

CHAPTER III - HE SHOWS HIMSELF

I too, looked at the cottage, and made a discovery that surprised me at one of the upper windows.

If I could be sure that the moon had not deceived me, the most beautiful face that I had ever seen was looking down on us--and it was the face of a man! By the uncertain light I could discern the perfection of form in the features, and the expression of power which made it impossible to mistake the stranger for a woman, although his hair grew long and he was without either moustache or beard. He was watching us intently; he neither moved nor spoke when we looked up at him.

"Evidently the lodger," I whispered to Cristel. "What a handsome man!"

She tossed her head contemptuously: my expression of admiration seemed to have irritated her.

"I didn't want him to see you!" she said. "The lodger persecutes me with his attentions; he's impudent enough to be jealous of me."

She spoke without even attempting to lower her voice. I endeavored to warn her. "He's at the window still," I said, in tones discreetly lowered; "he can hear everything you are saying."

"Not one word of it, Mr. Gerard."

"What do you mean?"

"The man is deaf. Don't look at him again. Don't speak to me again. Go home--pray go home!"

Without further explanation, she abruptly entered the cottage, and shut the door.

As I turned into the path which led through the wood I heard a voice behind me. It said: "Stop, sir." I stopped directly, standing in the shadow cast by the outermost line of trees, which I had that moment reached. In the moonlight that I had left behind me, I saw again the man whom I had discovered at the window. His figure, tall and slim; his movements, graceful and easy, were in harmony with his beautiful face. He lifted his long finely-shaped hands, and

clasped them with a frantic gesture of entreaty.

"For God's sake," he said, "don't be offended with me!"

His voice startled me even more than his words; I had never heard anything like it before. Low, dull, and muffled, it neither rose nor fell; it spoke slowly and deliberately, without laying the slightest emphasis on any one of the words that it uttered. In the astonishment of the moment, I forgot what Cristel had told me. I answered him as I should have answered any other unknown person who had spoken to me.

"What do you want?"

His hands dropped; his head sunk on his breast. "You are speaking, sir, to a miserable creature who can't hear you. I am deaf."

I stepped nearer to him, intending to raise my voice in pity for his infirmity. He shuddered, and signed to me to keep back.

"Don't come close to my ear; don't shout." As he spoke, strong excitement flashed at me in his eyes, without producing the slightest change in his voice. "I don't deny," he resumed, "that I can hear sometimes when people take that way with me. They hurt when they do it. Their voices go through my nerves as a knife might go through my flesh. I live at the mill, sir; I have a great favour to ask. Will you come and speak to me in my room--for five minutes only?"

I hesitated. Any other man in my place, would, I think, have done the same; receiving such an invitation as this from a stranger, whose pitiable infirmity seemed to place him beyond the pale of social intercourse.

He must have guessed what was passing in my mind; he tried me again in words which might have proved persuasive, had they been uttered in the customary variety of tone.

"I can't help being a stranger to you; I can't help being deaf. You're a young man. You look more merciful and more patient than young men in general. Won't you hear what I have to say? Won't you tell me what I want to know?"

How were we to communicate? Did he by any chance suppose that I had learnt the finger alphabet? I touched my fingers and shook my head, as a means of dissipating his delusion, if it existed.

He instantly understood me.

"Even if you knew the finger alphabet," he said, "it would be of no use. I have been too miserable to learn it--my deafness only came on me a little more than a year since. Pardon me if I am obliged to give you trouble--I ask persons who pity me to write their answers when I speak to them. Come to my room, and you will find what you want--a candle to write by."

Was his will, as compared with mine, the stronger will of the two? And was it helped (insensibly to myself) by his advantages of personal appearance? I can only confess that his apology presented a picture of misery to my mind, which shook my resolution to refuse him. His ready penetration discovered this change in his favour: he at once took advantage of it. "Five minutes of your time is all I ask for," he said. "Won't you indulge a man who sees his fellow-creatures all talking happily round him, and feels dead and buried among them?"

The very exaggeration of his language had its effect on my mind. It revealed to me the horrible isolation among humanity of the deaf, as I had never understood it yet. Discretion is, I am sorry to say, not one of the strong points in my character. I committed one more among the many foolish actions of my life; I signed to the stranger to lead the way back to the mill.