

CHAPTER VII.

I HAD spoken confidently enough, while arguing the question of Doctor Dulcifer's respectability with the Treasurer of the Duskydale Institution; but, if my perceptions had not been blinded by my enthusiastic admiration for Alicia, I think I should have secretly distrusted my own opinion as soon as I was left by myself. Had I been in full possession of my senses, I might have questioned, on reflection, whether the doctor's method of accounting for the suspicions which kept his neighbors aloof from him, was quite satisfactory. Love is generally described, I believe, as the tender passion. When I remember the insidiously relaxing effect of it on all my faculties, I feel inclined to alter the popular definition, and to call it a moral vapor-bath.

What the Managing Committee of the Duskydale Institution thought of the change in me, I cannot imagine. The doctor and his daughter left the town on the day they had originally appointed, before I could make any excuse for calling again; and, as a necessary consequence of their departure, I lost all interest in the affairs of the ball, and yawned in the faces of the committee when I was obliged to be present at their deliberations in my official capacity.

It was all Alicia with me, whatever they did. I read the Minutes through a soft medium of maize-colored skirts. Notes of melodious laughter bubbled, in my mind's ear, through all the drawling and stammering of our speech-making members. When our dignified President thought he had

caught my eye, and made oratorical overtures to me from the top of the table, I was lost in the contemplation of silk purses and white fingers weaving them. I meant "Alicia" when I said "hear, hear"--and when I officially produced my subscription list, it was all aglow with the roseate hues of the marriage-license. If any unsympathetic male readers should think this statement exaggerated, I appeal to the ladies--they will appreciate the rigid, yet tender, truth of it.

The night of the ball came. I have nothing but the vaguest recollection of it.

I remember that the more the perverse lecture theater was warmed the more persistently it smelled of damp plaster; and that the more brightly it was lighted, the more overgrown and lonesome it looked. I can recall to mind that the company assembled numbered about fifty, the room being big enough to hold three hundred. I have a vision still before me, of twenty out of these fifty guests, solemnly executing intricate figure-dances, under the superintendence of an infirm local dancing-master--a mere speck of fidgety human wretchedness twisting about in the middle of an empty floor. I see, faintly, down the dim vista of the Past, an agreeable figure, like myself, with a cocked hat under its arm, black tights on its lightly tripping legs, a rosette in its buttonhole, and an engaging smile on its face, walking from end to end of the room, in the character of Master of the Ceremonies. These visions and events I can recall vaguely; and with them my remembrances of the ball come to a close. It was a complete failure, and that would,

of itself, have been enough to sicken me of remaining at the Duskydale Institution, even if I had not had any reasons of the tender sort for wishing to extend my travels in rural England to the neighborhood of Barkingham.

The difficulty was how to find a decent pretext for getting away. Fortunately, the Managing Committee relieved me of any perplexity on this head, by passing a resolution, one day, which called upon the President to remonstrate with me on my want of proper interest in the affairs of the Institution. I replied to the remonstrance that the affairs of the Institution were so hopelessly dull that it was equally absurd and unjust to expect any human being to take the smallest interest in them. At this there arose an indignant cry of "Resign!" from the whole committee; to which I answered politely, that I should be delighted to oblige the gentlemen, and to go forthwith, on condition of receiving a quarter's salary in the way of previous compensation.

After a sordid opposition from an economical minority, my condition of departure was accepted. I wrote a letter of resignation, received in exchange twelve pounds ten shillings, and took my place, that same day, on the box-seat of the Barkingham mail.

Rather changeable this life of mine, was it not? Before I was twenty-five years of age, I had tried doctoring, caricaturing portrait-painting, old picture-making, and Institution-managing; and now, with the help of Alicia, I was about to try how a little marrying

would suit me. Surely, Shakespeare must have had me prophetically in his eye, when he wrote about "one man in his time playing many parts." What a character I should have made for him, if he had only been alive now!

I found out from the coachman, among other matters, that there was a famous fishing stream near Barkingham; and the first thing I did, on arriving at the town, was to buy a rod and line.

It struck me that my safest way of introducing myself would be to tell Doctor Dulcifer that I had come to the neighborhood for a little fishing, and so to prevent him from fancying that I was suspiciously prompt in availing myself of his offered hospitality. I put up, of course, at the inn--stuck a large parchment book of flies half in and half out of the pocket of my shooting-jacket--and set off at once to the doctor's. The waiter of whom I asked my way stared distrustfully while he directed me. The people at the inn had evidently heard of my new friend, and were not favorably disposed toward the cause of scientific investigation.

The house stood about a mile out of the town, in a dip of ground near the famous fishing-stream. It was a lonely, old-fashioned red-brick building, surrounded by high walls, with a garden and plantation behind it.

As I rang at the gate-bell, I looked up at the house. Sure enough all the top windows in front were closed with shutters and barred. I was let

in by a man in livery; who, however, in manners and appearance, looked much more like a workman in disguise than a footman. He had a very suspicious eye, and he fixed it on me unpleasantly when I handed him my card.

I was shown into a morning-room exactly like other morning-rooms in country houses.

After a long delay the doctor came in, with scientific butchers' sleeves on his arms, and an apron tied round his portly waist. He apologized for coming down in his working dress, and said everything that was civil and proper about the pleasure of unexpectedly seeing me again so soon. There was something rather preoccupied, I thought, in those brightly resolute eyes of his; but I naturally attributed it to the engrossing influence of his scientific inquiries. He was evidently not at all taken in by my story about coming to Barkingham to fish; but he saw, as well as I did, that it would do to keep up appearances, and contrived to look highly interested immediately in my parchment-book. I asked after his daughter. He said she was in the garden, and proposed that we should go and find her. We did find her, with a pair of scissors in her hand, outblossoming the flowers that she was trimming. She looked really glad to see me--her brown eyes beamed clear and kindly--she gave my hand another inestimable shake--the summer breezes waved her black curls gently upward from her waist--she had on a straw hat and a brown Holland gardening dress.

I eyed it with all the practical interest of a linendraper. O Brown Holland you are but a coarse and cheap fabric, yet how soft and

priceless you look when clothing the figure of Alicia!

I lunched with them. The doctor recurred to the subject of my angling intentions, and asked his daughter if she had heard what parts of the stream at Barkingham were best for fishing in.

She replied, with a mixture of modest evasiveness and adorable simplicity, that she had sometimes seen gentlemen angling from a meadow-bank about a quarter of a mile below her flower-garden. I risked everything in my usual venturesome way, and asked if she would show me where the place was, in case I called the next morning with my fishing-rod. She looked dutifully at her father. He smiled and nodded. Inestimable parent!

On rising to take leave, I was rather curious to know whether he would offer me a bed in the house, or not. He detected the direction of my thoughts in my face and manner, and apologized for not having a bed to offer me; every spare room in the house being occupied by his chemical assistants, and by the lumber of laboratories. Even while he was speaking those few words, Alicia's face changed just as I had seen it change at our first interview. The downcast, gloomy expression overspread it again. Her father's eye wandered toward her when mine did, and suddenly assumed the same distrustful look which I remembered detecting in it, under similar circumstances, at Duskydale. What could this mean?

The doctor shook hands with me in the hall, leaving the workman-like footman to open the door.

I stopped to admire a fine pair of stag's antlers. The footman coughed impatiently. I still lingered, hearing the doctor's footsteps ascending the stairs. They suddenly stopped; and then there was a low heavy clang, like the sound of a closing door made of iron, or of some other unusually strong material; then total silence, interrupted by another impatient cough from the workman-like footman. After that, I thought my wisest proceeding would be to go away before my mysterious attendant was driven to practical extremities.

Between thoughts of Alicia, and inquisitive yearnings to know more about the doctor's experiments, I passed rather a restless night at my inn.

The next morning, I found the lovely mistress of my destiny, with the softest of shawls on her shoulders, the brightest of parasols in her hand, and the smart little straw hat of the day before on her head, ready to show me the way to the fishing-place. If I could be sure beforehand that these pages would only be read by persons actually occupied in the making of love--that oldest and longest-established of all branches of manufacturing industry--I could go into some very tender and interesting particulars on the subject of my first day's fishing, under the adorable auspices of Alicia. But as I cannot hope for a wholly sympathetic audience--as there may be monks, misogynists, political economists, and other professedly hard-hearted persons present among

those whom I now address--I think it best to keep to safe generalities, and to describe my love-making in as few sentences as the vast, though soft, importance of the subject will allow me to use.

Let me confess, then, that I assumed the character of a fastidious angler, and managed to be a week in discovering the right place to fish in--always, it is unnecessary to say, under Alicia's guidance. We went up the stream and down the stream, on one side. We crossed the bridge, and went up the stream and down the stream on the other. We got into a punt, and went up the stream (with great difficulty), and down the stream (with great ease). We landed on a little island, and walked all round it, and inspected the stream attentively from a central point of view. We found the island damp, and went back to the bank, and up the stream, and over the bridge, and down the stream again; and then, for the first time, the sweet girl turned appealingly to me, and confessed that she had exhausted her artless knowledge of the locality. It was exactly a week from the day when I had first followed her into the fields with my fishing-rod over my shoulder; and I had never yet caught anything but Alicia's hand, and that not with my hook.

We sat down close together on the bank, entirely in consequence of our despair at not finding a good fishing-place. I looked at the brown eyes, and they turned away observantly down the stream. I followed them, and they turned away inquiringly up the stream. Was this angel of patience and kindness still looking for a fishing place? And was it up the stream, after all? No!--she smiled and shook her head when I asked the

question, and the brown eyes suddenly stole a look at me. I could hold out no longer In one breathless moment I caught hold of both her hands--in one stammering sentence I asked her if she would be my wife.

She tried faintly to free her hands--gave up the attempt--smiled--made an effort to look grave--gave that up, too--sighed suddenly--checked herself suddenly--said nothing. Perhaps I ought to have taken my answer for granted; but the least business-like man that ever lived becomes an eminently practical character in matters of love. I repeated my question. She looked away confusedly; her eye lighted on a corner of her father's red-brick house, peeping through a gap in the plantation already mentioned; and her blushing cheeks lost their color instantly. I felt her hands grow cold; she drew them resolutely out of mine, and rose with the tears in her eyes. Had I offended her?

"No," she said when I asked her the question, and turned to me again, and held out her hand with such frank, fearless kindness, that I almost fell on my knees to thank her for it.

Might I hope ever to hear her say "Yes" to the question that I had asked on the riverbank?

She sighed bitterly, and turned again toward the red-brick house.

Was there any family reason against her saying "Yes"? Anything that I must not inquire into? Any opposition to be dreaded from her father?

The moment I mentioned her father, she shrank away from me and burst into a violent fit of crying.

"Don't speak of it again!" she said in a broken voice. "I mustn't--you mustn't--ah, don't, don't say a word more about it! I'm not distressed with you--it is not your fault. Don't say anything--leave me quiet for a minute. I shall soon be better if you leave me quiet."

She dried her eyes directly, with a shiver as if it was cold, and took my arm. I led her back to the house-gate; and then, feeling that I could not go in to lunch as usual, after what had happened, said I would return to the fishing-place.

"Shall I come to dinner this evening?" I asked, as I rang the gate-bell for her.

"Oh, yes--yes!--do come, or he--"

The mysterious man-servant opened the door, and we parted before she could say the next words.