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Chapter 20

September 24th. - In the morning I rose, light and cheerful - nay, intensely happy. The hovering cloud cast over me by my aunt's views, and by the fear of not obtaining her consent, was lost in the bright effulgence of my own hopes, and the too delightful consciousness of requited love. It was a splendid morning; and I went out to enjoy it, in a quiet ramble, in company with my own blissful thoughts. The dew was on the grass, and ten thousand gossamers were waving in the breeze; the happy red-breast was pouring out its little soul in song, and my heart overflowed with silent hymns of gratitude and praise to heaven.

But I had not wandered far before my solitude was interrupted by the only person that could have disturbed my musings, at that moment, without being looked upon as an unwelcome intruder: Mr. Huntingdon came suddenly upon me. So unexpected was the apparition, that I might have thought it the creation of an over-excited imagination, had the sense of sight alone borne witness to his presence; but immediately I felt his strong arm round my waist and his warm kiss on my cheek, while his keen and gleeful salutation, 'My own Helen!' was ringing in my ear.

'Not yours yet!' said I, hastily swerving aside from this too presumptuous greeting. 'Remember my guardians. You will not easily obtain my aunt's consent. Don't you see she is prejudiced against you?'

'I do, dearest; and you must tell me why, that I may best know how to combat her objections. I suppose she thinks I am a prodigal,' pursued he, observing that I was unwilling to reply, 'and concludes that I shall have but little worldly goods wherewith to endow my better half? If so, you must tell her that my property is mostly entailed, and I cannot get rid of it. There may be a few mortgages on the rest - a few trifling debts and incumbrances here and there, but nothing to speak of; and though I acknowledge I am not so rich as I might be - or have been - still, I think, we could manage pretty comfortably on what's left. My father, you know, was something of a miser, and in his latter days especially saw no pleasure in life but to amass riches; and so it is no wonder that his son should make it his chief delight to spend them, which was accordingly the case, until my acquaintance with you, dear Helen, taught me other views and nobler aims. And the very idea of having you to care for under my roof would force me to moderate my expenses and live like a Christian - not to speak of all the prudence and virtue you would instil into my mind by your wise counsels and sweet, attractive goodness.'

'But it is not that,' said I; 'it is not money my aunt thinks about. She knows better than to value worldly wealth above its price.'

'What is it, then?'

'She wishes me to - to marry none but a really good man.'

'What, a man of "decided piety"? - ahem! - Well, come, I'll manage that too! It's Sunday to-day, isn't it? I'll go to church morning, afternoon, and evening, and comport myself in such a godly sort that she shall regard me with admiration and sisterly love, as a brand plucked from the burning. I'll come home sighing like a furnace, and full of the savour and unction of dear Mr. Blatant's discourse - '

'Mr. Leighton,' said I, dryly.

'Is Mr. Leighton a "sweet preacher," Helen - a "dear, delightful, heavenly-minded man"?''

'He is a good man, Mr. Huntingdon. I wish I could say half as much for you.'

'Oh, I forgot, you are a saint, too. I crave your pardon, dearest - but don't call me Mr. Huntingdon; my name is Arthur.'

'I'll call you nothing - for I'll have nothing at all to do with you if you talk in that way any more. If you really mean to deceive my aunt as you say, you are very wicked; and if not, you are very wrong to jest on such a subject.'

'I stand corrected,' said he, concluding his laugh with a sorrowful sigh. 'Now,' resumed he, after a momentary pause, 'let us talk about something else. And come nearer to me, Helen, and take my arm; and then I'll let you alone. I can't be quiet while I see you walking there.'

I complied; but said we must soon return to the house.

'No one will be down to breakfast yet, for long enough,' he answered. 'You spoke of your guardians just now, Helen, but is not your father still living?'

'Yes, but I always look upon my uncle and aunt as my guardians, for they are so in deed, though not in name. My father has entirely given me up to their care. I have never seen him since dear mamma died, when I was a very little girl, and my aunt, at her request, offered to take charge of me, and took me away to Staningley, where I have remained ever since; and I don't think he would object to anything for me that she thought proper to sanction.'

'But would he sanction anything to which she thought proper to object?'

'No, I don't think he cares enough about me.'

'He is very much to blame - but he doesn't know what an angel he has for his daughter - which is all the better for me, as, if he did, he would not be willing to part with such a treasure.'

'And Mr. Huntingdon,' said I, 'I suppose you know I am not an heiress?'

He protested he had never given it a thought, and begged I would not disturb his present enjoyment by the mention of such uninteresting subjects. I was glad of this proof of disinterested affection: for Annabella Wilmot is the probable heiress to all her uncle's wealth, in addition to her late father's property, which she has already in

possession.

I now insisted upon retracing our steps to the house; but we walked slowly, and went on talking as we proceeded. I need not repeat all we said: let me rather refer to what passed between my aunt and me, after breakfast, when Mr. Huntingdon called my uncle aside, no doubt to make his proposals, and she beckoned me into another room, where she once more commenced a solemn remonstrance, which, however, entirely failed to convince me that her view of the case was preferable to my own.

'You judge him uncharitably, aunt, I know,' said I. 'His very friends are not half so bad as you represent them. There is Walter Hargrave, Millicent's brother, for one: he is but a little lower than the angels, if half she says of him is true. She is continually talking to me about him, and lauding his many virtues to the skies.'

'You will form a very inadequate estimate of a man's character,' replied she, 'if you judge by what a fond sister says of him. The worst of them generally know how to hide their misdeeds from their sisters' eyes, and their mother's, too.'

'And there is Lord Lowborough,' continued I, 'quite a decent man.'

'Who told you so? Lord Lowborough is a desperate man. He has dissipated his fortune in gambling and other things, and is now seeking an heiress to retrieve it. I told Miss Wilmot so; but you're all alike: she haughtily answered she was very much obliged to me, but she believed she knew when a man was seeking her for her fortune, and when for herself; she flattered herself she had had experience enough in those matters to be justified in trusting to her own judgment - and as for his lordship's lack of fortune, she cared nothing about that, as she hoped her own would suffice for both; and as for his wildness, she supposed he was no worse than others - besides, he was reformed now. Yes, they can all play the hypocrite when they want to take in a fond, misguided woman!'

'Well, I think he's about as good as she is,' said I. 'But when Mr. Huntingdon is married, he won't have many opportunities of consorting with his bachelor friends; - and the worse they are, the more I long to deliver him from them.'

'To be sure, my dear; and the worse he is, I suppose, the more you long to deliver him from himself.'

'Yes, provided he is not incorrigible - that is, the more I long to deliver him from his faults - to give him an opportunity of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness - to do my utmost to help his better self against his worse, and make him what he would have been if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish, miserly father, who, to gratify his own sordid passions, restricted him in the most innocent enjoyments of childhood and youth, and so disgusted him with every kind of restraint; - and a foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent, deceiving her husband for him, and doing her utmost to encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress, - and then, such a set of companions as you represent his friends to be - '

'Poor man!' said she, sarcastically, 'his kind have greatly wronged him!'

'They have!' cried I - 'and they shall wrong him no more - his wife shall undo what his mother did!'

'Well,' said she, after a short pause, 'I must say, Helen, I thought better of your judgment than this - and your taste too. How you can love such a man I cannot tell, or what pleasure you can find in his company; for "what fellowship hath light with darkness; or he that believeth with an infidel?"'

'He is not an infidel; - and I am not light, and he is not darkness; his worst and only vice is thoughtlessness.'

'And thoughtlessness,' pursued my aunt, 'may lead to every crime, and will but poorly excuse our errors in the sight of God. Mr. Huntingdon, I suppose, is not without the common faculties of men: he is not so light-headed as to be irresponsible: his Maker has endowed him with reason and conscience as well as the rest of us; the Scriptures are open to him as well as to others; - and "if he hear not them, neither will he hear though one rose from the dead." And remember, Helen,' continued she, solemnly, "'the wicked shall be turned into hell, and they that forget God!'" And suppose, even, that he should continue to love you, and you him, and that you should pass through life together with tolerable comfort - how will it be in the end, when you see yourselves parted for ever; you, perhaps, taken into eternal bliss, and he cast into the lake that burneth with unquenchable fire - there for ever to - '

'Not for ever,' I exclaimed, "'only till he has paid the uttermost farthing;" for "if any man's work abide not the fire, he shall suffer loss, yet himself shall be saved, but so as by fire;" and He that "is able to subdue all things to Himself will have all men to be saved," and "will, in the fulness of time, gather together in one all things in Christ Jesus, who tasted death for every man, and in whom God will reconcile all things to Himself, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven."'

'Oh, Helen! where did you learn all this?'

'In the Bible, aunt. I have searched it through, and found nearly thirty passages, all tending to support the same theory.'

'And is that the use you make of your Bible? And did you find no passages tending to prove the danger and the falsity of such a belief?'

'No: I found, indeed, some passages that, taken by themselves, might seem to contradict that opinion; but they will all bear a different construction to that which is commonly given, and in most the only difficulty is in the word which we translate "everlasting" or "eternal." I don't know the Greek, but I believe it strictly means for ages, and might signify either endless or long-enduring. And as for the danger of the belief, I would not publish it abroad if I thought any poor wretch would be likely to presume upon it to his own destruction, but it is a glorious thought to cherish in one's own heart, and I would not part with it for all the world can give!'

Here our conference ended, for it was now high time to prepare for church. Every one attended the morning service, except my uncle, who hardly ever goes, and Mr. Wilmot, who stayed at home with him to enjoy a quiet game of cribbage. In the afternoon Miss Wilmot and Lord Lowborough likewise excused themselves from attending; but Mr. Huntingdon vouchsafed to accompany us again. Whether it was to ingratiate himself with my aunt I cannot tell, but, if so, he certainly should have behaved better. I must confess, I did not like his conduct during service at all. Holding his prayer-book upside down, or open at any place but the right, he did nothing but stare about him, unless he happened to catch my aunt's eye or mine, and then he would drop his own on his book, with a puritanical air of mock solemnity that would have been ludicrous, if it had not been too provoking. Once, during the sermon, after attentively regarding Mr. Leighton for a few minutes, he suddenly produced his gold pencil-case and snatched up a Bible. Perceiving that I observed the movement, he whispered that he was going to make a note of the sermon; but instead of that, as I sat next him, I could not help seeing that he was making a caricature of the preacher, giving to the respectable, pious, elderly gentleman, the air and aspect of a most absurd old hypocrite. And yet, upon his return, he talked to my aunt about the sermon with a degree of modest, serious discrimination that tempted me to believe he had really attended to and profited by the discourse.

Just before dinner my uncle called me into the library for the discussion of a very important matter, which was dismissed in few words.

'Now, Nell,' said he, 'this young Huntingdon has been asking for you: what must I say about it? Your aunt would answer "no" - but what say you?'

'I say yes, uncle,' replied I, without a moment's hesitation; for I had thoroughly made up my mind on the subject.

'Very good!' cried he. 'Now that's a good honest answer - wonderful for a girl! - Well, I'll write to your father to-morrow. He's sure to give his consent; so you may look on the matter as settled. You'd have done a deal better if you'd taken Wilmot, I can tell you; but that you won't believe. At your time of life, it's love that rules the roast: at mine, it's solid, serviceable gold. I suppose now, you'd never dream of looking into the state of your husband's finances, or troubling your head about settlements, or anything of that sort?'

'I don't think I should.'

'Well, be thankful, then, that you've wiser heads to think for you. I haven't had time, yet, to examine thoroughly into this young rascal's affairs, but I see that a great part of his father's fine property has been squandered away; - but still, I think, there's a pretty fair share of it left, and a little careful nursing may make a handsome thing of it yet; and then we must persuade your father to give you a decent fortune, as he has only one besides yourself to care for; - and, if you behave well, who knows but what I may be induced to remember you in my will!' continued he, putting his fingers to his nose, with a knowing wink.

'Thanks, uncle, for that and all your kindness,' replied I.

'Well, and I questioned this young spark on the matter of settlements,' continued he; 'and he seemed disposed to be generous enough on that point - '

'I knew he would!' said I. 'But pray don't trouble your head - or his, or mine about that; for all I have will be his, and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of us require?' And I was about to make my exit, but he called me back.

'Stop, stop!' cried he; 'we haven't mentioned the time yet. When must it be? Your aunt would put it off till the Lord knows when, but he is anxious to be bound as soon as may be: he won't hear of waiting beyond next month; and you, I guess, will be of the same mind, so - '

'Not at all, uncle; on the contrary, I should like to wait till after Christmas, at least.'

'Oh! pooh, pooh! never tell me that tale - I know better,' cried he; and he persisted in his incredulity. Nevertheless, it is quite true. I am in no hurry at all. How can I be, when I think of the momentous change that awaits me, and of all I have to leave? It is happiness enough to know that we are to be united; and that he really loves me, and I may love him as devotedly, and think of him as often as I please. However, I insisted upon consulting my aunt about the time of the wedding, for I determined her counsels should not be utterly disregarded; and no conclusions on that particular are come to yet.