

"I pay all the bills, and that, considering how many and large they are, is doing about as much as could be reasonably expected of an old man like me. And, as to Ellen, why let the child have her own way. As long as she's good and dutiful to me I'm not going to force or thwart her inclinations."

"But you ought to think of her health, Mr. Hastings. It is the worst thing in the world for young girls like her to seclude themselves so entirely from society, and sit moping all day long over books, or drawing, or sewing."

"Ellen takes a long walk every day," interrupted my father.

"Yes, but where does she go? Anywhere except to those places where young ladies ought to frequent. Moping through lanes, scrambling into dusty garrets, or creeping down into damp cellars. I expect she'll bring some horrid disease yet into the house. I believe in charity, but I believe also a young lady should have some regard for her health."

"I don't see but that Ellen is as healthy as the most of girls. I never hear her complain of her back, or side, or head; she has neither consumption, bronchitis nor neuralgia, and I never knew her to be nervous or to faint away. Beside, if she were out of health, she wouldn't be very likely to regain it in a ball-room. She should go into the country."

"Country this time of year, with the snow over the fences! I don't believe you know, Mr. Hastings, that it is midwinter."

"I should think I ought to, wife; I paid a heavy enough coal bill this morning."

"And never grumbled a word, the dear good-natured man you are. But to go back to Ellen. I do really wish you'd coax her to go in society a little more. A girl with her beauty and accomplishments and talents ought not to live so secluded. She owes it to herself and you and her friends—and," she hesitated and then said, softly, "to me."

Then there was a sob, seemingly strangled ere it had full utterance.

"You know I am her step-mother, only in name though, for I love her almost as I do my own May, and would do quite as much to insure her happiness; but the world, the cold, cruel, censorious world, is always ready to talk and make mischief whether there is a just cause or not. And I have lately learned something that has given me great pain. People say—oh, how can they be so unfeeling!—they say it is my fault that Ellen does not go out more, that I am jealous of her, and want to keep her out of the way lest she shall eclipse poor little May; that I thrust her into the background to give my own daughter a better chance for an eligible marriage; that I spend all your money on us two, and that Ellen's allowance is such that she can't make a decent appearance in society; and they say a great deal more—oh, such cruel, cruel things! And you know it's not so. You know that I've never once asked you what you gave your own daughter for spending money, that

"But why need you mind the senseless talk of folks who'd better a good deal be looking after their own affairs? As long as I don't find any fault with you or May why need you care for the speech of other people? When I married you I promised to be a father to your daughter, that she and Ellen should share the same while I lived, and be co-heiresses when I was dead. And I've kept my word to the letter. I've never interfered with May's enjoyments. I know she likes gay society, and I'm willing she should. I shouldn't make a fuss if she went to a ball six nights out of a week; only I should, for decency's sake, wish she'd manage to get in from the last one before midnight. You and May are privileged to do just as you please, and you, I don't care what the world says, you must let Ellen and me do as we please. I won't have any interference with the child. If she's happier at home, at home she shall stay."

My father did not often rouse himself to so long a speech, but when he did his tone had an earnestness in it that made itself felt.

My stepmother knew it was time to stop, so she only said, wisely:

"I can't help wishing though that Ellen would go just this one night, for it's to be such a grand affair and so select. I know she would enjoy herself, and be, withal, the belle of the crowd. I declare," and she threw a passionate fervor into her tone, "it does seem too bad that such a queenly figure as hers should never be seen anywhere except in the haunts of poverty. I wish you were as proud of her as I am."

And then she turned to go.

"I wish you knew how proud I am of you," my father said, at last. It was only a whisper, but such an earnest one that it penetrated even to my draped aloof. "Proud of you, of May of Ellen! Is there another man in the wide world that has three such graces? Not one, not one. And all I want of you is that each be happy in her own way."

And then he kissed her, and the dear affectionate old man went back to his chair and then she passed out.

Don't think now that I approve of eavesdropping. I do not. I abhor it; and had not Mrs. Hastings's first sentence assured me that I was to be the topic of conversation I should have drawn the curtain and shown myself to her. But I was curious to know what had come over her of late, and why she, who during the first year of her marriage had so sedulously secluded me, should all at once have changed her tactics. I felt assured it was no love she bore me. What, then, was the reason? I learned it from that

talk. The world, her world, the fashionable set with whom she mingled, was censuring her. It had seen through her flimsy veil, and it demanded that Mr. Hastings's daughter should have her rights. She was sensitive to the world's good opinion. She was determined it should recognize her as a model woman, a stepmother impartial in her affections. Therefore I must go to the ball that night.

I sat a while and thought. I could not. She was a selfish, unprincipled woman, who had wheeled my father into marrying her, and who accommodated herself to all his peculiarities, because she knew it was necessary she should keep on the right side of him; for my father, although naturally indolent and averse to argument, when his anger or prejudices were aroused drove everything before him.

I did not love her daughter either. May was as heartless as she was beautiful; not a spark of true girlish feeling in her. To be treated as a belle by the young men, to be acknowledged as a leader of fashion by the young ladies, to live a gay, thoughtless, butterfly life for a few years and then marry a millionaire, make the tour of Europe, and return to queen it over a palatial home—such was her ambition. How could I love her? I did not care that she had ingratiated herself into my father's affections, though I knew it was from policy, because I felt that she had never usurped my place there. I knew that, do or say what they would, he would never cease to love his only child, the child who, as he used so often and proudly to say, "was all mother."

Do not think now that I had any of those foolish, bitter prejudices against stepmothers which make such sad havoc in the domestic peace of hundreds of households. I had not. I had been too truly educated by my own mother to feel ought of them. She had taught me that indeed my own experience had since corroborated, that second marriages are not necessarily unhappy, that there are no limits to the affectionate capacities of the human heart, that while there is life there must be love there, that is, if it be a thorough heart, a heart worthy of the name. She had brought me up to feel great tenderness towards those who held the delicate relationship of step parents, saying that they had a rugged path to travel, and it should be the aim of all who cared for them to help them over the rough places and throw the stones out instead of in their way.

I had always expected my father would marry a second time. Indeed, to own the whole truth, I wanted him to. I had even selected a wife for him. Dear Mrs. Somers, if he had only married her what a happy family we should have been! I could have called her mother without feeling that I desecrated the holy name, such a true woman as she was. And her little Allie, what a pet she would have been. And Edward, the noble-hearted intellectual young man that he was, struggling so hard to win his way in the world, that his widowed mother and fatherless sister might never know care or want—how proud I should have been to have called him brother and known that my father loved him as a son.

Ah, it was a hard, hard blow to me when that castle tottered to ruins. And though I never disputed my father's right to his own choice I could not bring my heart to love the mother and sister he had given me. I treated the one with the respect due to my father's wife, called her mother when I spoke to her, but always Mrs. Hastings at other times; while to May I showed the politeness due to my father's stepdaughter.

I do not mean that I was frigidly ceremonious in my intercourse with her, for I was not. I was kindly polite, always ready to help her with my needle when her dressmaker or seamstress disappointed her, and assisting her from my own purse when, as was often the case—for she was woefully extravagant—her own allowance fell short. But love her I could not, nor her mother either. Still we did not often clash. My father was satisfied with them both, and I loved him too tenderly to wish to do aught that might disturb his domestic peace. There was a tacit understanding between us that we were to be friendly to each other's faces and that neither was to seek out the real state of feeling existing between us.

Sitting there on that particular morning, and thinking over all these things and many more, I suddenly determined that I would accede to my stepmother's wish, and attend Mrs. Morgan's ball. I have never been able to account for the mental process which I must have gone through with to arrive at that conclusion, and it matters little. I decided to go, and, having decided, of course I must bestir myself to select a dress, for it was now nearly twelve.

I peeped out of my little sanctum. My father was fast asleep. I stole up to him and kissed him on his cheeks, first one and then the other. He opened his eyes lazily and smiled. I kissed him again and whispered:

"I'm going to the ball to-night."

"Good girl, good girl," said he, and relapsed into his nap.

Dear old man! he would have said the same had I told him I was going to stay at home. He did not think "Ellen" could do wrong. I am glad he did not know how I felt towards his wife and stepchild. But he did not, no, and never should. I would bear with them for his sake.

I went to my chamber, and, unlocking one of my bureau drawers, took out an old-fashioned jewel-case, the key of which I wore constantly about my person. One might have thought there was valuable gems treasured there, but instead it held only a heavy door-key. Dropping that into my pocket, I hurried up to the attic,

taking care though that my slipped feet made no pattering either on the staircase or the bare floor above.

I stopped before one particular dormer bedroom and listened cautiously. Hearing only the throbbing of my own heart, I ventured to take out the key and unlock the door. Passing in, I looked it from the inside, and then hung my black silk apron over the knob. If they found out where I was they should not see what I was doing.

When I drew aside the heavy curtains and looked about me I was emphatically "monarch of all I surveyed." This room belonged exclusively to me, and it was the only room that did; nor was this all—everything that it contained was mine, mine only. I had taken possession of it the very day my father had told me of his contemplated marriage, taken it with his permission, and had a lock of peculiar make put on the door—a lock that none but an expert could pick. Here I had brought all my dead mother's wearing apparel, jewels, knock-knacks, papers and letters, and also all the clothing she had bought for me for the two years previous to her decease. It was literally filled with cedar chests and trunks, and so thoughtful had I been that I had even persuaded my father to purchase for me a small fire-proof safe, into which I had deposited the jewels and papers.

Neither my stepmother nor her daughter had ever crossed the threshold of that little room, and, whatever they guessed, they were in reality ignorant of its contents. It was veritably a Bluebeard's den to them.

Opening one of the chests, I took from it a white silk dress. So carefully had it been folded and so well guarded from dust and air, that it looked as snowy and lustrous as if fresh bought, whereas it had lain there nearly four years. Tears came into my eyes as I shook it out. Can you wonder? That dress my own mother had purchased for me to wear at my "coming-out party." Alas! she was taken suddenly ill just a week before, and when the eventful night came which was to have seen me arrayed in it I sat on my poor father's knee, clad in the black bombazine which had been hurriedly got up for the funeral.

Keep a thing seven years, and it will come in fashion again, they say. I looked at this white silk dress. It had only been kept four years, yet it was so nearly in the then style that none would have suspected its age.

"It will do," I said to myself, with quite satisfaction.

It had never been trimmed. The dressmaker had sent for the lace the very day my mother was taken ill. Of course no one thought of orders then, and so after the funeral it came home lacking those finishing touches which give style to a dress.

From another chest I took a box of rich laces, flounces, edgings and a berth. They had been sent to me by an aged relative of my mother as a present for my eighteenth birthday, and were to have been worn with this dress. Despite my blinding tears, I looked at them now with exquisite delight, for I dote on laces, and have often said if I were poor and could not get the real, before I would wear imitation I would use the plain linen exclusively for both collars and cuffs. There was a little fortune in these that I now held in the slant of the sunbeams; like frostwork on mist they seemed there; something for fairies instead of humanity.

Wiping my eyes and girding on my resolution, I sat down and commenced trimming my dress. I had taste and skill, so much of both that May often said that if I should be left poor I could easily earn my living with my needle. Thus I made a short task of what was, before me, and had soon the pleasure of seeing my dress completed, and, without any vanity, I knew I should be the best as well as the richest dressed of all the throng that should attend Mrs. Morgan's party.

Spreading out the robe carefully, I left it, and, locking the door securely, went down to my chamber. I was selecting my skirts when some one tapped. I knew the tap. It was catty, like her footsteps.

"Why, where in the world have you been hiding, Ellen?" exclaimed my stepmother as she entered. "I've searched the house high and low for you."

I was apparently absorbed at that moment in ascertaining whether or not there was a flaw in the fitting of one of my ruffled skirts. When I did look up it was with a blank face, as though I had not heard her question or remark.

She did not repeat either, but continued talking in the same tone:

"I've come, Ellen, to see if it isn't possible even yet to induce you to change your mind and attend the ball to-night."

"I have concluded to go," I answered, quietly, taking out another skirt and inspecting the trimming closely.

"Have you?" There was no mistaking that emphasis. It expressed profound astonishment. "Well, I am glad you have at last come to your senses. May will be delighted, and so will Stevee" (this pronunciation is her own), "and so will everybody. But what brought about this change? I cannot help feeling curious to know."

"Oh, I concluded I'd go once and see if there was as much enjoyment in gay society as you and May tell about. I am going to see if it pays as well as staying at home."

Apparently this satisfied her, for she immediately began about my dress.

"It's too late, of course, to do anything about a new one, though if you had decided yesterday we might possibly—possibly, I say—have got one, there was a splendid rose-colored satin at

Stephens's that would have been exquisite—the same price and quality as the blue one I got for May. Let's see." And she opened the door of my wardrobe. "Oh, here's just the thing, this pearl-colored silk. No one has ever seen you wear it here." And she took it from the hook.

"I shall wear white," said I, laying out the skirts I had selected.

"White!—but what have you nice enough in white? Oh, I remember—that India mull you wore last summer. It will be beautiful!"

Here a malicious gleam quivered in her eye. I understood it. I should be eclipsed totally by the splendor of May's blue satin. Then her brow clouded. I understood that too. The cold, cruel, censorious world of which she had told my father might, probably would, make invidious remarks about the contrast between the two daughters, the real heiress in mull, the adopted one in satin.

"Hadn't you better wear this pearl silk, Ellen?"

"No; I prefer white. It's the first ball I've attended here since—since I laid off black, and white is the most appropriate." Then, seeing that the shadow was still there, I added, playfully, "I see you are afraid to trust my taste, but I assure you I will do credit to your training and to my father's position."

She was flattered, for I did not often use that tone to her, and went away with a self-satisfied look that almost made me repent the part I was playing, for I was playing a part. I was going to the ball with the determination to be the cynosure of all eyes, to eclipse every one with my dress, jewels, style, talk, dancing, playing and singing. I was going to show my stepmother that I was a dangerous rival for little May, and then I trusted I would be left at home in peace, free to follow my own chosen pursuits, whether they took me into my father's library or into the dark and damp haunts of destitution.

"You'll want Susette to assist you," said she, as we left the dining-room. "I'll send her as soon as she has finished with May and myself, or you may have her first, just as you please."

"I shall not need her. Bessie is quite equal to my wants. Just let me know when you are ready, as I want to read till the last moment."

"Read!" exclaimed May, petulantly. "I verily believe, Ellen, if you were dying, you'd read till the last moment. You'd better keep your eyes bright for conquests."

I did not retort, but calmly summoned our little chambermaid to my room. My father only allowed one waiting-maid to all three of us. Indeed he often said, good-naturedly, that "it was all nonsense for women to think of such a thing; he'd no patience with it. Just as though we couldn't put up our own hair and tie our own shoestrings," and a great deal more; but he never refused to pay Susette her monthly wages.

I went out so seldom that I had very little need of her, and of late I had called on Bessie, finding that she had quite as good taste as the Parisienne, and was more to my mind in every way, never disturbing my reveries with ill-timed loquaciousness.

"I am going to the ball to-night, Bessie," I said, "and I want you to dress me. Look at this picture." And I showed her a mezzotint that I had kept in my portfolio for many months. "Do you think you can put my hair up in that way? It's a style that would suit my face, and it isn't common."

She studied the plate attentively for a few minutes, then, looking up confidently, answered:

"Yes, I can. Your hair is so long and heavy that I can do it easily; but what shall I put in that space where there are pearls in the picture?"

"I'll find something that'll answer."

And I submitted myself to her hands.

"Now, please don't look, Miss Ellen, will you, till I get it done?"

And she turned the dressing-mirror so that it was impossible for me to catch a reflection if I had cared to do so.

She worked patiently, and I waited quietly, without any anxiety; for I had perfect confidence in her skill, and I knew she would exert herself to the utmost, that her young lady, as she always called me, should not be outdone by Susette's.

"Oh, if I only had some pearls now!" she cried out, at last, standing a little way off to watch the effect.

"Hand me that jewel-case."

And I pointed to one on the bureau. I had taken it that day from the safe in the attic.

Her eyes grew big with curiosity as I opened it, but when she saw me lift from its white satin resting-place a bandeau of pearls that a queen might have coveted she fairly clapped her hands with joy, saying at the same moment:

"And Miss May has only a string of sequins for hers!"

She had been very still hitherto, but now, in spite of herself, little bursts of laughter would ripple from her lips, and snatches of ballads, and exclamations of delight; yet she kept busy all the while.

Two or three of her verses haunted me. I had heard her hum them before, and once when I asked her where she learned them she said she couldn't—she believed she had always known them. They were set to a wild chanting tune that I often even yet seem to hear when I sit alone at twilight.

"I combed my bonnie ladie's hair,

I fastened it with jewels rare,

I dressed her in a robe of white—

Her own true love she'll see to-night!