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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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A STRANGE FAMILY HISTORY

For the following curious episode of family history we are indebted to a descendant of one of the chief personages involved; his story runs as follows.

Somewhat less than one hundred years ago, a large schooner, laden with oranges from Spain, and bound for Liverpool, was driven by stress of weather into the Solway Firth, and after beating about for some time, ran at last into the small port of Workington, on the Cumberland coast. For several previous days some of the crew had felt themselves strangely 'out of sorts,' as they termed it; were depressed and languid, and greatly inclined to sleep; but the excitement of the storm and the instinct of self-preservation had kept them to their duties on deck. No sooner, however, had the vessel been safely moored in the harbour than

a reaction set in; the disease which had lurked within them proclaimed its power, and three of them betook themselves to their hammocks more dead than alive. The working-power of the ship being thus reduced and the storm continuing, the master determined to discharge and sell his cargo on the spot. This was done. But his men did not recover; he too was seized with the same disease; and before many days were past most of them were in the grave. Ere long several of the inhabitants of the village were similarly affected, and some died; by-and-by others were smitten down; and in less than three weeks after the arrival of the schooner it became evident that a fatal fever or plague had broken out amongst the inhabitants of the village.

The authorities of the township took alarm; and under the guidance of Squire Curwen of Workington Hall, all likely measures were taken to arrest or mitigate the fatal malady. Among other arrangements, a band of men was formed whose duties were to wait upon the sick, to visit such houses as were reported or supposed to contain victims of the malady, and to carry the dead to their last home.

Among the first who fell under this visitation was a man named John Pearson, who, with his wife and a daughter, lived in a cottage in the outskirts of the village. He was employed as a labourer in an iron foundry close by. For some weeks his widow and child escaped the contagion; but ere long it was observed that their cottage window was not opened; and a passer-by stopping to look at the house, thought he heard a feeble moan as from

a young girl. He at once made known his fears to the proper parties, who sent two of the 'plague-band' to examine the case. On entering the abode it was seen that poor Mrs Pearson was a corpse; and her little girl, about ten years old, was lying on her bosom dreadfully ill, but able to cry: 'Mammy, mammy!' The poor child was removed to the fever hospital, and the mother to where her husband had been recently taken. How long the plague continued to ravage the village, I am not able to say; but as it is about the Pearson family, and not about the plague I am going to write, such information may be dispensed with.

The child, Isabella Pearson, did not die; she conquered the foe, and was left to pass through a more eventful life than that which generally falls to the lot of a poor girl. Although an orphan, she was not without friends; an only and elder sister was with relatives in Dublin, and her father's friends were well-to-do farmers in Westmoreland. Nor was she without powerful interest in the village of her birth: Lady Curwen, of the Hall, paid her marked attention, as she had done her mother, because that mother was of noble descent, as I shall now proceed to shew.

Isabella Pearson (mother of the child we have just spoken of), whose maiden name was Day, was a daughter of the Honourable Elkanah Day and of his wife Lady Letitia, daughter of the Earl of Annesley. How she came to marry John Pearson forms one of the many chapters in human history which come under the head of Romance in Real Life, or Scandal in High Life, in the newspaper literature of the day. Isabella's parents were among those parents

who believe they are at liberty to dispose of their daughters in marriage just as they think fit, even when the man to whom the girl is to be given is an object of detestation to her. Heedless of their daughter's feelings in the matter, they had bargained with a man of their acquaintance, to whom they resolved that Isabella should give her hand – be her heart never so unwilling. The person in question was a distant relative of their noble house, had a considerable amount of property in Ireland, and was regarded, by the scheming mother especially, as a most desirable match for her daughter. But what if the young lady herself should be of a contrary opinion? In the instance before us the reader will be enabled to see.

Captain Bernard O'Neil, the bridegroom elect, was nearly twice the age of Isabella Day; and although not an ill-looking man, was yet one whom no virtuous or noble-minded girl could look upon with respect, for he was known to be addicted to the vice of gambling, to be able to consume daily an enormous quantity of wine, and to be the slave of all sorts of debauchery. So habituated had O'Neil become to these degrading vices, that no sensible girl could hope to reclaim and reform him. The gratification of his propensities had been spread over so long a time that his entailed estate had become heavily burdened with debt, whilst his creditors, even his dependents, were clamorous for the money which he owed them.

Such being the man to whom the Honourable Elkanah Day and his noble wife had agreed to give their daughter, can it be

wondered at that that daughter should not only be indisposed to comply with their wish, but should also be so disgusted and indignant at its expression as to give way to her feelings in words and acts which in themselves are incapable of justification? One day the captain had called at the house by appointment to arrange for the marriage, being anxious to have it consummated, that he might be helped out of a pressing embarrassment through the portion which he knew would be given to his bride. Isabella had been present at the interview. Her father and mother knew full well that she was far from being pleased with the match, but of this they took little heed, believing that once married, their daughter would reconcile herself to her lot, even if she did not derive much felicity from the union. The girl herself knew that no language of hers, whether of anger, sorrow, or entreaty, would avail, especially with her mother, who was one of the most hot-headed and stubborn of women; so from the first her mind was made up rather to circumvent than to oppose them; to cheat them in the game they were playing, if she could not by fair-play win the right to give herself where she could love and be loved.

On the occasion referred to, it had been arranged that the marriage should take place in a fortnight; and when she was urged to make the necessary arrangements, instead of yielding a hearty compliance, as in a different case she would naturally have done, she gave a feeble assent and left the room. No sooner had she put the door between herself and the other parties, than the emotions which she had managed to keep under while

in their presence began to rage within her, and with the hope of finding sympathy below-stairs which was denied her in her proper domain, she sought the company of the maids. Wrath is seldom discreet, and grief at times is not over-nice in selecting those before whom it vents itself. So without waiting to consider the rank of those whose company she had sought, or taking into consideration the consequences which might ensue on making known to them the circumstances in which she was involved, she gave expression to the feelings which were agitating her at that moment by exclaiming: 'So I am to be married in a fortnight, am I? And to that horrible O'Neil? Never, my honourable father; never, my lady mother! Never, no never! By God's aid, *never!* Rather than do so, I'll marry the first man who can be found willing to take me, and go with him to the ends of the earth!' Saying which, she fled from the kitchen into the garden at the rear of the house, and in the summer-house found relief in a flood of tears. All this occurred in Dublin.

Now the cook was one of those who heard the poor girl utter these passionate words. She was an old and esteemed servant of the family, and as such had more liberty and could use more freedom than servants in general. She had been in the family when Isabella, twenty years before, was born, had been her nurse, and was therefore greatly attached to her; and she felt more keenly the fate which the poor girl dreaded, than any others who were present. Indeed so afflicted was she on her account, that she sought her in the summer-house, and poured into her ear

all the soothing and encouraging words she could think of. The girl's rage had abated, but she was in a condition of affliction and misery which was truly pitiable to behold. She was, however, still determined not to link her life to one whom she utterly detested, and besought her old and devoted friend to aid her in seeking in flight what she could not otherwise avoid. Whether the cook promised to do so, or what exact reply she made, I am not able to relate; but that very night an event took place which decided her fate, and gave to her after-life its direction and character. The cook was a native of Westmoreland, had been brought up in the neighbourhood of Farmer Pearson, whose son John was at that time a private in the Royal Guards stationed in Dublin. He and the cook were therefore old acquaintances, and when John had an hour to spare, he often spent it in her company. That very night he happened to pay her a visit. In course of conversation she told him about her grief arising out of the trouble of her young mistress, and added thereto the wild expression to which she had that day given utterance. This was done by the simple-minded woman without the least design either of aiding or injuring the young lady, nor had she at that moment the slenderest suspicion that her act would have any practical effect on the young soldier. But it was otherwise. He knew the girl by sight, and she knew him. Though they had not exchanged a word, nor been for even a moment in each other's company, yet they had on several occasions seen each other when he had been visiting his friend the cook. He was a fine open-hearted generous fellow, in the

heyday of youth, fearless and brave. All his sympathies were aroused and drawn to the side of the suffering girl; and believing that he would be doing a truly manly act in rescuing her from what he regarded as worse than a thousand deaths, he told the cook that he was prepared to go with her to the ends of the earth, should she be willing to trust herself to his care and fidelity; and he got his friend to promise that she would make his readiness known to her young mistress. Though the promise was made, it is but fair to say that in giving it the cook had not the smallest idea that the poor girl would do aught else than laugh at the proposal as a good joke. But herein she was deceived. Isabella Day caught at the offer of John Pearson the Life Guardsman, with an eagerness and a joy beyond description; she begged of the cook to arrange a meeting; it was done; and the result was an elopement and a clandestine marriage!

The day which ended the residence of Miss Day with her parents, ended her life of luxury and ease. They renounced her for ever. Her name was erased from the family register, and she was as completely severed from those she had left behind as if she had been buried in the family vault. The rage of her mother was fearful for a time; but Isabella was beyond its reach, and happy. Her husband was a fine-looking young fellow, tall, well-made, and handsome in feature and in form. He was also kind and gentle towards her; and whatever discrepancy existed between them before marriage, none was allowed to exist afterwards; for although he could not rise to her standard of refinement

and elegance, nor give her the means of gratifying those tastes which her breeding and habits had fostered within her, yet they both had sense enough to know how to adapt themselves to each other; so their life, if not a luxurious one, was one of resignation and contentment. She followed him to those places to which his regiment was occasionally ordered; and when, in a year or two, he was invalided and discharged from the army, she retired with him to his native village of Burton-in-Kendal, and thence to Workington, where he found employment in the foundry at Beerpot. Two children were born to them, both girls; the elder of whom, as I have said, was on a visit to her relatives in Dublin; while the other daughter, Isabella, narrowly escaped death from the plague, at the time of her mother's decease, as I have narrated. I now resume my story at the period when she was left an orphan.

Lady Curwen, as has been intimated, undertook the necessary and, to her, pleasant task of befriending the desolate girl. She had been kind to her mother; indeed she thought it an honour rather than otherwise to be on friendly terms with her. She was a frequent visitor at the Hall, where she was received rather as a friend and equal than as a poor woman; for although she was in straitened circumstances, she was free from that cringing dependence which poverty is calculated to engender in those who are reared therein.

Her paternal relatives in Westmoreland also interested themselves in the orphan; so the bereaved child knew neither

want nor scant. In a while she went to her uncle's homestead in Burton, where for a year or two she resided and thrived again. But the sea and its surroundings had more charms for an ardent girl than the more sober associations of an inland life; she would rather scamper among the rocks and sea-weed of her native shore than ramble among the heather of her moorland home; and so, as time passed on, she began to yearn after the earlier associations of her life. And inheriting the recklessness and determination of her parents, she, unmindful of obligation and of self-interest, carried out a long-cherished project: she ran away! While her uncle and his family were at church one Sunday morning, she went to the stable, and taking thence a cart-horse with which she had become familiar, she got astride upon his back, and bidding adieu to the farm and all its belongings, she set off to the place of her birth, which she reached safe and sound, but not without having attracted considerable attention from the onlookers on the way. Taking the horse to the inn, at which her uncle happened to be known, and requesting that it might be cared for until it was called for, she bent her steps to the well-remembered homes of her old neighbours, by whom she was cordially received.

She was at this time a fine blooming girl of twelve or thirteen years of age, tall, stately, handsome, with a natural aristocratic bearing, but remarkably unsophisticated and simple. Her return, and the way in which it had been effected, soon reached the ears of her late mother's friend, Lady Curwen, by whose influence she soon secured a good place as housemaid; in which position

I shall leave her while I recount a fragment of the history of her elder sister Letitia.

I have said that her family renounced for ever their runaway relative. But in course of time an elder sister of the offender, who was married to a gentleman named Weeks, and living in London, relented of her animosity by occasionally corresponding with her, and sending her now and again what enabled her to keep a few marks of her former life about her. The children, however, were not visited with the same hostility as was their mother; they were inquired about, and, through a cousin who was known to the girls as Councillor Lennon, an occasional letter of recognition was sent them. This courtesy led to Letitia being sent for to Dublin, where she resided under the care of Lord Annesley for a few years. But what is bred in the bone is certain sooner or later to make itself visible; it was so in the case of Letitia: a disposition for frolic and adventure was in her; she found it difficult to conform to the rules of life which now held her in, and in spite of all restraint and watchfulness, she went into forbidden paths, and became at last a self-made outcast from her high-bred friends. The way was this: falling in with the steward of an American ship lying in one of the docks, and taken with his charms as he with hers, she agreed to a marriage and a flight with him like those of her mother. The chief difficulty which presented itself was how to get to America with her intended husband; but where there is a will there is mostly a way; both existed in this case, and proved successful. She adopted male

attire, applied for and obtained a position which had become open on board of her husband's ship, that of assistant steward or cook, in which capacity she served in company with her husband during the voyage to Charleston. There she arrived in safety; her husband left off going to sea; and the last time her sister Isabella heard of her, she was mistress of a large and flourishing inn in the above city.

Some time after Letitia's abscondment, Lord Annesley, yielding to Lady Curwen's entreaty, and perhaps to the voice of his own conscience as well, sent for Isabella, promising to give her the education and position of a lady, provided she would in all things conform to his wishes. The offer was a good and kind one, and presented temptation sufficient to induce an enthusiastic girl to yield thereto a ready compliance. The only means which Cumbrians had of reaching Ireland at that time was by the coal-vessels which regularly sailed from Workington to Dublin. In one of these Isabella Pearson set sail with visions of grandeur and greatness before her. But the winds and waves had well-nigh extinguished the lamp of hope which was burning so bright within her, for she had not been long on her voyage before a terrific storm broke upon the deeply-laden brig; it was impossible to make progress; it was hazardous to put back, for Redness Point, where many a noble ship had been wrecked and many a precious life lost, stood threateningly behind them. At last, however, the master of the brig made for the Scotch coast, and happily succeeded in gaining the port of Kirkcudbright. Here

our heroine remained with the vessel nearly a week, when the weather permitting, the voyage was again attempted, and without further mishap accomplished.

Isabella Pearson was received into the mansion of her noble relative with becoming friendliness. I have heard her, in her old age, describe his lordship as being a fine-looking venerable man, with a head white through age, an eye beaming with kindness, and a heart brimful of love. He had had the misfortune to lose a leg, and like many of his lowlier brethren, had to be content with a wooden one. With him she spent a few happy months; and at length became as familiar with the ways of those in high rank as she had been with those of her own class. I cannot say how long this new life lasted; but it is certain that as time passed she began to feel her lot irksome, and to long for the less elegant, but to her more pleasurable life she had previously led. The fact is that, as in the case of her sister and her mother, Cupid, small and child-like though he seems, was far more powerful than wealth and fashion, and all other attractions of aristocratic life. While living as a domestic servant in Cumberland, she had fallen in with a young sailor, who had run away with her heart. When she set sail for Dublin she had a hope that nothing would happen to prevent her from yielding to her wishes to become his wife; but she had not been long her relative's guest before she was forced to come to another conclusion; for she saw plainly that her worthy kinsman had set his heart upon fitting her to become something better than a common sailor's wife. A lady had been engaged

as her governess and a time fixed for her arrival; but before the time came the inbred spirit of freedom had again asserted itself, and Isabella had bidden adieu for ever to Lord Annesley and all the good things which his kindness had gathered around her! A collier brig took her back to her native village, and soon after she became the wife of John Ruddock, able seaman.

No one can justify, though all may extenuate, the conduct of Isabella Pearson; nor can any one be pronounced harsh and unfeeling who may say: 'The suffering that might fall to her lot in after-life was the result of her folly and recklessness. On the other hand, it may be pleaded that her heart was her own, to give to whom she pleased; and as it had been sought for and gained by the young sailor, her happiness could only be secured by living with him; therefore she did right in preferring his lot to the wishes of her noble uncle. Be this as it may, she grievously erred in quitting him in so heartless a way after the tender care she had received at his hands. And this she afterwards acknowledged. After her marriage, her husband left the sea, and taking his young wife with him to Durham, he there found employment as a sail-maker, in which art he was proficient. A letter, professing repentance, was written to her uncle; but before it was posted the death of Lord Annesley was announced; which event put an end for ever to all hope for help or favour in that quarter. Soon after, a pressgang laid relentless hands upon poor Ruddock, and dragged him on board a ship of war; so once more our heroine was forced to seek her living in domestic servitude. But herein she was not able long

to abide, for the birth of a daughter made such life for a while impracticable. Sad as was her lot, it soon became worse; for her poor husband was killed in an engagement off the coast of Spain, and with many other brave hearts found an early grave in the ocean's bed.

Isabella was now left with a young child to fight the world alone. Health and vigour, however, were her portion; and hearing that plenty of work for women was to be had at Cleator near Whitehaven, she repaired thither, and found a settlement and a living. While there, she was one day agreeably surprised by a visit from her kind friend Lady Curwen, who had driven from Workington Hall expressly to tell her that an advertisement applying for the heirs of John Pearson who worked in Beerpot Foundry, had that week appeared in the columns of a London newspaper, and urged her to attend to it. But she was illiterate, was unused to business habits, and being alone and helpless, put off the matter day by day, until at last she gave it up altogether. What might have come out of this, is of course unknown to the writer; but Isabella herself believed – I do not know why – that her aunt, Mrs Weeks, had died, and had bequeathed to her sister's children a considerable sum of money.

Time passed on, and her child grew, developing among other things a love of mischief; for one day, while her mother was at the mill where she wrought, she got to the box in which were kept her mother's cherished family documents and letters, and amused herself by setting them ablaze one by one at a lighted candle

got for the purpose! Thus, in one half-hour, every document necessary to prove her mother's pedigree was destroyed, and with it all hope of bettering her position was thrown to the winds; so, when some years afterwards, Lady Curwen sent a messenger to tell her that the advertisement I have named had once more appeared in the public prints, she paid no attention to the information, satisfying herself simply with an expression of thanks to her kind benefactor!

She was, however, content with her lot. Her child was her chief comfort and joy. For her she toiled in the mill by day, and in her humble home at night; and as she grew in stature and in beauty, the mother's heart throbbled its gratitude and her eye beamed with admiration. But on one occasion she had nearly lost her. Playing one fine afternoon on the bank of the stream which drove the wheel belonging to the mill, her feet slipped, and she fell in. A man who happened to be a little in advance, had his eye drawn to an object on the water, which he at first took to be a quantity of loose hair; but another glance revealed to him the head of a little girl beneath the surface of the rapid stream. He ran and was just in time to lay hold of the hair as its possessor was falling over on to the wheel. Another moment, and Jane Ruddock (the drowning girl) would have been no more; in which case he who now pens these fragments of a strange history would not have been in existence – for that little girl became his mother.

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