

CHAPTER XX.

DOWN-EAST AGAIN.

"I AM so glad to see you, my dear Esther!" exclaimed Emily Sidney, as she assisted her friend to free herself from her many wrappings. "I knew that winter was a poor time to visit our quiet little Belfast; but, as Virginia and Maria were coming, I hoped it would be pleasant enough to make you forget our cold Maine winters."

"Remember, too, that I am a Down-East girl," replied Esther, "and not at all afraid of the cold weather. In fact, winter is my favorite season. I am delighted to see a good sparkling wood fire again," she added, approaching the hearth, and warming her cold hands. "But are you alone?" she asked, observing that there was no one else present.

"Yes; all of the family have gone to the Lyceum, except grandma and myself. I had a presentiment that you would come to-night. But let us go to grandma's room, for I left the good old lady alone, and I ought to stay with her."

Esther followed Emily through the long entry, up a flight of winding stairs, to the room which she had designated as grandmother's. The house was an old-

fashioned one, but very large and comfortable in its appearance. The room which they entered was wide, but rather low. Old Mrs. Sidney was seated in a low rocking-chair, near the fire-place, where a large wood fire was blazing. Near her stood a little light stand, upon which lay an open Bible; her knitting-work laid in her lap, and she had evidently been reading; but, as the door opened, she pushed her spectacles up on her cap, and looked curiously at Esther. She was dressed in black, a small shawl was neatly folded over her bosom, and her cap was tied simply under her chin. A large Dutch clock stood in one corner of the room; an old-fashioned desk occupied another, on which laid several books, in equally old-fashioned bindings. Rocking-chairs, of various shapes and sizes, with a lounge, constituted the rest of the furniture.

A cat sat purring at the old lady's feet, looking lazily at the ball of yarn, which had fallen from her capacious pocket upon the hearth, in tempting proximity to pussy; but she, like her mistress, had grown old, and her play-days were over.

All this Esther saw at a glance; for Emily approached her grandmother, saying, in a loud voice (for the old lady was a little deaf), "This is my friend, Esther Hastings; she has just come, in the stage."

Mrs. Sidney extended her hand to the new comer, and looked at her curiously. "Wall, I'm glad to see ye, dear. Hastings! Hastings!" she repeated—

"Sarah Mansfield married a Hastings. Be you any relation to her?"

"That was my mother's name," replied Esther.

"Law, now, you don't say so. Why, I know'd her when she wan't much older than you be. Wall, you're the pictur of her. I know'd, as soon as I see you, that you looked like somebody I'd seen. Wall, she was a pooty gal, and a good gal, too. Set up to the fire and warm you, dear," she continued; "you look cold."

Esther did as she was requested; and, drawing her low chair to the fire, looked, in her turn, rather curiously at Mrs. Sidney.

She was a fine-looking old lady, a little bent by age; but her black eye was undimmed, and a lock of hair, which had escaped from her cap, still retained its jetty hue.

"I guess I'll smoke a little," she said, "and then go to bed."

Her grand-daughter rose, took a pipe from a small box on the end of the mantel, and, lighting it at the fire, handed it to her grandmother.

The good old lady seemed to enjoy her smoke very much; and when her pipe was out, requesting Emily "to rake up the fire, so that there would be a good bed of coals in the morning," arose, and entered her bedroom, a small apartment adjoining the one where they were sitting.

Emily accompanied her, and assisted her in disrobing, a work of but few minutes, and then carefully covered up the fire, crossed the andirons in most ap-

proved style, and laid the shovel across them, saying, as she did so, "I don't know as grandmother would sleep a wink to-night, if she were not sure that the andirons were placed just so; and now," said she, after placing the chairs back in proper order, "let us go down into the sitting-room, and have a cozy chat."

This was also a large, though low room, rejoicing in the usual bright wood fire. It was simply but comfortably furnished. A large secretary or book-case stood on one side of the room, while a piano occupied the other. A sofa, large and wide, was placed across the wall, opposite the fire. The chairs were all arranged very stiffly in their places, as if one would hardly venture to remove them from their respective stations. A large centre-table occupied the middle of the apartment, on which a bright solar lamp stood. A few books, placed at regular distances, reposing on the mahogany, were the only ornaments. A little hour-glass table stood in one corner, heaped with work, some of which was falling off. This was the only disorderly thing in the room. Emily at once set to work to remedy this; and, folding each piece separately, soon reduced it to order.

"Mother's table," said she, "is always in a litter; she isn't what you would call a particular body at all: but aunt Mary's eyes will spy out anything. I think it looks so cheerful to see everything in place, that I always try to have everything in order before the family come home."

Esther looked at the rigidly fixed furniture, and longed to get her hands upon the different articles,

and place them in a more comfortable position: but she made no remarks, as Emily swept the hearth carefully, and lifted a refractory stick of wood into place. "There," said she, throwing herself into a rocking-chair, which appeared to be fixed on a certain figure of the carpet—"there, all's tidy now, I believe; and now, do tell me all about Mrs. Hastings' marriage. Wasn't it rather sudden? I knew she and Mr. McIntyre seemed to like each other very much, but I never dreamed of their becoming one flesh."

"I hear footsteps," said Esther; "and though there isn't much to tell, I'll wait till some other time."

"Yes," said Emily, "they are coming home; the bell rung for nine a few moments ago."

In fact, the door opened, and quite a party, as it seemed to Esther, entered—Mrs. Sidney, her husband, aunt Mary, and brother Ned, as she was informed. She was received by Mrs. Sidney with a passive "How d'ye do?" by Mr. Sidney, with a keen glance and a warm grasp of the hand, while Aunt Mary kissed her, and Ned welcomed her joyously, saying "that he supposed Em was perfectly happy now."

Emily now busied herself in taking her mother's bonnet, ribbons and cloak, and Esther looked with a good deal of curiosity at her new acquaintances.

Mrs. Sidney, divested of her wrappings, was a pale, delicate looking woman, whose blue eyes expressed neither much energy or warm affections. She fell back almost exhausted in the rocking chair which Emily had left, and seemed unconscious that the rockers had become entangled in another chair which Ned

had drawn near it, and, finding it impossible to rock, she had resigned herself to a state of quiet, and had not even taken the trouble to look behind her. Mr. Sidney was a tall but rather spare man. His features were large and far from handsome. His brow, care-worn and wrinkled, was shaded by dark hair thickly sown with gray. He took the slippers handed him by Emily, gave in exchange his boots, and settled himself comfortably upon the sofa. Aunt Mary and Ned had left the room, and there was a silent pause. Mrs. Sidney did not appear to notice the break in the conversation, but her husband seemed to feel in duty bound to say something, and began to ask some questions about the travelling, remarking that a stage ride in winter was anything but agreeable.

Esther replied to this at as great length as possible, but was as much relieved as Mr. Sidney evidently was, at the entrance of Aunt Mary, who, quietly and without the painful appearance of effort which had distinguished her brother's attempts at conversation, soon made Esther feel quite at home, while Mr. Sidney relapsed into silence.

Aunt Mary was tall and finely formed; she had a great abundance of black hair which was tastefully arranged; her features, though not regular, were pleasing, and her eyes, large and deep, lighted up beautifully as she talked. She smiled often, displaying white and even teeth. She seemed to possess that gift so important but so rare, of seeing almost intuitively what was the character of the person whom she addressed,

and of adapting herself at once to her companion, talking of what most interested her listener.

"I wonder how she ever came to be an old maid," thought Esther—for an old maid she certainly was. Emily had assured her again and again that Aunt Mary was forty-one or two, and, though she had many offers, seemed to have resolved on a life of single blessedness. Ned now entered the room, bearing in his hands a huge apple pie which he said he had found in a foraging expedition into the pantry. He was closely followed by Emily with plates and knives, and, though Mr. Sidney declared that it was a most unhealthy practice to eat just before going to bed, he was very easily persuaded to take a piece. Mrs. Sidney roused herself from her half dozing state and did the same. Esther received her portion from the hands of Edward and, as he seated himself opposite her, she had a fine opportunity to study his countenance, a favorite employment of hers. He was a young man of about twenty-five years of age. "A fine, frank face," thought Esther, "though not handsome." His brown complexion, so different from his mother's and Emily's, she attributed to his sea voyages, for he was a sea captain. This she already knew, for, thanks to Emily's communications, none of the family seemed strangers to her. See read, she thought, in the lines of his mouth when at rest, an inflexible will, but this almost sternness vanished at once when he smiled. He was the idol of his sister, and his mother's eyes followed him with proud affection in all his wild vagaries, and they were many. She even suffered his

dog to lick her face without expostulation, and her cold smile became a warm and ardent one as he seated himself by her side, and taking her thin hand, pressed it fondly between his rough palms. She received all Emily's attentions quietly, and suffered her caresses passively, but the slightest token of Edward's love for her called such a light to her wasted features as really made them beautiful, and then, and then only, could Esther trace any marks of the beauty which she was said to have possessed in her youthful days.

"Emily, bring me the Bible," said Mr. Sidney, after a pause.

His daughter at once took from the table the large family Bible, and taking his spectacles from his pocket, wiping them, and giving a preparatory ahem, Deacon Sidney, as he was usually called, commenced reading aloud, one of the Psalms; but his eyes troubled him, and he requested Mary to read for him. She immediately complied, and as her rich sweet voice broke the silence, Esther could not but be struck with the contrast between the reading of the brother and sister. Mr. Sidney read in a cold, hard voice the words, which, imbued with the enthusiasm of Mary's nature, breathed of faith and love, and familiar as were the words to Esther, they seemed almost new to her, coming, as it were, fresh from the reader's heart.

She ceased, and Mr. Sidney knelt down; at once all present did the same, and the voice of the Deacon was lifted in prayer. He prayed long and fervently for the welfare of church and state, for the upbuilding of Zion, for heathen lands, for the poor

and oppressed, but not for the family, except in general terms. Esther felt that there was a lack, she hardly knew of what, and she reproached herself for the feeling which she could not prevent.

At the close of the prayer each bade good night, and taking lamps, sought their chambers. Esther and Emily were to share the same room; they had hardly thrown themselves upon the bed, when Aunt Mary entered.

She approached the bed-side and carefully tucked the covering around them, then laid her hand caressingly upon the brow of each, saying as she bade them good-night, "God bless and keep you, my children."

The words were simple, but the tone, deep and heartfelt, made them very impressive, and as she left the chamber Esther felt that a holy presence departed with her.

"How do you like Aunt Mary?" asked Emily as the door closed after her.

"She is a superior being," returned Esther, "I could love her very dearly, but it surprises me that she should be an old maid."

"It always did me, till a short time since grandma told me her story. She was engaged to a very fine man, a sea captain, and they were to be married on his return from a voyage. All things were in readiness for their marriage, and he was expected in a week or two, when there was a terrible gale; his ship was wrecked, and all but one man lost. This sailor was taken off the vessel, and told of the sad fate of the rest, both captain and crew.

"It nearly killed Aunt Mary, grandma said. She used to be very merry and wild, but this sobered her at once. She is never lively now, though not very melancholy. For all it was so long ago, she can never hear any thing about a shipwreck without leaving the room. None of the family ever name such a thing to her; but once, when I was quite small, I remember I read from a paper a tale of a vessel lost at sea. Aunt Mary was alone in the room with me; she started up, and pressed her hand to her heart, exclaiming, "Oh, God!" then sunk back in her chair. She was deathly pale, and I was frightened enough. I was going to run for assistance, but she bade me remain, and said she should be well in a moment. This was the only time I ever knew her to betray any emotion; but on the anniversary of that fatal day, she goes to her room and sees no one on any occasion. She has had many offers of marriage, but never listens to any of them. I don't know what we should do, if she were to marry. Grandma couldn't live without her, and she is always doing good. She visits the sick a great deal, and if any one is in trouble, she goes to them, and knows just what to say to them to comfort them."

"Surely," thought Esther, as she heard this story, "all things work together for good to them that love God."

Emily now began to tell Esther that Virginia and Maria would be in Belfast in the course of a day or two, and after talking of her plans for enjoyment, the two friends fell asleep, from which Esther did

not awake till the clear voice of Aunt Mary, as she stood by their bedside, awoke both of the sleepers.

"We must make haste," said Emily, "for father never likes to have any one absent or late at prayers." And dressing in haste, they reached the sitting room just as Deacon Sidney had rung the bell, and, Bible in hand, had opened its sacred pages.

Breakfast followed, at which Mrs. Sidney the younger made her appearance for the first time. Grandmother had been up a long time, and as her daughter-in-law spoke of a bad headache, and sleepless night, she cast a glance of incredulity at her, simply saying, "Folks hain't nigh so strong now-a-days, as they used to be when I was a gal."

Breakfast over, Emily and Esther entered the sitting room. It was already in perfect order, for Aunt Mary's hand had been there. Mrs. Sidney threw herself languidly upon the sofa, replying in as few words as possible to Emily's inquiries about her health.

Aunt Mary had been for some time in her mother's room, she now appeared, neatly dressed, and seating herself at a low table, commenced sewing. She had hardly got her work about her, when a large-framed, coarse looking woman entered. She had a piercing black eye, and her hair was cut short, falling over her forehead. Her dress was of calico, and rather short, a large cape or vandyke, as it was usually called, completed her costume.

She bore in her hands a large basket of stockings, which she gave to Miss Mary, telling her that there was "a hull heap on um to mend this week. What

be we goin' to hev for dinner?" continued Violet Maxwell, for this was the name of the new comer, the maid of all work in Mrs. Sidney's family.

"I will come out and see to it," was Miss Mary's reply, and Violet vanished.

"I presume Virginia and Maria will be here to-day," said Emily, "and then we shall have a grand time. It will seem like Auld Lang Syne again. Come, Esther," she continued, "let's try some of our old duetts."

"But your mother," said Esther in a low voice, "will not the music make her head ache?"

"Oh, no," replied Emily, "she always has an ill turn in the morning, but she gets over it and sews or reads in a little while after breakfast."

In fact, Mrs. Sidney now drew her work-table to her side, unfolded nearly every piece of work with which it was covered, looked first at a bosom which was to be stitched, then laid it aside; taking up a black silk apron, she subjected it to the same ordeal; several unhemmed pocket handkerchiefs she added to the pile of rejected articles, and at last taking some knitting work in her hand, she left the room.

"She has gone to grandmother's room," said Emily, and opening the piano they commenced playing.

Hours flew like moments while they were thus engaged, for both were very fond of music; but at last the clock struck twelve. Emily started, declaring that she had no idea that it was so late. "We must go and get ready for dinner," she said, "for we dine at half past twelve."