

CHAPTER IV - HE EXPLAINS HIMSELF

Giles Toller's miserly nature had offered to his lodger shelter from wind and rain, and the furniture absolutely necessary to make a bedroom habitable--and nothing more. There was no carpet on the floor, no paper on the walls, no ceiling to hide the rafters of the roof. The chair that I sat on was the one chair in the room; the man whose guest I had rashly consented to be found a seat on his bed. Upon his table I saw pens and pencils, paper and ink, and a battered brass candlestick with a common tallow candle in it. His changes of clothing were flung on the bed; his money was left on the unpainted wooden chimney-piece; his wretched little morsel of looking-glass (propped up near the money) had been turned with its face to the wall. He perceived that the odd position of this last object had attracted my notice.

"Vanity and I have parted company," he explained; "I shrink from myself when I look at myself now. The ugliest man living--if he has got his hearing--is a more agreeable man in society than I am. Does this wretched place disgust you?"

He pushed a pencil and some sheets of writing-paper across the table to me. I wrote my reply: "The place makes me sorry for you."

He shook his head. "Your sympathy is thrown away on me. A man who has lost his social relations with his fellow-creatures doesn't care how he lodges or where he lives. When he has found solitude, he has found all he wants for the rest of his days. Shall we introduce ourselves? It won't be easy for me to set the example."

I used the pencil again: "Why not?"

"Because you will expect me to give you my name. I can't do it. I have ceased to bear my family name; and, being out of society, what need have I for an assumed name? As for my Christian name, it's so detestably ugly that I hate the sight and sound of it. Here, they know me as The Lodger. Will you have that? or will you have an appropriate nick-name? I come of a mixed breed; and I'm likely, after what has happened to me, to turn out a worthless fellow. Call me The Cur. Oh, you needn't start! that's as accurate a description of me as any other. What's your name?"

I wrote it for him. His face darkened when he found out who I was.

"Young, personally attractive, and a great landowner," he said. "I saw you just now talking familiarly with Cristel Toller. I didn't like that at the time; I like it less than ever now."

My pencil asked him, without ceremony, what he meant.

He was ready with his reply. "I mean this: you owe something to the good luck which has placed you where you are. Keep your familiarity for ladies in your own rank of life."

This (to a young man like me) was unendurable insolence. I had hitherto refrained from taking him at his own bitter word in the matter of nick-name. In the irritation of the moment, I now first resolved to adopt his suggestion seriously. The next slip of paper that I handed to him administered the smartest rebuff that my dull brains could discover on the spur of the moment: "The Cur is requested to keep his advice till he is asked for it."

For the first time, something like a smile showed itself faintly on his lips--and represented the only effect which my severity had produced. He still followed his own train of thought, as resolutely and as impertinently as ever.

"I haven't seen you talking to Cristel before to-night. Have you been meeting her in secret?"

In justice to the girl, I felt that I ought to set him right, so far. Taking up the pencil again, I told this strange man that I had just returned to England, after an absence of many years in foreign countries--that I had known Cristel when we were both children--and that I had met her purely by accident, when he had detected us talking outside the cottage. Seeing me pause, after advancing to that point in the writing of my reply, he held out his hand impatiently for the paper. I signed him to wait, and added a last sentence: "Understand this; I will answer no more questions--I have done with the subject."

He read what I had written with the closest attention. But his inveterate suspicion of me was not set at rest, even yet.

"Are you likely to come this way again?" he asked.

I pointed to the final lines of my writing, and got up to go.

This assertion of my will against his roused him. He stopped me at the door--not by a motion of his hand but by the mastery of his look. The dim

candlelight afforded me no help in determining the color of his eyes. Dark, large, and finely set in his head, there was a sinister passion in them, at that moment, which held me in spite of myself. Still as monotonous as ever, his voice in some degree expressed the frenzy that was in him, by suddenly rising in its pitch when he spoke to me next.

"Mr. Roylake, I love her. Mr. Roylake, I am determined to marry her. Any man who comes between me and that cruel girl--ah, she's as hard as one of her father's millstones; it's the misery of my life, it's the joy of my life, to love her--I tell you, young sir, any man who comes between Cristel and me does it at his peril. Remember that."

I had no wish to give offence--but his threatening me in this manner was so absurd that I gave way to the impression of the moment, and laughed. He stepped up to me, with such an expression of demoniacal rage and hatred in his face that he became absolutely ugly in an instant.

"I amuse you, do I?" he said. "You don't know the man you're trifling with. You had better know me. You shall know me." He turned away, and walked up and down the wretched little room, deep in thought. "I don't want this matter between us to end badly," he said, interrupting his meditations--then returning to them again--and then once more addressing me. "You're young, you're thoughtless; but you don't look like a bad fellow. I wonder whether I can trust you? Not one man in a thousand would do it. Never mind. I'm the one man in ten thousand who does it. Mr. Gerard Roylake, I'm going to trust you."

With this incoherent expression of a resolution unknown to me, he unlocked a shabby trunk hidden in a corner, and took from it a small portfolio.

"Men of your age," he resumed, "seldom look below the surface. Learn that valuable habit, sir--and begin by looking below the surface of Me." He forced the portfolio into my hand. Once more, his beautiful eyes held me with their irresistible influence; they looked at me with an expression of sad and solemn warning. "Discover for yourself," he said, "what devils my deafness has set loose in me; and let no eyes but yours see that horrid sight. You will find me here tomorrow, and you will decide by that time whether you make an enemy of me or not."

He threw open the door, and bowed as graciously as if he had been a sovereign dismissing a subject.

Was he mad?

I hesitated to adopt that conclusion. There is no denying it, the deaf man had found his own strange and tortuous way to my interest, in spite of myself. I might even have been in some danger of allowing him to make a friend of me, if I had not been restrained by the fears for Cristel which his language and his manner amply justified, to my mind. Although I was far from foreseeing the catastrophe that really did happen, I felt that I had returned to my own country at a critical time in the life of the miller's daughter. My friendly interference might be of serious importance to Cristel's peace of mind--perhaps even to her personal safety as well.

Eager to discover what the contents of the portfolio might tell me, I hurried back to Trimley Deen. My stepmother had not yet returned from the dinner-party. As one of the results of my ten years' banishment from home, I was obliged to ask the servant to show me the way to my own room, in my own house! The windows looked out on a view of Fordwitch Wood. As I opened the leaves which were to reveal to me the secret soul of the man whom I had so strangely met, the fading moonlight vanished, and the distant trees were lost in the gloom of a starless night.