



THEY MADE A CHARMING GROUP.

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***AUNT MILLY'S
DIAMONDS***

BY

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AUNT MILLY'S

DIAMONDS

CHAPTER I

GRANDMAMMA'S STORY

"YES, children, I will tell you the story of Aunt Milly's diamonds; and in telling about them, you must hear the tale of my own life almost, because one is so mixed up with the other that they can scarcely be separated."

The speaker, an old lady, looked pleasantly at a group of grandchildren, her Christmas visitors; who, tired with many a merry game, were clustering round her and asking for the story.

It was Christmas Eve, and they had been making the old hall at Denesfield Manor ring with happy voices. And now, in the dim twilight hour, they came into the drawing-room, and begged that before the gas was lighted, Grandmamma would tell them all about "those diamonds."

A charming group they made. The girls with their young, fair faces, and streaming curls, the boys full of life and strength and fun; yet all so loving to the silver-haired lady who delighted to see them round her at happy Christmastide.

Picture them for yourselves; some, the elder girls, demurely seated, ready to listen; two little ones on footstools by Grandmamma's knees, each holding a hand tenderly imprisoned; the lads just stretched here and there upon the rug, while on their upturned faces the blaze of a Christmas fire shone and danced merrily.

But listen. Grandmamma is beginning her story:

Aunt Milly and my own dear mother were sisters; but there was a great difference in their ages, and still more in their worldly positions. My aunt married, while very young, the owner of Denesfield Manor, where we are now gathered to spend our Christmas, you know, children. Her husband, Squire Dene, was a very rich man, and the diamonds you have heard so much about were his wedding-gift to Aunt Milly. They were worth many thousands of pounds, and were talked about all over the county.

But though they were so much admired, both for their cost and beauty, I do not think anybody envied Aunt Milly the possession of them.

You know, dears, there is a great difference in the way persons use jewels. If people think themselves the better for possessing them, and look down upon their neighbours because they cannot have such costly things, they show a foolish pride and a wrong spirit.

But if they look upon them as beautiful things that God has created, and to which He has been pleased to compare His own beloved servants and children in Christ, just using them in a spirit of thankfulness to their Maker, they will stir up no envy amongst those who do not possess jewels themselves.

I believe that Aunt Milly looked at her diamonds in this way. She used to say that she never put them away so carefully in their cases, and locked them up in their strong box, without thinking of God's promise to them that "feared Him, and spake often one to another." The text is in Malachi, and the words are: "And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels."

Aunt Milly told me that the sight of her husband's costly gift made her often pray to be numbered amongst the jewels of the Lord of Hosts.

My dear mother's home was very different from Denesfield. Her husband was a clergyman; and though for a few years the sisters lived near each other, my parents removed to Welland Vicarage whilst we children were quite young, and then we were a hundred and fifty miles from Aunt Milly and Denesfield.

Soon after came a great sorrow. Mr. Dene and my aunt went abroad for the winter; and while travelling together in Southern Italy, he met with an accident, from the effects of which he never recovered.

My father went to try to comfort my aunt, and thought she would return to England with him. But she could not bear to think of that fair home where her brightest and happiest years had been spent, and he came back alone, leaving her in Italy. Beautiful Denesfield was deserted, and only a few old servants remained in charge, and looked longingly, year after year, for the return of their mistress.

Welland Vicarage, where my youth was passed, was a happy, peaceful place. My dear father was the beloved vicar of the parish, and his wife and children found a welcome in every house, from the cottage to the hall.

We knew little of such great wealth as Aunt Milly could command, for Mr. Dene had left all to her; but on the other hand, we were free from those small economies and anxieties which, alas!—harass so many. The income of the vicarage was not large; but my mother's little fortune, and a small property of my father's, made our means quite sufficient.

Possessing plenty without luxury, and having occupation without wearing toil, surely we could say that "the lines were fallen unto us in pleasant places."

There was no small excitement in our country home when one day my mother, after reading a long letter from her sister, exclaimed:

"How glad I am I Aunt Milly is coming home at last!"

My father looked up with an expression of pleased surprise; and we four girls plied our mother with questions as to when Aunt Milly would arrive. Would she stay with us at Welland? And if not, where?

"Aunt Milly is going to her own home. They are now preparing Denesfield, and in a month she hopes to be settled there."

As children we had always been warmly welcomed under our aunt's roof; but during the long years which had passed since our removal to Welland, we had forgotten what Denesfield was like. We told our mother so, when she spoke of its beauty.

"You will soon have an opportunity of refreshing your memories," she answered. "Listen to what your aunt writes;" and she read from the letter:

"I hope my young nieces will be my guests as often and for as long a time as you can spare them. As Mildred is my namesake and god-daughter, you must let her come as soon as possible after I reach home. Alice, Ellen, and Miriam will forgive me this preference. Tell them, with my love, that I hope Aunt Milly's house will be a second home to them all."

There was no feeling of envy because I received the first invitation. We sisters loved each other, and if one had a special pleasure, the rest rejoiced with her. There was no striving amongst us; and, as I look back, I often feel how the sympathy which reigned amongst us increased our happiness.

I own that I was nearly wild with delight at the prospect of leaving Welland for a time. I longed to take all my dear ones with me; but in that quiet spot, with its round of duties and pleasures, the days seemed so much alike that I was eager for a change.

The time came to an end at last, and I started on my journey. Travelling was not so easy then as now; but I was able to go nearly the whole distance under the care of an old friend. Two miles from Denesfield, I changed my seat in the mail-coach for one in my aunt's carriage, which was waiting for me.

But I received my welcome before I reached the house. A tall, stately-looking lady stood on the pavement as the coach drew up, and having seen her likeness, I recognised my aunt. I sprang forward, exclaiming:

"You must be Aunt Milly, I am sure!"

What a beautiful, hearty smile of welcome lighted her face as she answered, "And you are my niece, Mildred Corsor, my dear sister Ellen's child. I am so glad to see you!"

She kissed me tenderly, and then, bidding the footman see to my luggage, she led me to the carriage, and we started for Denesfield.

CHAPTER II

DENESFIELD AND ITS OWNER

AS we drove through the beautiful park and wide grounds, I was full of wonder that my aunt could have left such a lovely spot for so many years. I used to visit all the country gentry round Welland; but how modest all their homes seemed in comparison with Denesfield! And my aunt, with her tall, graceful figure and stately carriage looked fit to be the mistress of such a home.

We had not much talk that night. My aunt asked questions about my parents and sisters; but beyond telling her of them, and delivering the loving messages with which I was charged, there was little time for conversation. It was evening when I arrived, so Aunt Milly kindly insisted that I should go to bed early.

"I want you to be quite rested after your long journey, dear," she said, "so as to be ready to make acquaintance with all the ins and outs of Denesfield."

"Indeed, aunt," I replied, "I am not at all weary. It is very nice to travel when one leaves home so seldom."

"True, my child. At sixteen, we know little of weariness; but when you rise, feeling fresh and looking bright in the morning, you will thank me for having given you a long night in bed."

At breakfast we had much pleasant talk. Aunt Milly seemed anxious to hear as much as possible about those I had left behind. Nothing was uninteresting that related to my home. To me, the subject was a very delightful one. I have said before, that the members of our family realised the blessedness of dwelling "together in unity." So it was very sweet for me to be led on to speak of all its branches, and to picture our daily home-life to my aunt.

"I have never yet seen Welland," Aunt Milly remarked; "but I hope to do so. Your father and mother went there just before I left England. I shall want to be really amongst you all in your own home, before I can know you properly. That cannot be just yet, so I must have the family piecemeal, at Denesfield, first."

My aunt rose from the table as she spoke, and added, "I dare say you will like to go over the house and grounds, first of all."

"I should like that better than anything, aunt, if you will go too."

"Certainly, dear. You and I will be companions for a time, at any rate. Soon we shall have more of our neighbours about us; for some have called already, and you will find acquaintances nearer your own age."

"I shall not care about them, aunt. I could not enjoy being with them more than with you."

Aunt Milly smiled, and kissed my forehead. "I shall be glad to have you, Mildred; but I am not so selfish as to expect that you should give yourself wholly to me. Now, put on your hat, dear, and let us enjoy the fresh morning air."

My aunt spent some time in showing me her lovely home and its surroundings. After rambling till we were tired, we sat down to rest, and I said:

"Oh, Aunt Milly, this place is a perfect Paradise! What could any one desire that cannot be found at Denesfield!"

"Once I should have said the same, Mildred," replied my aunt; "but for a long time past, Denesfield is the place I have least wished to see. You know why—I lost my dear husband; and then, though so much was left me, I closed my eyes to the light, and selfishly shut myself up with my great sorrow. But now, Mildred, I am able to look back, and thank God for the past happy years. I have been awakened from my selfish dreams to see that there is yet something left for me to do in the world, and that I have lost many an opportunity of comforting others during the years given up to nursing my own sorrow."

I hardly knew what to say, except that we were all so glad at home to think of having Aunt Milly back in England again, and how we all hoped she would have many happy years.

"You must be my helper, Mildred. My desire is that we may together find a welcome, not only in rich homes, but in those of the poor whom I have neglected too long."

"I have been used to such work, aunt," I said. "As papa is a clergyman, he has found us plenty of visiting; so I will either be your companion or messenger."

Then Aunt Milly told me of plans she had formed for the good of those around her, and of her anxiety to consult my father, whose experience was so much greater than her own.

"I wanted him to come here at once; but that cannot be, it seems. I do hope that Christmas will bring not only him, but your mother and sisters to Denesfield. With the whole family gathered round my fireside, Mildred, I should feel as though I belonged to somebody."

My father was always busy amongst his people at Christmas time, contriving comforts for the old, and pleasures for the young; yet all the while striving to link the present with that far past, when Jesus, the long-promised Messiah, was first revealed in the flesh—expected as a king, given as a helpless babe, and cradled in a manger in Bethlehem.

I told my aunt that I doubted whether my father could be spared. Welland people would hardly think it could be a merry Christmas, scarcely a happy one, if the vicar were away; though to me the prospect of seeing all the members of our dear family circle collected together at such a season in my aunt's beautiful home was the most delightful thing possible.

It was only the beginning of October when I arrived at Denesfield, so there was plenty of time to plan, hope, and prepare. More voices to sound in those noble rooms, more feet to awaken the echoes in the long corridors, more happy faces round hearth and table—these were, to my mind, the only things needed to complete the charms of Denesfield.

When I expressed my doubts as to whether papa could come at Christmas, Aunt Milly would not hear me.

"They must come, Mildred," was her answer. "They must teach me how to work and use my talents for God's glory. I have been so long out of the way, and I want a guide. Do you suppose your father's people would keep him away? Why, he has spent the best years

of his life in teaching them to be unselfish. Nonsense, child! His precepts and example cannot have been thrown away."

Aunt Milly spoke and looked as though she should be quite certain to have her own way in the matter; and while I feared, I wished she might prove to be right.

CHAPTER III

THE BEST TREASURE

LONG before Christmas came, Aunt Milly and I had become closely attached to each other. I had learned to love her second only to my parents, and her own words taught me how much she cared for me.

"I shall never part with you for long together, Mildred, if I can help it. Denesfield must always be your home, and I shall give you all the love that I believe every true woman has stored up in her heart ready to be lavished on her children. I have had no children of my own to draw from that store; but you are making me pour out, on you, my long-hidden treasure of affection."

I could hardly reply, for my eyes and my heart were full; but I am sure she did not need words to tell her how warmly my affection was given in return.

Perhaps the fact that my aunt was still a young woman—only thirty-six years of age—and young-hearted, despite her past sorrow, drew us still more closely to each other. She never forgot her own girlish tastes and likings; and whilst often giving me wise advice, she was full of sympathy and consideration for me. She won my entire confidence, not so much by asking for it as by giving me her own.

The days passed quickly. We had, as Aunt Milly expected, plenty of visitors and invitations; and in the village, too, we had become well known both to young and old. My aunt did not wait for papa's coming before commencing her work for the good of the poor people round Denesfield; but she consulted him by letter, and followed his advice as closely as possible.

We were not quite sure he would be with us for Christmas until three days before, and then Aunt Milly, with a bright smile, gave me a letter to read, saying:

"I was right, you will see, dear. You might have spared all your fears and misgivings."

The letter was in my dear mother's hand, for papa was far too busy to write; but it told that they, with the three girls, would be with us on Christmas Eve.

Now I must tell you that, during all the time of my stay at Denesfield—and I had been there nearly three months—I had never either seen or heard a word about Aunt Milly's diamonds. I often caught myself wondering that these costly jewels, so much talked of by others before I came, were not alluded to now by the owner. My aunt spoke of everything else, I thought; but not of these. Perhaps, after all, she had not kept them. During those years of mourning she would not care to wear such things; but still, it would be strange for her to part with her husband's gift.

My curiosity was set at rest on the morning of Christmas Eve, when all was ready for our expected dear ones; and there were only the few last hours to while away before their arrival.

"Come up into my room, Mildred," said my aunt. "When we are expecting very dear friends the hours seem as long as days. I will show you some things that you have not yet seen; and looking at them will occupy a little while."

I followed, saying, "Indeed, Aunt Milly, I do feel eager and restless. As long as there was anything to do in the way of getting ready, I could not move fast enough; but now everything is done."

"Well, Mildred, I am going to show you my diamonds. They have not seen the light for a long time, for they were left at the banker's when my husband and I went abroad; and there they remained until a few days ago, when I had them brought home."

My aunt took out a key, the ring of which she slipped over a flower carved on one of the panels in her room. As she did so a little iron plate flew back, and showed a keyhole, into which my aunt put the key, and on turning it, what I had thought to be a wooden panel moved slowly out, and I found that it was the massive door of an iron safe. Inside were a number of cases; and, taking them out, one after another, she showed me their glittering contents.

I was full of astonishment and delight at the beauty of the gems; and, as Aunt Milly took them out and placed the bracelets on my wrists, the rings on my fingers, and the larger ornaments on neck and hair, I moved about to see their ever-changing hues, and that curious shimmering light which makes them seem almost alive.

"They are very beautiful, Mildred," said my aunt; "and when, sixteen years to-day, my husband gave them to me, I thought I should never be tired of looking at and wearing them. I wore them first on Christmas Day, and for seven Christmas Days after that. Then for eight long years they lay hidden and unused. I almost forgot I possessed them, so absorbed was I with the thought of the treasure of love I had lost. Now, I hope I have learned a better lesson. I believe my treasure is not lost, only laid up amongst my heavenly Father's jewels, to be restored to me again when the summons comes to call me from earth in my turn."

"Do you never mean to wear these again, aunt?" I asked.

"Yes, dear. I intend to wear them to-morrow. I shall try to use all the good gifts that have been bestowed upon me in their season; and I thank God that He has made the world full of beautiful things as well as of useful ones. Now I must lock up these jewels, Mildred, for earthly treasures are a temptation to thieves to break through and steal. What a happy thing that no one can rob us of our heavenly treasures!"

I do not know what possessed me to say, "What are your heavenly treasures, Aunt Milly?"

"My dear, I hope your heart can answer such a question as well as my voice. But I must not forget—you are young; and when I was a girl, I am afraid, I thought more about possessing such things as these diamonds than I did about heavenly riches."

Aunt Milly paused a moment, then she turned her face to me, lighted up with such an expression as I had never seen there before, and said:

"I have a long list, Mildred, all bought for me at a vast cost. There is 'an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.' A place in one of the 'many mansions'—a welcome into the family of God, whose child I am, through adoption in Christ. Yes, Mildred, Denesfield is fair, but it will crumble and decay; these diamonds

glitter, but I look for 'a crown of glory, that fadeth not away,' and a home in 'a city that bath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God.' I can dress here in costly clothing; but what is that to the robes washed, the raiment made white, in the blood of the Lamb? Then there are the beloved friends who are gone before, all kept safely in the same treasure-house."

"My dear," exclaimed Aunt Milly, "if I were to go on speaking for ever so long, how could I tell you all? MY earthly treasures were the purchase and gift of my dear husband, and I must leave them behind when I die. My heavenly ones were bought for me by the precious blood of Jesus, and will be mine for all eternity."

Never while I live shall I forget my aunt's face and words. Never before had I understood, so well as then, the difference between earthly and heavenly things. My aunt, possessing all that earth could give—fair home, glittering gems, costly raiment, obedient servants ready to do her bidding—regarded and used them thankfully, yet counted them as but nothing in comparison with the enduring inheritance of God's children. Her words kept coming into my mind even after the arrival of my father, mother, and sisters had given me something else to think of and to do.

CHAPTER IV

MORE ABOUT DENESFIELD

WHILE my aunt and mother were enjoying each other's society, I had the pleasure of taking my dear father up and down both park and village. The girls stayed indoors; but my father declared he was not tired. All he wanted after his long ride was the change which would be afforded by walking in the frosty December air. He had a bright word for everybody. To the grooms who were busy in the stables, he gave a pleasant greeting, and said:

"When you are filling your mangers with hay, doesn't it put you in mind of the Babe, born as at this time, whose first bed was in one?"

"I can't say that I have thought of that, sir, but I shall do now," replied one; and wishing them a "Happy Christmas," we passed on.

Old Maurice, the shepherd of the home farm, had his word. He was a sturdy, grizzled old fellow, and my father said, "Well, Maurice, haven't you wished you had been amongst those shepherds who heard first that angel chorus of 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men?'"

"Ay, sir; that I have. And I've thought to myself, if it had happened in this country, the angels wouldn't have found us in the fields at this time o' year. They'd have had to come to us in the home pens."

My father laughed, and on we went, he scattering kindly questions and good wishes—words for the little nurses who were tending the babies; words for the mothers who must strive to teach their young ones to know and heed the voice of the Good Shepherd.

I think I never enjoyed a walk more; and as it was that most delightful of Christmas seasons, not only frosty, but with the moon rising to turn all the frail crystals into shining gems, our stroll home through the park was very lovely.

We had no other guests that night; but we were to have quite a gathering of various ages on Christmas Day. My aunt had taken good care that there should be plenty in every home round Denesfield. There should not be festival in the hall and pinching want in the cottage; no thought of spiritual blessings sent at that season disturbed by thoughts of earthly needs unsupplied.

My sisters and I had a great deal to say to each other; and many questions were asked and answered by us, while the elders sat and talked, at some distance from us, in the great drawing-room.

During a little pause in our conversation, I heard my father say to Aunt Milly, "Will any of the Denes be here to-morrow?"

My aunt's face flushed as she answered, "No; I have seen nothing of the Denes since my return to England. They have neither written to nor come near me."

"I am sorry for that, Milly," said my father. "I did not like to name it in a letter; but somehow, knowing how your views were changed in so many things, I hoped that those old differences were now only like shadows of a nearly forgotten past."

"What could I do, Stephen?" said my aunt. "You know quite well that all the enmity was on the side of the Denes. You must remember that I did nothing to provoke it. The only fault they could bring against me was, that I inherited what was never theirs, and what my husband had a right to dispose of as he chose."

I did not hear my father's answer; but Aunt Milly spoke again, in that earnest way which proved how she felt all she said.

"No, Stephen, believe me, I have not the smallest feeling of anger or revenge. How could I entertain bitter thoughts in my heart when I remember that, as a disciple of Christ, my love towards my neighbour must not be 'in word; neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth?'"

"Then if one of Edmund Dene's children had come to Denesfield, you would have welcomed him?"

"Most certainly I would. Edmund himself is dead, you know; so there is no brother of my husband's left."

Just then the servants came trooping in as usual to prayers, and the conversation was not resumed. But what I had heard set me thinking of things belonging to that far-away past that my father spoke of, and of the circumstances which made Aunt Milly's husband owner of Denesfield.

He—William Dene—was the younger of two brothers. Their father had run through his inheritance, and left his children almost beggars. There were but the two—Edmund and William. William was adopted by his uncle, a successful merchant, who had been winning great wealth while his brother had squandered his own.

The merchant bought back the old home, rebuilt the house, added to the estates, and passing over his elder nephew, left everything except a few thousand pounds to William Dene, Aunt Milly's husband.

Edmund, disappointed and angry, said bitter things to and of his brother, as well as of my aunt. So they parted—not kindly, or in a brotherly spirit—and met no more on earth.

William died abroad, and Aunt Milly inherited all his wealth; and now it seemed as though a wall were built up between Denesfield and the much humbler home where Edmund's widow strove to make her little income suffice to bring up her three boys, and educate them to make their way in the world.

As I thought about this wall of ill-feeling and division, I could not help hoping that my dear father would somehow contrive to break it down. I had so often seen him in the character of peacemaker, that I could scarcely imagine his failing if he once took the matter fairly in hand.

CHAPTER V

AN EARNEST TALK

I AM not going to tell all about our doings that happy Christmastide. All I can say is, that I hope every one who listens to my story may spend this Christmas as happily as we spent ours that year. Aunt Milly duly wore the famous diamonds, and we girls as duly admired them, and wondered at their beauty.

My mother made the remark that they must have cost a fortune, and Aunt Milly said, "Yes, they did;" and laughingly added:

"They are to be part of Mildred's. She is my namesake and godchild, and years hence, when your girls, perhaps, have children and homes of their own, Mildred will be mistress here, and the youngsters will talk about another 'Aunt Milly' and her diamonds."

My mother exclaimed, "Hush, dear Milly! Please do not put such a thought into the girl's head. I should never like to think of Mildred filling your place at Denesfield."

"Not while I live, Ellen, of course. Now she is as a daughter to me. You can hardly think how much happiness she has brought to a lonely woman. You must give Mildred to me. She must be my child, without ceasing to be yours; and if she fills the position of daughter here, what would there be unnatural in her stepping into my place?"

"You are very good to her, Milly," said my mother; "but while I shall be only too glad for her to be all you wish, neither her father nor I would like you to carry out your present design. Stephen is not anxious that his children should have great wealth. We have enough to provide for them in the station of life they are accustomed to—a very happy state, as they all feel."

"Then would you have me find some stranger to bestow my wealth upon, Ellen?"

"Certainly not, Milly. If you like, I will tell you what Stephen says you ought to do with it."

"What, Ellen?"

My aunt asked the question; but I feel certain she knew what the answer would be, for that quick flush rose to her cheek, and her manner was excited.

"You will not be vexed at me, dear Milly, if I tell you. Stephen says that Edmund Dene's children are the only fitting heirs of Denesfield. He does not, for an instant, deny your perfect right to dispose of the property which is your own, as much as wealth can be, by any human law. We neither of us believe you will ever marry again, therefore the responsibility of disposing of this wealth rests upon you. But after all, dear, we are but stewards in God's sight, and this wealth is one of the talents to be accounted for."

"I am striving to use it rightly, Ellen," replied my aunt gently; "and I am thankful for advice and guidance."

"Yes, dear; and while you hold it, I shall have no fear that it will not be turned to good account."

"Yes; but I often fear for myself. I feel that I have years of indolence and neglect to regret—all that long time when I neither used the money nor gave it to those who needed it. Still, if, when I no longer want the wealth, I may not leave it to the friends I really love, but to people I have only known as enemies, my stewardship would be a burden, indeed."

"I would not say enemies, Milly. Edmund Dene, being the elder brother, thought it very hard when all the riches of his uncle, as well as the old estates, went to your husband. He had no claim to anything; but the disappointment must have been hard to bear. Think, dear Milly, had you been in his place, would you have said no sharp word—had no envious feeling?"

"It was a hard thing to bear, no doubt of that," returned Aunt Milly frankly.

"And now," resumed mamma, "the young Denes are growing up; the eldest, William, is about twenty, I believe. Stephen has heard a good deal about him from an old college friend, and he says what a fine young fellow he is, how hard he is working, denying himself every indulgence that he may not be a burden to his mother, and earning money by private teaching even while a student himself. I have told you all these things, Milly, because I want you to think of them. And, in this blessed season of peace and goodwill, remember your husband's kindred. Forget all past differences. Love and forgive, even as God, for Christ's sake, loves and pardons."

The tears were in my dear mother's eyes as she thus pleaded so eloquently; and as she ended she heard a quick sob, and saw that Aunt Milly's eyes too were wet. Then after a short silence, my aunt said:

"Ellen, you have done right to speak boldly and frankly. I will think over this conversation, and I will pray to be guided aright."

Then, with that little impetuous way of hers, she drew her hand across her eyes, and with a smile, exclaimed, "Say what you like, I will not go back from my resolution in one thing. No person but my niece and adopted child, Mildred Corsor, shall ever own Aunt Milly's diamonds."

My mother was contented with the answer; and having been allowed to speak so freely to her sister about a subject which she was at first half afraid to mention, she would not attempt to combat this last sentence. This conversation took place in my aunt's room, at the close of that happy Christmas Day, when the guests had departed and the sisters were lingering over the fire, as if unwilling to say the final good-night.

During the rest of the time that my father and mother stayed at Denesfield, no further mention was made of Edmund Dene's widow and children.

CHAPTER VI

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

IT was a happy season to all of us. At the end of three weeks my parents returned home; a fortnight later the girls followed, laden with gifts, and full of delightful memories of their stay under my aunt's roof. They had the promise, too, that when their holidays should come round again, they might reckon on spending them—if not at Denesfield, in some place of summer resort with Aunt Milly and me.

A few more weeks passed, and for the first time since I came to live with her, my aunt had some secret from me. She wrote letters and received answers, without telling me a word about the matter. In all else she was, if possible, more tender and kind than ever; so I comforted myself with the thought that she was not displeased, and that she had a perfect right to use her own judgment about trusting a girl like me.

One morning, about a week before Easter, I was sitting preparing an Italian lesson to read with my aunt, who knew the language well, when a gentleman was shown into the room. As raised my head I could not help thinking I had seen him before; but I could neither remember when or where.

He had scarcely time to speak, when the servant came back, and said:

"Please to step into the library, sir. Mrs. Dene will be glad to see you there."

It was no uncommon thing for my aunt to receive such visits. Many a young man, whose path in life was made smoother through her kind help or effort, came with a full heart to thank her.

But nearly an hour passed, and still the visitor was in the library with my aunt. My task was done, and I had laid my books down, and now stood looking out of the window at the trees just beginning to break out into bud, and thinking to myself how lovely the place would be in the green glory of spring.

All at once came again the memory of that visitor's face, and a new idea flashed across my mind. I ran out of the room and into the picture gallery, where hung a very fine full-length portrait of Aunt Milly's husband, taken when he was just of age.

I saw the likeness at once. It might have been that of the young man whose face had struck me some little while before as so familiar. I stood for a few moments, and then exclaimed aloud:

"How like he is to the picture! He must be a Dene!"

"You have guessed rightly, Mildred," said Aunt Milly's voice. "This is my dear husband's nephew and namesake, William Dene. And this girl, William, who recognised a sort of kinsman in you, is the child of my only sister. She is my namesake, too, and adopted daughter, Mildred Corsor."

In my haste and anxiety to look at the portrait, I had not noticed Aunt Milly and her companion, who were entering the gallery by a door which led to it from the library.

I was quite confused for a few moments; but dear Aunt Milly soon made me feel at ease again. I shook hands with William Dene, and told him most heartily how glad I was to

see him. I knew what pleasure it would give my dear father and mother, for mamma had told me of her conversation with my aunt on Christmas night, and what she hoped might be the result of it.

"You know my secret, now," said Aunt Milly, "or at least you can guess who was my mysterious correspondent. Here he stands, Mildred. And now, to make amends for my seeming want of trust, you shall write to your father and mother and tell them that I have taken their advice. I hope, for the future, only peace and goodwill may be known amongst us Denes."

CHAPTER VII

A PLEASANT ENDING

MY task was a very pleasant one. I had to tell my parents that Aunt Milly, acting on their advice, had made many inquiries respecting her late husband's nephews; and that all she had heard confirmed my father's account, especially of William, who, everybody said, was a kinsman to be proud of.

So then Aunt Milly had written to him, just in her own brave, frank way, alluding to past differences between the elder people only so far as was needful, and expressing her hope that they would agree with her in forgetting them, and beginning a new life of friendship.

When my father and mother heard this they were delighted.

"Time will do the rest," exclaimed papa. "All will work right now, and there will soon be no question about the inheritance of Denesfield. Aunt Milly will find a son in William Dene."

And so, in the end, it proved. William's mother and brothers also came to visit my aunt. The widowed mother had no longer to pinch and contrive for the education of her children, for Aunt Milly did nothing by halves. She at once made an ample provision for her sister-in-law and the younger boys, but "William," she said, "I must look after myself. He is so like what my dear husband was when I first knew him."

I think that year was one of the happiest I ever spent during my early life. Every day that William Dene was with us, we saw more and more of the truth and goodness of his character. By degrees, Aunt Milly learned to consult and trust him just as a mother does a beloved son. How proud, too, she was of his college honours! Indeed, I doubt whether his own mother, who was of a very quiet, placid disposition, thought as much of her son's well-won place as did Aunt Milly.

One day, during the long vacation, my aunt said to him, "William, when will your birthday be?"

"Did I never tell you, aunt?" said he. "I am a Christmas child. I was born on the twenty-fifth of December."

"And you will be of age next Christmas?"

"Yes, aunt; and I come into my whole inheritance at once. A pair of long legs that can get over as much ground as most, a pair of strong hands, and a head which I have done my best to furnish. These are my capital and stock to trade with, and I hope they will bring me a fair return."

"Not to be despised, William: good health, good education, and the will to use them in a right way, are things to thank God for with all one's heart."

"I feel that, dear aunt; and there is another blessing I have to thank you for—an easy mind. You have removed the anxieties I used to have about my mother and the boys by your generous kindness to them."

My aunt put her hand to his lips to hinder the further expression of thanks.

"Do not speak of that, William," she replied. "It reminds me that I might have saved you all these years of suffering and anxiety if I had only thought less of myself and more of others. Now about your birthday. Our Christmas this year, please God, will be a double festival. We shall gather all your people, William, and all mine, and we will have our friends and neighbours, rich and poor, to rejoice with us."

When Christmas Day did come, it was such a one as I shall never forget. The old church at Denesfield was full to overflowing; and there was one special prayer offered for him who that day attained to man's estate, that the blessing of God would rest upon him—that indeed he might be blessed and made a blessing to those amongst whom he would, in course of time, be called to dwell.

Those who heard that prayer guessed rightly that my Aunt Milly was asking the prayers of the congregation for him who was, after her, to be the master of Denesfield. I believe every lip and heart echoed the prayer, for all the people were learning to know and love William Dene, and they rejoiced that one of the "old stock" would be heir to Denesfield.

My father and mother rejoiced with all their hearts. They never desired the inheritance for their children; and when Aunt Milly took the course they always hoped she might be led to take, with regard to her husband's relatives, they were greatly pleased.

There was one thing which excited my surprise, and that was their anxiety that my aunt should arrange all her affairs and make William Dene's inheritance certain. I did not know that dear Aunt Milly was even then suffering from a disease which left no hope of long life, and that, when she talked to me of her heavenly treasures, she was expecting ere long to enter upon her eternal inheritance.

I was only twenty when Aunt Milly died, rejoicing in her sure and certain hope; her one regret being for those who so tenderly loved and would so sadly mourn for her and miss her.

She left Denesfield to William; and left legacies to the rest of his family, to my sisters, and myself. In addition, she gave me the famous diamonds, as she had always declared she would do; but she made one condition—that, should I desire it, William Dene should pay me the sum of ten thousand pounds instead of the most important ornaments.

My father had experienced some losses a little time before, of which he would not let Aunt Milly know anything; but now I was glad that by leaving the diamonds for the future mistress of Denesfield, I could far more than replace the money. So I wrote and told William Dene that the articles named by my aunt were fit for a lady holding a different position from that of a country clergyman's daughter, and that I would only keep those which she expressly wished me to retain.

The money was duly paid to me; and in handing it to my parents for their use, I was happier than I could have been in possessing the most gorgeous jewels.

The old lady, who had been listened to with the greatest attention by the youngsters round her, here paused for a moment, and a thoughtful-looking lad raised his face, and said:

"Grandmamma, I think I can finish the story."

She smiled gently, and replied, "Go on, Will; and if you are wrong, I will correct you."

"In the first place, then, you got your Aunt Milly's diamonds after all; and you were, and you are, mistress of Denesfield Manor. Grandpapa's name is William Dene, and I am called after him."

"Quite right, dear Will. A year after Aunt Milly's death, William Dene brought me here as his wife, and gave me back my home and Aunt Milly's diamonds. I have had such a happy married life as wives have who can honour their husbands and see in them disciples of the Saviour. We have been spared to see our children grow up, and come in their turn bringing their boys and girls to keep Christmas at Denesfield. God grant to us and all a happy one this year!"

"But," said a little girl, "were you not very glad and proud when you got the diamonds after all?"

"I was glad, dear; but not so glad as I should once have been; for I had, in the meantime, found a more precious jewel. I wear Aunt Milly's diamonds still on Christmas Day, for Grandpapa will have it so; but I have the better jewel always about me—the Pearl of great price.' That means very much the same thing as Aunt Milly's heavenly treasure.

"And now we must go and listen, for I hear children's voices ringing through the air, and I catch the words of the old carol:

"Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King:
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled."

Printed in Great Britain by MORRISON & GIBB LIMITED. Edinburgh