

MADAME'S LITTLE PLOT.



“WELL, thank goodness! the new governess comes to-morrow.”

Truly we were a disorderly crew as we stood there in various stages of dilapidation, before our beautiful, daintily-attired mother, who had just returned from a garden-party. No wonder she and father gazed at us as at some pre-Adamite curiosities, and pronounced us “hopeless.” Two months of holidays, uncurbed and unrestrained, in the wilds of the country had hardly tended to our moral or

physical improvement, and we had come to the stage of longing for order ourselves, yet hardly knowing how to attain to it.

Discipline arrived, however, the next day in the shape of Madame de Saussaye, our new French governess. She was very small and slim, with a clear sallow complexion, piercing dark eyes, and a neat, trim little figure. Mother was charmed with her, pronounced her French perfect, and having duly installed her, and given her a somewhat vague catalogue of her duties, departed with father on a tour of visits, airily saying, as she kissed us all round, that she expected us to have become thorough little French scholars on her return home. Madame smiled and bowed, the carriage drove away, and we were left alone with our new governess.

I do not know how she managed it, but at the end of a week the school-room was a transformed place, and we altered children. Order, method, and punctuality reigned in the place of confusion and untidiness, and any one who had seen us doing our lessons would have pronounced us a very well-brought-up family.

And the most extraordinary part of it was that the children liked the sway that deprived them of so much they had once held so dear. I alone refused to join in the universal worship of Madame, which was shared equally by the servants and by my brothers and sisters. Yet to me she was specially gracious, and went so far as to confide to me some of her sad story, which had driven her to England. Mother had already given me its outline, by which I had learnt that Madame was not a widow, but that she and her husband had lost everything in the world they possessed in the Franco-German War, and were come to England to try and make a little money, she as a governess, he as a clerk in a merchant's house.

The weeks rolled on, and still mother did not return. She wrote to me, however, to say that Madame's husband was coming down from London for the day to see his wife; and, as she was away, I

must be sure and do the honours of the house prettily. It was quite a long letter for mother, and three parts of it were filled with the praises of Madame de Saussaye.

Two days afterwards arrived M. de Saussaye, a little, short, fat, yellow-faced man, with hair like a blacking brush, and twinkling black eyes.

“He does not look a bit like a gentleman,” I remarked to Charlie, “nor is he dressed like one.”

“You see,” said Charlie, who stammered a little, “he—e i—is French.”

This seemed, to our insular minds, to explain everything; and when we sat down to lunch we forgave M. de Saussaye his appearance, he was so good-natured and facetious. His little black eyes twinkled more than ever as, during a pause in the conversation, he helped himself to mustard out of a beautiful old-fashioned mustard-pot on the table.

“You have some splendee seelver, mees,” he remarked to me, though he looked at Madame, and Madame responded with a smile and a look at me.

“There are many beautiful things in this house; we must show them all to Alphonse after lunch, n'est-ce pas, ma chérie?”

So after lunch M. de Saussaye was conducted over the house, and displayed due appreciation of all that was pointed out to him by Madame. She took especial pains to show him mother's room and boudoir, asserting that they were the prettiest rooms in the house.

And now we had concluded the tour of the house. M. de Saussaye had peered with his little eyes into every corner of those rooms into which I had taken him, and, having regained the hall, I pronounced it finished.

“Ah, mais!” said Madame, “he has not seen the keetchen—an English keetchen!” and Madame threw up her eyes and raised her hands, as though words failed her to describe the glories of an English kitchen. Down-stairs then we proceeded to the kitchen, where Madame was received with enthusiasm by our usually rather cross cook, Mrs. Baker, who piloted her and M. de Saussaye through scullery, bakehouse, dairy, and laundry, with unusual good-humour. Coming back we passed by the pantry. In the doorway stood Johnson, our butler, his coarse red face suffused with smiles of welcome, for he was always very good-natured to us children. Being such an admirable man-servant, father shut his eyes to an unfortunate propensity he possessed, and in which he indulged freely when his master's back was turned.

“Ah! there is the good Meester Johnson,” exclaimed Madame, “and dat is his domain where he watches over his plate—is it not so, Meester Johnson? Ciel! quelle argenterie!” M. de Saussaye smiled, and, rubbing his little yellow hands together, pronounced that he thought he had seen everything now, and must soon be returning to town. In the school-room he was regaled with tea and hot cakes, after which

Madame walked with him to the station, leaving us to a good game of romps ; and we saw no more of M. de Saussaye.

The following week brought father and mother home ; and, before many days had elapsed, they too had fallen victims to the spell of Madame's fascinations. She was a true Parisian, and could manufacture the most bewitching caps and bonnets wherewith to adorn mother's golden head, and she was withal the most subtle and adroit of flatterers ; needless to say she soon became as indispensable in the drawing-room as in the school-room.

So summer turned to autumn, and autumn to winter, and after Christmas the neighbourhood began to wake up, and dances and theatricals were the order of the day. We younger ones too came in for a share of

expression that crossed her face, even in the midst of them. It caught my eye, however, but, child-like, I had forgotten it by the end of the drive. On the night of the ball, mother came to my bedside to show me her dress, while Madame held the candle aloft, letting the light fall on the sheeny white satin, and play amongst the diamonds that lay on the fair neck, and in the golden hair.

"Madame has been my maid to-night, Kitty," she said, radiant with beauty, "and I do not know when I have been so well turned out." She did indeed look beautiful, and I could not wonder that Madame was pleased with her handiwork, for, in spite of her modest deprecating smiles, her eyes sparkled almost as much as the diamonds, with satisfaction.

It might have been a fortnight after this that father



"AT THE END OF A WEEK WE WERE ALTERED CHILDREN" (p. 218).

the gaieties, and wherever we went Madame accompanied us, winning golden opinions by her good-nature, her tact, and her many resources.

Early in January, the Trensham county ball was to take place. Mother began to get her toilette in order, and bethought herself of her diamonds that lay at the bank in the town, whither they and part of the plate had been transported for safety when she and father quitted home. Our house was to be filled with guests for the occasion, so both plate and diamonds were to be withdrawn from the bank, and Madame and I accompanied mother when she fetched them. She was like a child over her "dear diamonds," as she called them ; and, indeed, they were a magnificent set of unusually large and fine stones. Often had we expatiated to Madame on their beauty ; and now mother could not wait till our return home to exhibit them, but unlocking the tin box that contained them, displayed the lovely shining drops to Madame's appreciative gaze. She admired them beyond everything, and mother, delighted with her raptures, failed to notice the curious

went away to spend a week with a bachelor friend, and mother was left alone with us. She certainly was not fond of domestic life, and she contrived to be out somewhere every night during his absence, leaving us with perfect confidence to Madame. I was rather out of spirits this week, for a series of catastrophes had occurred in the house. First and foremost, our two dear dogs—little "Cosy," mother's pug, and old "Bruin," our house-dog—had both come to a sad end, owing to the carelessness of myself and Bobby. We two had been busy with our paint-boxes in the school-room one afternoon, until, tired of the amusement, we ran out into the garden, leaving the door open behind us. The two dogs wandered in during our absence, and when about an hour afterwards Madame entered, she found them both lying in the agonies of death, their jaws being smeared with the fatal green paint, telling only too plainly the story of the disaster. In spite of our utmost efforts to recover them, they were both dead before the evening was out ; and we children were

quite broken-hearted, particularly Bobby and myself. The only thing that puzzled us was that we had left our paint-boxes well out of reach, but Madame related that she had found the tables and chairs upset, so, no

Father had left us on Monday, and on the following Thursday mother went to dine with some friends in the neighbourhood, to accompany them to a penny reading a few miles off. She was consequently



"SHE DID INDEED LOOK BEAUTIFUL." (p. 219).

doubt, poor Bruin and Cosy had been romping together, and had brought down the boxes in the *mêlée*.

This incident, combined with the sudden dismissal of our schoolroom-maid, of whom we were very fond, at a day's notice, had made me very miserable; and Bobby's revelation that "Susan had been sent away because she stole," had not tended to soothe my feelings.

simply dressed, and wore none of her valuable jewellery. I had a headache that evening, and feeling dull and heavy after my tea, I retired to bed early, and was soon fast asleep, as were all the other children. It must have been about a quarter to nine that Madame entered my room to see how I was. She walked very quietly, but I was only dozing restlessly, and awoke on hearing her footsteps. I felt very cross with her; she

had given me a long lesson to learn that afternoon, as a punishment for some slight misdemeanour, so I thought I would pretend to be asleep, an art in which I excelled. She stooped over me, holding the light full in my eyes, which ordeal I bore without winking.

"Elle dort bien, tout va au mieux," she muttered to herself, and with light noiseless step she left the room.

I was quite awake now. "I wonder what she meant," I thought to myself; "oh! my headache, I suppose;" and, quite satisfied, I got out of bed and put on my dressing-gown. A sudden idea had struck me. I would go and creep into mother's bed, and help her undress when she came home. No sooner thought of than done. Closing my door very softly, I ran noiselessly down the passage and one flight of stairs, opened mother's room, which lay on the first floor of bed-rooms, and jumped into her bed. But I soon found I had made a mistake. Moving about had made my head ache and throb violently, and I could not get to sleep again.

I must have lain there about twenty or thirty minutes, when suddenly I was roused by a faint noise, and instantly opened my eyes wide. Softly and gently, as I listened, I heard the sash of the window drawn up; then the curtains began to blow about, and finally, as I lay spell-bound with terror, gazing most intently, they gently parted and, horror of horrors! a man's face peered through them for a moment—the next he had emerged into the room. At this juncture the fire suddenly burst into a blaze, and the light fell full upon the intruder's face. He was a little, short, fat man, with enormous bushy red whiskers, moustache, and hair, and small twinkling eyes. Mercifully he did not glance towards the bed, a large, old-fashioned four-poster, but remained close by the dressing-table, surveying its contents, which seemed to give him much pleasure, for he rubbed his hands together and gave a low chuckle. He then advanced to the fire, turning his back to the foot of the bed, took the poker, and, in the most extraordinarily noiseless manner, proceeded to break up the coal and produce a blaze. Under cover of these slight sounds, I slipped lower and lower in the bed, until I was entirely concealed under the enormous eider-down quilt that lay on it. I now felt comparatively safe; my presence of mind returned to me, and I determined to listen to all that was being done, even if I could not see it.

Time was evidently everything to the robber, for I do not think it took him ten minutes to sweep off all mother's lovely things. He seemed to know by instinct where everything was kept, for he went straight to the drawer where were her diamonds, and from thence he proceeded to secure everything of value in the room. I heard the clanking of her pretty chate-laine, the opening and shutting of her dressing-case, of drawers, and of cupboards, and my heart sank within me as I reflected how impotent I was to prevent all this spoliation, and inwardly I reproached mother for her carelessness in leaving her keys about.

The rifling of the room had now ceased, and the thief stood for one moment after his labours. I could hear him murmuring to himself in accents of evident

satisfaction, but could not catch what he said. Another minute, and I was free to emerge from my concealment, for, noiselessly as he had entered, the robber had once more disappeared through the window, and I was again alone in the room. Oh! how thankful I was! I should have burst out crying, but that I felt there was no time for such an indulgence. Instead thereof, I hastily threw off the bedclothes and huddled on my dressing-gown, which being also under the *douvet* had escaped the house-breaker's detection.

I hurried out of the room as fast as I could, and went straight to Madame's door. I found it locked.

"Let me in! let me in!" I cried, shaking with terror; "something dreadful has happened. Oh! I am so frightened."

Madame, with a scared face, opened the door in her dressing-gown, although it was barely half-past nine.

"Mais qu'est-ce donc, ma chérie?" she asked.

My only answer was to burst out crying.

She drew me into her room, soothed and petted me, till by degrees I managed to tell her that there was a robber in the house, and that he had carried off all mother's jewellery. She looked absolutely petrified.

"How do you know?" she asked in excited tones.

"I saw him; I was in mother's bed."

"In mother's bed!" she screamed. "How dared you leave your room?"

"Never mind now," I answered, recovering my composure as Madame lost hers. "I shall go and call Johnson. We shall catch him if we only make haste."

"Wait for me, petite," she said, suddenly resuming her ordinarily calm demeanour; "we will go together and call Johnson."

"No, no, Madame—at once, at once—there is no time to be lost." And before she could detain me, I had darted down-stairs, and was in the servants' hall.

Our establishment at this time was much diminished owing to various causes. Mother's maid had left her a fortnight ago, on account of the suspicion of a thief in the house, which had finally caused the dismissal of poor Susan. Neither of these two had as yet been replaced, so when I entered the servants' hall I only found a group of giggling girls lingering over their supper. Neither Johnson nor Mrs. Baker was to be seen.

"Lor! Miss Kitty," they exclaimed in chorus; then, seeing that I looked rather scared, they began to ask what was the matter. In a few words I told them what had happened, nearly throwing them into hysterics with fright, and begged that Johnson might be called. At this request all three looked at each other mysteriously, and finally explained to me that Johnson and Mrs. Baker had both retired to bed some time ago with headaches.

"You see, miss," they continued, "it is Madame's birthday, and she came down-stairs and begged us to drink her health, and put two beautiful bottles of wine in the housekeeper's room for Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Baker"—and here, in spite of their fears, all three maids commenced giggling afresh.

Nevertheless, after sundry starts, screams, and other similar demonstrations, we proceeded in a body to

the pantry, where lay Johnson dressed on his bed, and apparently fast asleep. In the middle of the room stood the plate-chest, open, rifled, and empty. There was a faint smell pervading the atmosphere, which I recognised as chloroform. It was evident therefore that Johnson, in addition to being tipsy, had had chloroform administered to him.

The thing was now to try and rouse him, but this was a very difficult matter, and meanwhile the robber would escape. I began to cry bitterly, and seizing a stick dealt Johnson so smart a blow on his hand that it awoke him effectually. A few minutes afterwards there came a loud peal at the door-bell. We all started with fright. What could it be?

It served, however, to assist in rousing the butler, who had recovered consciousness, and was slowly beginning to take in what had happened.

"It is master's ring," he murmured; and, at these words, off I flew to the hall door, forgetful of lurking robbers, and began to tug and pull at the keys and chains which secured it. They were too much for my strength, however, and I was compelled to relinquish them and return for assistance. With much difficulty I induced one of the trembling maids to repair to the door with me, and after much fumbling it was opened. There stood father in a towering passion.

"What does all this mean?" he asked, catching sight of me in my dressing-gown. "Why is not the door properly answered by Johnson?"

Quickly I explained to him the terrible events of the night, and he saw at once, as I did, the necessity for immediate action. We conjectured that the robber, having secured plate and jewellery, was now flying with his booty; and this idea was confirmed by Madame, who now appeared on the scene, fully dressed, calm, and collected.

"I am come to give you news of the thief," she said, with her sweetest smile, to father. "I just now looked out of my window, and I saw him going across the park towards the North Lodge. Ah! Monsieur, how fortunate that you are come home!"

Father thanked her for the information, regardless of the fact, as we all were, that the night was far too dark for her to see any one going across the park from her window, and immediately set to work, wondering the while whether the housebreaker was alone or had confederates. Gardeners, stablemen—in fact, every man in the place was roused, and scouts were sent out in all directions, whilst I was summarily dismissed to bed. I was nearly in hysterics with fright and excitement, and Madame took me by the hand and led me back to bed, soothing and patting me gently.

"Poor little girl! I will give you a little tisane," she said; "you are quite upset."

So, caressing and quieting me, she brought me to her room, and poured me out a glass, not of tisane, but of the most delicious cordial I have ever tasted, which she said was medicine and would do me good. I drank it off eagerly, and, quite exhausted with the night's work, allowed Madame then to take me to bed, and sit by my side till I was asleep. She had not to sit long, for no sooner was my head on my pillow

than my eyelids began to droop, and whilst still speculating as to how it was father had arrived at so opportune a moment, I quietly slipped into dreamland.

It must have been somewhere towards five in the morning that I awoke with a sudden start. My head felt like lead, but I was wide awake. I got out of bed, opened the window very gently, and looked out, wondering what time it was, whether the thief was caught, whether mother had come home, and so on.

Suddenly, through the thick darkness, my attention was arrested by something moving near the school-room window. Now the schoolroom lay on the floor below my bed-room, but not immediately under it. I therefore should have commanded a good view of what was going on, but as it was I could not see. A spot of light in close proximity to the moving object came now to my aid, and by its help I could just distinguish the figure of a man emerging from the schoolroom window, and in his hand a lantern. My old enemy, the robber, undoubtedly. I flew to my door, and found it locked. Some one had locked me in. But I was not to be daunted. Adjoining my room was a tiny washing-closet, and in this was another door communicating with the passage. My wash-stand stood in front of it, for it was never used, and did not even possess a key. To remove the wash-stand and unbolt the door was very quick work, and in a few minutes I was once more in mother's room. I arrived at the very right moment. Father, just returned from his fruitless chase, was sitting by mother, relating to her the adventures of the night, and how it was that he had so unexpectedly appeared on the scene, owing to a telegram he had received, telling him of the illness of a favourite racehorse at a training-stable a few miles off. They were both dressed, for mother had been afraid to go to bed, and had had Madame to sit with her to within the last quarter of an hour.

Breathless and incoherent, I nevertheless contrived to make myself understood, and before another minute had elapsed, had the satisfaction of seeing father creep down-stairs to the pantry to Johnson, who had also returned home. What followed was related to me afterwards.

When father had made known his mission to Johnson, the two, in order to be as quiet as possible, contrived to drop noiselessly from the pantry window, and getting into the path that ran through the shrubbery, came round to the side of the house where lay the schoolroom. They were now facing the window, concealed from detection by the shrubs, and favoured by the extremely dark night. This is what met their eyes.

At the foot of the schoolroom window, looking up with outstretched arms as if to catch something heavy, stood a man, his figure made discernible by the light of a lantern that rested on the path by his side; whilst above him, handing him through the open sash a large black bag, her face dimly illuminated by the feeble light of a solitary mortar, stood—Madame. Imagine father's feelings!

To emerge swiftly and silently from the shrubbery and pounce on the thief was the work of a minute, but

when they had secured him, and looked him in the face, the red hair and whiskers had disappeared, and he stood revealed to Johnson's astonished gaze as M. de Saussaye, Madame's husband.

The rest of my story is very quickly told. M. de Saussaye and his two black bags—for there were two of them—having been secured, the next step was to see after Madame.

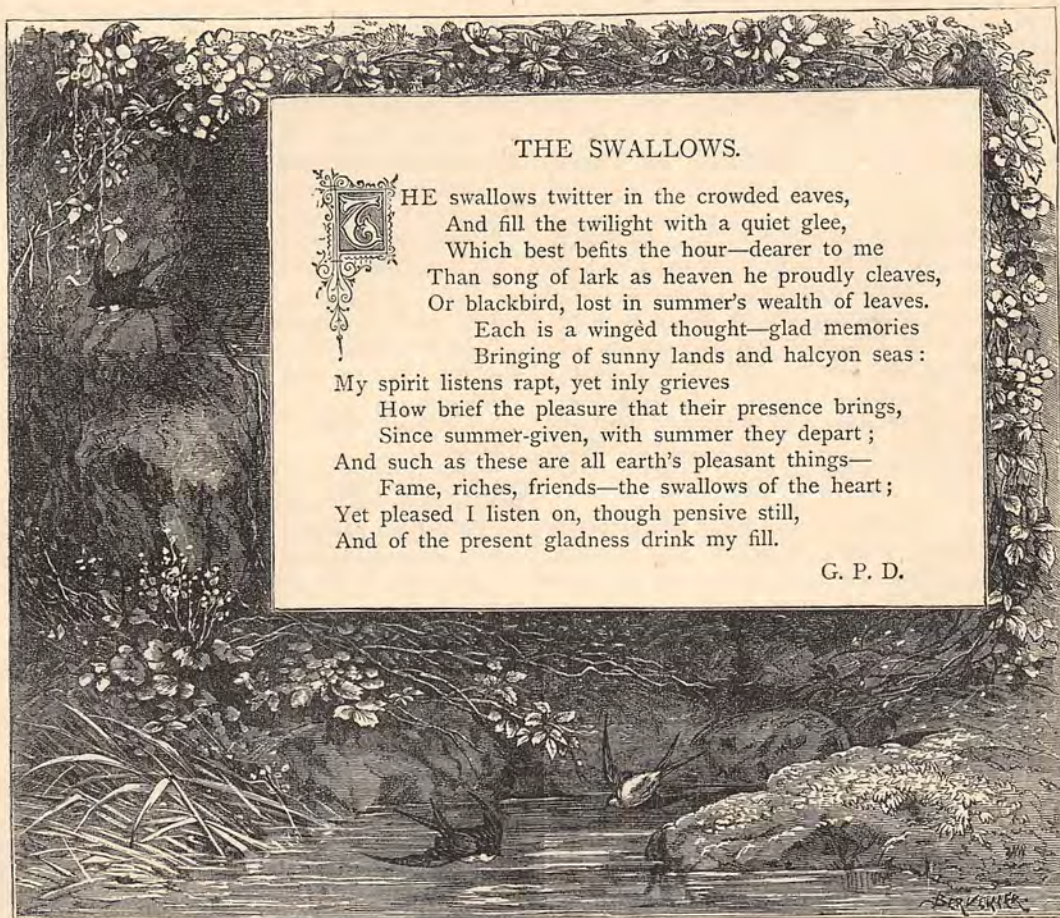
That ingenious person was found in her room, her door locked, and herself fast asleep. On being with much difficulty roused, she stated she had no idea what all this confusion meant, and begged she might be left in peace, as she had a severe headache. Her request was granted, but her door and window were watched, till with morning light the police sent for by father arrived, and M. and Madame de Saussaye were conveyed out of the house under their surveillance.

In due time they were brought before the magistrates and committed for trial, in the course of which it came out that, far from being victims of the Franco-German War, they were a pair of notorious communists who had fled to England to escape the reward of their misdeeds. Madame, whose real name was Leblanc,

was a clever but obscure little milliner in one of the worst quarters of Paris, and Monsieur's avocations were of too heterogeneous a nature to define. The admirable character and references Madame had shown mother were found out to be forgeries; and as to Monsieur, he picked up a livelihood, it was impossible to say how, in the lowest purlieu of Leicester Square. It made us all shudder to think what a woman we had had for an inmate of our home, and to whose care we children had been confided for so long.

I was very ill after that memorable night, so ill that father and the doctor wondered whether it might not have been something more than drugs that Madame had given me twice that evening; but, after a long period of anxiety, I fortunately recovered to find a nice new governess installed in the schoolroom, and innocent Susan reinstated as our maid.

Thenceforth father and mother never again left us so much to ourselves. On the contrary, they became exceedingly domestic, and in after-years, when I had my own household to manage, mother was wont to remark that, after all, Madame's residence amongst us had done some good.



THE SWALLOWS.

THE swallows twitter in the crowded eaves,
 And fill the twilight with a quiet glee,
 Which best befits the hour—dearer to me
 Than song of lark as heaven he proudly cleaves,
 Or blackbird, lost in summer's wealth of leaves.
 Each is a wingèd thought—glad memories
 Bringing of sunny lands and halcyon seas:
 My spirit listens rapt, yet inly grieves
 How brief the pleasure that their presence brings,
 Since summer-given, with summer they depart;
 And such as these are all earth's pleasant things—
 Fame, riches, friends—the swallows of the heart;
 Yet pleased I listen on, though pensive still,
 And of the present gladness drink my fill.

G. P. D.