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Chapter 19

Twenty Second: Night. - What have I done? and what will be the end of it? I cannot calmly reflect upon it; I cannot sleep. I must have recourse to my diary again; I will commit it to paper to- night, and see what I shall think of it to-morrow.

I went down to dinner resolving to be cheerful and well-conducted, and kept my resolution very creditably, considering how my head ached and how internally wretched I felt. I don't know what is come over me of late; my very energies, both mental and physical, must be strangely impaired, or I should not have acted so weakly in many respects as I have done; but I have not been well this last day or two. I suppose it is with sleeping and eating so little, and thinking so much, and being so continually out of humour. But to return. I was exerting myself to sing and play for the amusement, and at the request, of my aunt and Millicent, before the gentlemen came into the drawing-room (Miss Wilmot never likes to waste her musical efforts on ladies' ears alone). Millicent had asked for a little Scotch song, and I was just in the middle of it when they entered. The first thing Mr. Huntingdon did was to walk up to Annabella.

'Now, Miss Wilmot, won't you give us some music to-night?' said he. 'Do now! I know you will, when I tell you that I have been hungering and thirsting all day for the sound of your voice. Come! the piano's vacant.'

It was, for I had quitted it immediately upon hearing his petition. Had I been endowed with a proper degree of self-possession, I should have turned to the lady myself, and cheerfully joined my entreaties to his, whereby I should have disappointed his expectations, if the affront had been purposely given, or made him sensible of the wrong, if it had only arisen from thoughtlessness; but I felt it too deeply to do anything but rise from the music- stool, and throw myself back on the sofa, suppressing with difficulty the audible expression of the bitterness I felt within. I knew Annabella's musical talents were superior to mine, but that was no reason why I should be treated as a perfect nonentity. The time and the manner of his asking her appeared like a gratuitous insult to me; and I could have wept with pure vexation.

Meantime, she exultingly seated herself at the piano, and favoured him with two of his favourite songs, in such superior style that even I soon lost my anger in admiration, and listened with a sort of gloomy pleasure to the skilful modulations of her full-toned and powerful voice, so judiciously aided by her rounded and spirited touch; and while my ears drank in the sound, my eyes rested on the face of her principal auditor, and derived an equal or superior delight from the contemplation of his speaking countenance, as he stood beside her - that eye and brow lighted up with keen enthusiasm, and that sweet smile passing and appearing like gleams of sunshine on an April day. No wonder he should hunger and thirst to hear her sing. I now forgave him from my heart his reckless slight of me, and I felt ashamed at my pettish resentment of such a trifle - ashamed too of those bitter envious pang that gnawed my inmost heart, in spite of all this admiration and delight.

'There now,' said she, playfully running her fingers over the keys when she had concluded the second song. 'What shall I give you next?'

But in saying this she looked back at Lord Lowborough, who was standing a little behind, leaning against the back of a chair, an attentive listener, too, experiencing, to judge by his countenance, much the same feelings of mingled pleasure and sadness as I did. But the look she gave him plainly said, 'Do you choose for me now: I have done enough for him, and will gladly exert myself to gratify you;' and thus encouraged, his lordship came forward, and turning over the music, presently set before her a little song that I had noticed before, and read more than once, with an interest arising from the circumstance of my connecting it in my mind with the reigning tyrant of my thoughts. And now, with my nerves already excited and half unstrung, I could not hear those words so sweetly warbled forth without some symptoms of emotion I was not able to suppress. Tears rose unbidden to my eyes, and I buried my face in the sofa-pillow that they might flow unseen while I listened. The air was simple, sweet, and sad. It is still running in my head, and so are the words:-

Farewell to thee! but not farewell To all my fondest thoughts of thee: Within my heart they still shall dwell; And they shall cheer and comfort me.

O beautiful, and full of grace! If thou hadst never met mine eye, I had not dreamed a living face Could fancied charms so far outvie.

If I may ne'er behold again That form and face so dear to me, Nor hear thy voice, still would I fain Preserve, for aye, their memory.

That voice, the magic of whose tone Can wake an echo in my breast, Creating feelings that, alone, Can make my tranced spirit blest.

That laughing eye, whose sunny beam My memory would not cherish less; - And oh, that smile! I whose joyous gleam No mortal languish can express.

Adieu! but let me cherish, still, The hope with which I cannot part. Contempt may wound, and coldness chill, But still it lingers in my heart.

And who can tell but Heaven, at last, May answer all my thousand prayers, And bid the future pay the past With joy for anguish, smiles for tears.

When it ceased, I longed for nothing so much as to be out of the room. The sofa was not far from the door, but I did not dare to raise my head, for I knew Mr. Huntingdon was standing near me, and I knew by the sound of his voice, as he spoke in answer to some remark of Lord Lowborough's, that his face was turned towards me. Perhaps a half-suppressed sob had caught his ear, and caused him to look round - heaven forbid! But with a violent effort, I checked all further signs of weakness, dried my tears, and, when I thought he had turned away again, rose, and instantly left the apartment, taking refuge in my favourite resort, the library.

There was no light there but the faint red glow of the neglected fire; - but I did not want a light; I only wanted to indulge my thoughts, unnoticed and undisturbed; and sitting down on a low stool before the easy-chair, I sunk my head upon its cushioned seat, and thought, and thought, until the tears gushed out again, and I wept like any child. Presently, however, the door was gently opened and someone entered the room. I trusted it was only a servant, and did not stir. The door was closed again - but I was not alone; a hand gently touched my shoulder, and a voice said, softly, - 'Helen, what is the matter?'

I could not answer at the moment.

'You must, and shall tell me,' was added, more vehemently, and the speaker threw himself on his knees beside me on the rug, and forcibly possessed himself of my hand; but I hastily caught it away, and replied, - 'It is nothing to you, Mr. Huntingdon.'

'Are you sure it is not me?' he returned; 'can you swear that you were not thinking of me while you wept?' This was unendurable. I made an effort to rise, but he was kneeling on my dress.

'Tell me,' continued he - 'I want to know, - because if you were, I have something to say to you, - and if not, I'll go.'

'Go then!' I cried; but, fearing he would obey too well, and never come again, I hastily added - 'Or say what you have to say, and have done with it!'

'But which?' said he - 'for I shall only say it if you really were thinking of me. So tell me, Helen.'

'You're excessively impertinent, Mr. Huntingdon!'

'Not at all - too pertinent, you mean. So you won't tell me? - Well, I'll spare your woman's pride, and, construing your silence into "Yes," I'll take it for granted that I was the subject of your thoughts, and the cause of your affliction - '

'Indeed, sir - '

'If you deny it, I won't tell you my secret,' threatened he; and I did not interrupt him again, or even attempt to repulse him: though he had taken my hand once more, and half embraced me with his other arm, I was scarcely conscious of it at the time.

'It is this,' resumed he: 'that Annabella Wilmot, in comparison with you, is like a flaunting peony compared with a sweet, wild rosebud gemmed with dew - and I love you to distraction! - Now, tell me if that intelligence gives you any pleasure. Silence again? That means yes. Then let me add, that I cannot live without you, and if you answer No to this last question, you will drive me mad. - Will you bestow yourself upon me? - you will!' he cried, nearly squeezing me to death in his arms.

'No, no!' I exclaimed, struggling to free myself from him - 'you must ask my uncle and aunt.'

'They won't refuse me, if you don't.'

'I'm not so sure of that - my aunt dislikes you.'

'But you don't, Helen - say you love me, and I'll go.'

'I wish you would go!' I replied.

'I will, this instant, - if you'll only say you love me.'

'You know I do,' I answered. And again he caught me in his arms, and smothered me with kisses.

At that moment my aunt opened wide the door, and stood before us, candle in hand, in shocked and horrified amazement, gazing alternately at Mr. Huntingdon and me - for we had both started up, and now stood wide enough asunder. But his confusion was only for a moment. Rallying in an instant, with the most enviable assurance, he began, - 'I beg ten thousand pardons, Mrs. Maxwell! Don't be too severe upon me. I've been asking your sweet niece to take me for better, for worse; and she, like a good girl, informs me she cannot think of it without her uncle's and aunt's consent. So let me implore you not to condemn me to eternal wretchedness: if you favour my cause, I am safe; for Mr. Maxwell, I am certain, can refuse you nothing.'

'We will talk of this to-morrow, sir,' said my aunt, coldly. 'It is a subject that demands mature and serious deliberation. At present, you had better return to the drawing-room.'

'But meantime,' pleaded he, 'let me commend my cause to your most indulgent - '

'No indulgence for you, Mr. Huntingdon, must come between me and the consideration of my niece's happiness.'

'Ah, true! I know she is an angel, and I am a presumptuous dog to dream of possessing such a treasure; but, nevertheless, I would sooner die than relinquish her in favour of the best man that ever went to heaven - and as for her happiness, I would sacrifice my body and soul - '

'Body and soul, Mr. Huntingdon - sacrifice your soul?'

'Well, I would lay down life - '

'You would not be required to lay it down.'

'I would spend it, then - devote my life - and all its powers to the promotion and preservation - '

'Another time, sir, we will talk of this - and I should have felt disposed to judge more favourably of your pretensions, if you too had chosen another time and place, and let me add - another manner for your declaration.'

'Why, you see, Mrs. Maxwell,' he began -

'Pardon me, sir,' said she, with dignity - 'The company are inquiring for you in the other room.' And she turned to me.

'Then you must plead for me, Helen,' said he, and at length withdrew.

'You had better retire to your room, Helen,' said my aunt, gravely. 'I will discuss this matter with you, too, to-morrow.'

'Don't be angry, aunt,' said I.

'My dear, I am not angry,' she replied: 'I am surprised. If it is true that you told him you could not accept his offer without our consent - '

'It is true,' interrupted I.

'Then how could you permit -?'

'I couldn't help it, aunt,' I cried, bursting into tears. They were not altogether the tears of sorrow, or of fear for her displeasure, but rather the outbreak of the general tumultuous excitement of my feelings. But my good aunt was touched at my agitation. In a softer tone, she repeated her recommendation to retire, and, gently kissing my forehead, bade me good-night, and put her candle in my hand; and I went; but my brain worked so, I could not think of sleeping. I feel calmer now that I have written all this; and I will go to bed, and try to win tired nature's sweet restorer.