck 'fifteen o'clock,' as Amy Ladbrook called it, since my school-friend and I parted.

That Eulalie would be happy in the new life she had chosen I did not doubt who, indeed, could be otherwise whose lot it was to be always with papa, the first object of his thought, and love and care?

I was quite willing to come in 'a good second,' and to help him with all my might in the worship of his new idol.

There would be no need now, I thought, sitting there in the library with my letter on my knee, to ask him about the serpent with the diamond eyes; for would it not be now her dear delight to give her all things she could wish for?

I knew how he had loved and mourned my mother; but that was long, long years ago. I was not jealous for her memory, for I knew his reverence and tenderness would ever surround it, and perhaps some day—you never know what odd things come to pass—I, Nell, might—well—go away and leave papa—never loving him a bit the less, and yet loving some one else in a strange new way, that was a dim and indistinct thing to me just then, but that in my mind took the shadowy semblance of Rebecca's love for Ivanhoe. I should be glad then that he had found Eulalie, glad that his happiness was complete without my constant presence, though all the brighter for his careless thought of me, and mine of him.

What pen can run as swift as thought! This tangle of ideas ran through my busy brain as I sat there with my letter on my lap, in less than half the time I take to write it here.

Then, in a moment, like a snake from a basket of flowers rose up one ugly thought.

Did I not now that of Eulalie—of my father's promised wife—that I could never tell? For, if my lips were sealed before, they were doubly so now. What would he with his high notions of a gentleman's delicate sense of honour say, if he knew that the woman he loved was capable of reading surreptitiously a letter that did not belong to her?

There are people the spell of whose presence is so great, that while within earshot of the sound of their voice and the trick and manner of their smile and glance we cannot judge them fairly—we cannot see clearly enough to set their wrong-doings in an open light, and 'weigh them in the balance.' Of these Eulalie was one.

I had, while she was near me, been more ready to condemn myself for harsh thoughts of her, than to blame her for the base action that had called those thoughts into being. But once free from the glamour of her potent charm I saw things in a truer light, and I knew—I knew—that distrust must ever lurk beneath my love for her, deep and tender as it still was.

'Why he's old enough to be her father—almost her grandfather! Pshaw! don't talk to me, sister Mary! I've no patience with such folly! The man's old enough to have better sense; and, besides you know well enough we can't be certain a bit—' Thus far, in Miss Maria's clear, somewhat loud voice, I heard, and then my dear Miss Mary's softer tones answered,—

'No sister, we are certain of nothing, and therefore we have no right to take anything for granted. It is of that dear child I think.'

The two ladies were crossing the hall Miss Maria rattling her keys, a sure sign of irritation of spirit on her part. At that moment I almost hated her for the way she had spoken of papa; but there was a sore place in my heart that made Miss Mary's loving words touch me to the quick, and I had a sob in my throat as I sprang to the door to meet her.

'Child,' she said—'Nell, this is strange news for you, my dearie.'

She sat down on a low couch by the fire and I knelt beside her—I threw my arms about her, holding her close, her close, as if I needed to cling to something just then.

'Here's a nice state of things!' said Miss Maria, setting the straw boat down upon the table with a jerk that made the keys therein jump, as well it might. 'I wish we'd never sent Eulalie to Mrs. Langley's. Such an idea! A girl that hadn't a respectable dress to her back when she came to us; and to think of marrying Sir Charles Vansitart and settling at such a place as Hazeldene! Umph! set a beggar on horseback, and he'll—no—she'll—'

'Sister!' put in Miss Mary pleadingly, with an anxious look upon her face as of one who didn't quite know what might come next.

Miss Maria tossed her head, and was going to take up her parable again, when the other said softly,—

'Remember how kind her mother was to poor dear Charley.'

The words worked like a spell. Miss Maria's firm mouth softened and she drew a deep breath.

'Yes,' she said, 'you are quite right to remind me, sister Mary; her mother

was very kind to poor dear Charley.' Polly might have known that the individual of whose 'good impulses she was the outward embodiment was being spoken of, for she gave a sudden sort of croak that she must have taken her grey head from beneath 'heaving to utter, and then whispered in a hoarse, ghostly, creepy way, 'Fie for shame! fie for shame! Oh you naughty girl!'

'Don't take to talking in your sleep Polly,' called out Miss Maria, glad I fancy of any diversion as a way of escape from the shoals and quicksands into which the conversation in the library had drifted.

Kneeling by my dearest friend, and looking from her to Miss Maria, and from Miss Maria back again to her, I tried to gauge the words of each, not succeeding very admirably, but, for all that, coming to the resolution of speaking certain bold words that craved for utterance.

'It seems to me,' I said, trembling a good deal, but determined enough for all that, 'that papa is the best judge; and that for any of us to find fault with him for choosing anyone so beautiful and gentle as Eulalie to be his wife—is wrong.' Here my courage began to ooze out at my tingling finger ends, and I added, with a sudden squeeze of the hand that held mine, 'I'm sure he loves her very, very dearly, Miss Maria; who could help doing that?'

As I looked up into the face of the above me I saw the big tears shining and then all my wild excitement, all my strange feelings of the unreality of all things, all my fears about that shameful story told by the old mirror found vent in a passionate burst of weeping that scared Miss Maria from the room, redoubled Miss Mary's tenderness to the child of her love, and most effectually woke up Polly, who set to work to talk and whistle and scream to such an extent that the cook was sent for to pin a table-cloth over her cage.

I do not think papa could have been made otherwise than happy by the letter I wrote in reply to the one that told me of his engagement to my friend. I should think Eulalie must have been pleased with the one (enclosed within it) that I sent to her. All the loving wishes for both that my heart held I tried to put into words; I tried to le-nou faintest shadow of the one misgiving fall athwart the pages.

That night I had a strange dream. I seemed to be standing somewhere where the air blew chill, making me tremble with its dark and icy touch. All about me was a lurid gloom, and I could hear the sound of bitter weeping. Then I looked downwards, and lo! crouching at my feet was a child clothed in rags, and as I looked it raised a little pitiful, wo-begone face, streaming with tears, to mine.

It may seem a strange thing to chronicle—this childish dream full of vague fear and dread; but I have cause to chronicle it, for in the time to come that dream-child came to me many times and oft and ever as the harbinger of misfortune.

Always weeping, always dressed in rags that clung about its withered shrunken limbs; always looking up at me with its wee, white, weary face. What was it? Whence did it come? I cannot tell; but this much I know, that I have met with others besides who have been subject to the strange recurrence of one weird dream over-boding ill.

Mrs. Langley, the wife of the rector of Hazeldene, wrote delightedly of her young governess's good fortune. 'She had seen how it would be from the first,' she said. 'Sir Charles Vansitart had always been a frequent visitor at the rectory; but after Miss Le Breton's arrival few days passed without a visit from him, and he took to joining "the dear children" when out for a ramble on the shore, in her care. Miss Le Breton had a wonderful gift for telling fairy tales, and in the hour "between the lights" she used to tell her little pupils the most lovely legends. At first she was very shy when Mrs. Langley, the rector, and Sir Charles joined the audience, but a little gentle encouragement soon set her at her ease, and the grown-up portion of the listeners enjoyed the fairy-lore as much as the two tiny maids for whose original benefit it was intended.'

'They all seem very happy together, Miss Mary; don't they?' I said, when the reading aloud of Mrs. Langley's letter was finished. 'It reads like a story—doesn't it?'

The marriage was to take place in January, and I was to be promoted to the womanly glory. A 'long dresses' on the occasion; an idea welcome to my very soul, and one that filled me with a new and overpowering dignity even in anticipation. It so chanced that I had not seen Mr. Girdstone since Eulalie's betrothal was a known fact, until one day I met him in Bromley meadows. I thought his trousers seemed to have shrunk away from his ankles more than ever, and assuredly his hat was more on the back of his head. But the kind old face was the same; the eyes guileless and tender as those of a child; the shrivelled hand as ready to close on mine and hold it as fast and close as ever.

Miss 'Dosa' was at all times more terrible in her winter than her summer gear; for a black beaver bonnet is a most forbidding kind of armour, and her tippet was of some uncomfortable

kind of fur that stood out on end in every direction, and could not be persuaded to lie down sleek and smooth like any other fur. I used to think it must be the product of some peculiar kind of animal kept for her benefit alone, for I never saw any fur at all like it before, and I have never seen any of so rampant and unmanageable a nature since. Her dress was of what she called 'a sensible walking length,'—that is, it displayed her square ankles and large serviceable boots in all their native grace indeed, a general and pervading idea of ankles was the impression always left upon the mind of the beholder after meeting this brother and sister in their outdoor costume.

'Ah, Nell! Well, my dear, going to fetter outter and eggs, eh?' said the vicar, holding me by the hand and pointing to the basket on my arm. It was a way he had to make little feeble jokes when Miss Theodosia was in her grimmest moods; I think he did it in a sort of forlorn hope that the mind of the destined victim of these moods might be soothed and diverted thereby.

Then he began to fidget from one foot to the other, for a kind of rustling of his sister's rampant plumes told that she was in the throes of rising ideas presently to find utterance.

'So your nose is put out of joint, Miss Nell?'

I stood silent, my eyes fixed with a kind of fascination upon her face, where something that was meant for a smile, but that was more nearly related to a sneer, played lamently.

The vicar's fidgeting seemed meanwhile ready to develop into a kind of Indian war-dance, in the which his umbrella should do duty as a tomahawk. 'Tut.' Nonsense! 'Nose out of joint?' no such thing! he ejaculated, getting red as 'poppies in the corn.'

'You mean, Miss Theodosia,' said I, speaking very deliberately in my efforts after the dignity becoming in a Vansitart; 'you mean that papa will not care about me any more now that he is going to marry Eulalie? Well, you are mistaken—quite mistaken; and your thinking so just shows how very little you know of him, or of any of us.' I included Eulalie boldly in this 'any of us'; and Miss Theodosia for once in her life seemed thoroughly taken aback—as, indeed, people generally are when their hints and intonations are clothed in plain words, and set before them in the light of day.

'We shall get our deaths of cold standing here with the wind cutting us in two,' said the vicar eagerly, stamping his small boots as if to restore the circulation in the feet they covered.

'Yes,' I answered; 'it is cold. Good-bye.' And then, after touching the wooden joints of Miss Theodosia's fingers, and getting a warm grasp from her brother, I sped on my way, my head bent as though to stem the roughness of the keen east wind, but in reality to hide from any passer-by the angry tears that rose to my eyes and blurred my sight.

'So that is how people talk—that is how people think of all these things! I thought in bitter protest against those constructions that the world is pleased to put upon our actions, and against which it is so useless to rebel.'

'They think I'm jealous, do they? They pity me because papa will not care for me any more—as if—as if—I reiterated in my passionate resentment for the wrong done to him and to me—'anything or anybody in this world could make us—him and me—love each other one bit less dearly than we do. Oh, it is shameful!'

Down dropped the hot tears. I was blind—deaf too, surely, for I never heard the sound of footsteps behind me, and started so that I nearly let fall the basket which held some jelly for a sick child in the village when someone spoke quite close to me!

'Nell, see, you dropped your handkerchief.'

It was the vicar, a little breathless, hurrying after me and looking as if he were full of a kind of radiant sunshine of his own, so rejoiced was he in having outwitted his sister. I looked up at him with drowned eyes and piteous trembling lips and as he stuffed the handkerchief into my hand, he spoke softly to me, forgetting the distance at which the grim figure in the fur tippet stood waiting for him.

'Don't mind what she said, child; it's all stuff and nonsense, every bit of it. Dear, dear, don't cry; but-tut never cry about it!'

'It's not true, Mr. Girdstone,' I gasped out. 'I hate anyone to say such things—to speak so of papa and me.'

'No, no, it's not true, not a word of it—not a word of it,' he almost whispered, with a stealthy backward glance; 'Don't you mind it—don't think about it, there's a dear child.'

I felt so much for his distress of me that, meeting his kind eyes, I managed to call up a feeble sort of smile; at which he nodded till I thought his hat must come off its perilous resting-place upon the back of his head, and then trotted off, to where, looking like a scarecrow set up to frighten birds from corn, stood Miss Theodosia gaunt and grim.

'I wish I had told her that my dress for the wedding is to be made quite long—almost with a demi-train. How

To be continued