

CHAPTER VI - THE RETURN OF THE PORTFOLIO

With that serious question the last of the leaves entrusted to me by the Lodger at the Mill came to an end.

I betray no confidence in presenting this copy of his confession. Time has passed since I first read it, and changes have occurred in the interval, which leave me free to exercise my own discretion, and to let the autobiography speak for itself.

If I am asked what impression of the writer those extraordinary pages produced on me, I feel at a loss how to reply.

Not one impression, but many impressions, troubled and confused my mind. Certain passages in the confession inclined me to believe that the writer was mad. But I altered my opinion at the next leaf, and set him down as a man with a bitter humor, disposed to make merry over his own bad qualities. At one time, his tone in writing of his early life, and his allusions to his mother, won my sympathy and respect. At another time, the picture of himself in his later years, and the defiant manner in which he presented it, almost made me regret that he had not died of the illness which had struck him deaf. In this state of uncertainty I may claim the merit of having arrived, so far as my own future conduct was concerned, at one positive conclusion. As strangers he and I had first met. As strangers I was determined we should remain.

Having made up my mind, so far, the next thing to do (with the clock on the mantel-piece striking midnight) was to go to bed.

I slept badly. The events that had happened, since my arrival in England, had excited me I suppose. Now and then, in the wakeful hours of the night, I thought of Cristel with some anxiety. Taking the Lodger's exaggerated language for what it was really worth, the poor girl (as I was still inclined to fear) might have serious reason to regret that he had ever entered her father's cottage.

At the breakfast table, my stepmother and I met again.

Mrs. Roylake--in an exquisite morning dress; with her smile in perfect order--informed me that she was dying with curiosity. She had heard, from the servants, that I had not returned to the house until past ten o'clock on the

previous night; and she was absolutely bewildered by the discovery. What could her dear Gerard have been doing, out in the dark by himself, for all that time?

"For some part of the time," I answered, "I was catching moths in Fordwitch Wood."

"What an extraordinary occupation for a young man! Well? And what did you do after that?"

"I walked on through the wood, and renewed my old associations with the river and the mill."

Mrs. Roylake's fascinating smile disappeared when I mentioned the mill. She suddenly became a cold lady--I might even say a stiff lady.

"I can't congratulate you on the first visit you have paid in our neighborhood," she said. "Of course that bold girl contrived to attract your notice?"

I replied that I had met with the "bold girl" purely by accident, on her side as well as on mine; and then I started a new topic. "Was it a pleasant dinner-party last night?" I asked--as if the subject really interested me. I had not been quite four and twenty hours in England yet, and I was becoming a humbug already.

My stepmother was her charming self again the moment my question had passed my lips. Society--provided it was not society at the mill--was always attractive as a topic of conversation. "Your absence was the only drawback," she answered. "I have asked the two ladies (my lord has an engagement) to dine here to-day, without ceremony. They are most anxious to meet you. My dear Gerard! you look surprised. Surely you know who the ladies are?"

I was obliged to acknowledge my ignorance.

Mrs. Roylake was shocked. "At any rate," she resumed, "you have heard of their father, Lord Uppercliff?"

I made another shameful confession. Either I had forgotten Lord Uppercliff, during my long absence abroad, or I had never heard of him.

Mrs. Roylake was disgusted. "And this is a foreign education!" she exclaimed. "Thank Heaven, you have returned to your own country! We will

drive out after luncheon, and pay a round of visits." When this prospect was placed before me, I remembered having read in books of sensitive persons receiving impressions which made their blood run cold; I now found myself one of those persons, for the first time in my life. "In the meanwhile," Mrs. Roylake continued, "I must tell you--excuse me for laughing; it seems so very absurd that you should not know who Lord Uppercliff's daughters are--I must tell you that Lady Rachel is the eldest. She is married to the Honorable Captain Millbay, of the Navy, now away in his ship. A person of extraordinary strength of mind (I don't mean the Captain; I mean Lady Rachel); I admire her intellect, but her political and social opinions I must always view with regret. Her younger sister, Lady Lena--not married, Gerard; remember that!--is simply the most charming girl in England. If you don't fall in love with her, you will be the only young man in the county who has resisted Lady Lena. Poor Sir George--she refused him last week; you really must have heard of Sir George; our member of parliament; conservative of course; quite broken-hearted about Lady Lena; gone away to America to shoot bears. You seem to be restless. What are you fidgeting about? Ah, I know! You want to smoke after breakfast. Well, I won't be in your way. Go out on the terrace; your poor father always took his cigar on the terrace. They say smoking leads to meditation; I leave you to meditate on Lady Lena. Don't forget--luncheon at one o'clock, and the carriage at two."

She smiled, and kissed her hand, and fluttered out of the room. Charming; perfectly charming. And yet I was ungrateful enough to wish myself back in Germany again.

I lit my cigar, but not on the terrace. Leaving the house, I took the way once more that led to Fordwitch Wood. What would Mrs. Roylake have said, if she had discovered that I was going back to the mill? There was no other alternative. The portfolio was a trust confided to me; the sooner I returned it to the writer of the confession--the sooner I told him plainly the conclusion at which I had arrived--the more at ease my mind would be.

The sluggish river looked muddier than ever, the new cottage looked uglier than ever, exposed to the searching ordeal of sunlight. I knocked at the door on the ancient side of the building.

Cristel's father--shall I confess I had hoped that it might be Cristel herself?--let me in. In by-gone days, I dimly remembered him as old and small and withered. Advancing years had wasted him away, in the interval, until his white miller's clothes hung about him in empty folds. His fleshless face would have looked like the face of a mummy, but for the restless brightness of his little watchful black eyes. He stared at me in momentary perplexity,

and, suddenly recovering himself, asked me to walk in.

"Are you the young master, sir? Ah, yes, yes; I thought so. My girl Cristy said she saw the young master last night. Thank you kindly, sir; I'm pretty well, considering how I've fallen away in my flesh. I have got a fine appetite, but somehow or other, my meals don't show on me. You will excuse my receiving you in the kitchen, sir; it's the best room we have. Did Cristy tell you how badly we are off here for repairs? You being our landlord, we look to you to help us. We are falling to pieces, as it were, on this old side of the house. There's first drains----"

He proceeded to reckon up the repairs, counting with his fleshless thumb on his skinny fingers, when he was interrupted by a curious succession of sounds which began with whining, and ended with scratching at the cottage door.

In a minute after, the door was opened from without. A brown dog, of the companionable retriever breed, ran in and fawned upon old Toller. Cristel followed (from the kitchen garden), with a basket of vegetables on her arm. Unlike the river and the cottage, she gained by being revealed in the brilliant sunlight. I now saw, in their full beauty, the luster of her brown eyes, the warm rosiness of her dark complexion, the delightful vivacity of expression which was the crowning charm of her face. She paused confusedly in the doorway, and tried to resist me when I insisted on relieving her of the basket.

"Mr. Gerard," she protested, "you are treating me as if I was a young lady. What would they say at the great house, if they knew you had done that?"

My answer would no doubt have assumed the form of a foolish compliment, if her father had not spared her that infliction. He returned to the all-important question, the question of repairs.

"You see, sir, it's no use speaking to the bailiff. Saving your presence, he's a miser with his master's money. He says, 'All right,' and he does nothing. There's first, as I told you just now, the truly dreadful state of the drains----"

I tried to stop him by promising to speak to the bailiff myself. On hearing this good news, Mr. Toller's gratitude became ungovernable: he was more eager than ever, and more eloquent than ever, in returning to the repairs.

"And then, sir, there's the oven. They do call bread the staff of life. It's a burnt staff at one time, and a clammy staff at another, in our domestic

experience. Satisfy yourself, sir; do please cross the kitchen and look with your own eyes at the state, the scandalous state, of the oven."

His daughter interfered, and stopped him at the critical moment when he was actually offering his arm to conduct me in state across the kitchen. Cristel had just put her pretty brown hand over his mouth, and said, "Oh, father, do pray be quiet!" when we were all three disturbed by another interruption.

A second door communicating, as I concluded from its position, with the new cottage, was suddenly opened. In the instant before the person behind it appeared, the dog looked that way--started up, frightened--and took refuge under the table. At the next moment, the deaf Lodger walked into the room. It was he beyond all doubt who had frightened the dog, forewarned by instinct of his appearance.

What I had read of his writing disposed me, now that I saw the man by daylight, to find something devilish in the expression of his face. No! strong as it was, my prejudice failed to make any discoveries that presented him at a disadvantage. His personal attractions triumphed in the clear searching light. I now perceived that his eyes were of that deeply dark blue, which is commonly and falsely described as resembling the color of the violet. To my thinking, they were so entirely beautiful that they had no right to be in a man's face. I might have felt the same objection to the pale delicacy of his complexion, to the soft profusion of his reddish-brown hair, to his finely shaped sensitive lips, but for two marked peculiarities in him which would have shown me to be wrong--that is to say: the expression of power about his head, and the signs of masculine resolution presented by his mouth and chin.

On entering the room, the first person, and the only person, who attracted his attention was Cristel.

He bowed, smiled, possessed himself abruptly of her hand, and kissed it. She tried to withdraw it from his grasp, and met with an obstinate resistance. His gallantry addressed her in sweet words; and his voice destroyed their charm by the dreary monotony of the tone in which he spoke. "On this lovely day, Cristel, Nature pleads for me. Your heart feels the sunshine and softens towards the poor deaf man who worships you. Ah, my dear, it's useless to say No. My affliction is my happiness, when you say cruel things to me. I live in my fool's paradise; I don't hear you." He tried to draw her nearer to him. "Come, my angel; let me kiss you."

She made a second attempt to release herself; and this time, she wrenched her hand out of his grasp with a strength for which he was not prepared.

That fiercest anger which turns the face pale, was the anger that had possession of Cristel as she took refuge with her father. "You asked me to bear with that man," she said, "because he paid you a good rent. I tell you this, father; my patience is coming to an end. Either he must go, or I must go. Make up your mind to choose between your money and me."

Old Toller astonished me. He seemed to have caught the infection of his daughter's anger. Placed between Cristel and his money, he really acted as if he preferred Cristel. He hobbled up to his lodger, and shook his infirm fists, and screamed at the highest pitch of his old cracked voice: "Let her be, or I won't have you here no longer! You deaf adder, let her be!"

The sensitive nerves of the deaf man shrank as those shrill tones pierced them. "If you want to speak to me, write it!" he said, with rage and suffering in every line of his face. He tore from his pocket his little book, filled with blank leaves, and threw it at Toller's head. "Write," he repeated. "If you murder me with your screeching again, look out for your skinny throat--I'll throttle you."

Cristel picked up the book. She was gratefully sensible of her father's interference. "He shall know what you said to him," she promised the old man. "I'll write it myself."

She took the pencil from its sheath in the leather binding of the book. Controlling himself, the lover whom she hated advanced towards her with a persuasive smile.

"Have you forgiven me?" he asked. "Have you been speaking kindly of me? I think I see it in your face. There are some deaf people who can tell what is said by looking at the speaker's lips. I am too stupid, or too impatient, or too wicked to be able to do that. Write it for me, dear, and make me happy for the day."

Cristel was not attending to him, she was speaking to me. "I hope, sir, you don't think that father and I are to blame for what has happened this morning," she said. He looked where she was looking--and discovered, for the first time, that I was in the room.

He had alluded to his wickedness a moment since. When his face turned my way, I thought it bore witness to his knowledge of his own character.

"Why didn't you come to my side of the house?" he said to me. "What am I to understand, sir, by seeing you here?"

Cristel dropped his book on the table, and hurried to me in breathless surprise. "He speaks as if he knew you!" she cried. "What does it mean?"

"Only that I met him last night," I explained, "after leaving you."

"Did you know him before that?"

"No. He was a perfect stranger to me."

He picked up his book from the table, and took his pencil out of Cristel's hand, while we were speaking. "I want my answer," he said, handing me the book and the pencil. I gave him his answer.

"You find me here, because I don't wish to return to your side of the house."

"Is that the impression," he asked, "produced by what I allowed you to read?"

I replied by a sign in the affirmative. He inquired next if I had brought his portfolio with me. I put it at once into his hand.

In some way unknown to me, I had apparently roused his suspicions. He opened the portfolio, and counted the loose leaves of writing in it carefully. While he was absorbed in this occupation, old Toller's eccentricity assumed a new form. His little restless black eyes followed the movements of his lodger's fingers, as they turned over leaf after leaf of the manuscript, with such eager curiosity and interest that I looked at him in surprise. Finding that he had attracted my notice, he showed no signs of embarrassment--he seized the opportunity of asking for information.

"Did my gentleman trust you, sir, with all that writing?" he began.

"Yes."

"Did he want you to read it?"

"He did."

"What's it all about, sir?"

Confronted by this cool inquiry, I informed Mr. Toller that the demands of curiosity had their limits, and that he had reached them. On this ground, I declined to answer any more questions. Mr. Toller went on with his questions immediately.

"Do you notice, sir, that he seems to set a deal of store by his writings? Perhaps you can say what the value of them may be?"

I shook my head. "It won't do, Mr. Toller!"

He tried again--I declare it positively, he tried again. "You'll excuse me, sir? I've never seen his portfolio before. Am I right if I think you know where he keeps it?"

"Spare your breath, Mr. Toller. Once more, it won't do!"

Cristel joined us, amazed at his pertinacity. "Why are you so anxious, father, to know about that portfolio?" she asked.

Her father seemed to have reasons of his own for following my example and declining to answer questions. More polite, however, than I had been, he left his resolution to be inferred. His daughter was answered by a few general remarks, setting forth the advantage to the landlord of having a lodger who had lost one of senses.

"You see there's something convenient, my dear, in the circumstance of that nice-looking gentleman over there being deaf. We can talk about him before his face, just as comfortably as if it was behind his back. Isn't that so, Mr. Gerard? Don't you see it yourself, Cristy? For instance, I say it without fear in his presence: 'tis the act of a fool to be fumbling over writings, when there's nothing in them that's not well known to himself already--unless indeed they are worth money, which I don't doubt is no secret to you, Mr. Gerard? Eh? I beg your pardon, sir, did you speak? No? I beg your pardon again. Yes, yes, Cristy, I'm noticing him; he's done with his writings. Suppose I offer to put them away for him? You can see in his face he finds the tale of them correct. He's coming this way. What's he going to do next?"

He was going to establish a claim on my gratitude, by relieving me of Giles Toller.

"I have something to say to Mr. Roylake," he announced, with a haughty look at his landlord. "Mind! I don't forget your screaming at me just now,

and I intend to know what you meant by it. That will do. Get out of the way."

The old fellow received his dismissal with a low bow, and left the kitchen with a look at the Lodger which revealed (unless I was entirely mistaken) a sly sense of triumph. What did it mean?

The deaf man addressed me with a cold and distant manner. "We must understand each other," he said. "Will you follow me to my side of the cottage?" I shook my head. "Very well," he resumed; "we will have it out, here. When I trusted you with my confession last night, I left you to decide (after reading it) whether you would make an enemy of me or not. You remember that?" I nodded my head. "Then I now ask you, Mr. Roylake: Which are we--enemies or friends?"

I took the pencil, and wrote my reply:

"Neither enemies nor friends. We are strangers from this time forth."

Some internal struggle produced a change in his face--visible for one moment, hidden from me in a moment more. "I think you will regret the decision at which you have arrived." He said that, and saluted me with his grandly gracious bow. As he turned away, he perceived Cristel at the other end of the room, and eagerly joined her.

"The only happy moments I have are my moments passed in your presence," he said. "I shall trouble you no more for to-day. Give me a little comfort to take back with me to my solitude. I didn't notice that there were other persons present when I asked leave to kiss you. May I hope that you forgive me?"

He held out his hand; it was not taken. He waited a little, in the vain hope that she would relent: she turned away from him.

A spasm of pain distorted his handsome face. He opened the door that led to his side of the cottage--paused--and looked back at Cristel. She took no notice of him. As he moved again to the door and left us, the hysterical passion in him forced its way outward--he burst into tears.

The dog sprang up from his refuge under the table, and shook himself joyfully. Cristel breathed again freely, and joined me at my end of the room. Shall I make another acknowledgment of weakness? I began to fear that we might all of us (even including the dog!) have been a little hard on the poor deaf wretch who had gone away in such bitter distress. I communicated this

view of the matter to Cristel. She failed to see it as I did.

The dog laid his head on her lap, asking to be caressed. She patted him while she answered me.

"I agree with this old friend, Mr. Gerard. We were both of us frightened, on the very first day, when the person you are pitying came to lodge with us. I have got to hate him, since that time--perhaps to despise him. But the dog has never changed; he feels and knows there is something dreadful in that man. One of these days, poor Ponto may turn out to be right.--May I ask you something, sir?"

"Of course!"

"You won't think I am presuming on your kindness?"

"You ought to know me better than that, Cristel!"

"The truth is, sir, I have been a little startled by what I saw in our lodger's face, when he asked if you were his enemy or his friend. I know he is thought to be handsome--but, Mr. Gerard, those beautiful eyes of his sometimes tell tales; and I have seen his pretty complexion change to a color that turned him into an ugly man. Will you tell me what you wrote when you answered him?"

I repeated what I had written, word for word. It failed to satisfy her.

"He is very vain," she said, "and you may have wounded his vanity by treating him like a stranger, after he had given you his writings to read, and invited you to his room. But I thought I saw something much worse than mortification in his face. Shall I be taking a liberty, if I ask how it was you got acquainted with him last night?"

She was evidently in earnest. I saw that I must answer her without reserve; and I was a little afraid of being myself open to a suspicion of vanity, if I mentioned the distrust which I had innocently excited in the mind of my new acquaintance. In this state of embarrassment I took a young man's way out of the difficulty, and spoke lightly of a serious thing.

"I became acquainted with your deaf Lodger, Cristel, under ridiculous circumstances. He saw us talking last night, and did me the honor to be jealous of me."

I had expected to see her blush. To my surprise she turned pale, and vehemently remonstrated.

"Don't laugh, sir! There's nothing to be amused at in what you have just told me. You didn't go into his room last night? Oh, what made you do that!"

I described his successful appeal to my compassion--not very willingly, for it made me look (as I thought) like a weak person. Little by little, she extracted from me the rest: how he objected to find a young man, especially in my social position, talking to Cristel; how he insisted on my respecting his claims, and engaging not to see her again; how, when I refused to do this, he gave me his confession to read, so that I might find out what a formidable man I was setting at defiance; how I had not been in the least alarmed, and had treated him (as Cristel had just heard) on the footing of a perfect stranger.

"There's the whole story," I concluded. "Like a scene in a play, isn't it?"

She protested once more against the light tone that I persisted in assuming.

"I tell you again, sir, this is no laughing matter. You have roused his jealousy. You had better have roused the fury of a wild beast. Knowing what you know of him, why did you stay here, when he came in? And, oh, why did I humiliate him in your presence? Leave us, Mr. Gerard--pray, pray leave us, and don't come near this place again till father has got rid of him."

Did she think I was to be so easily frightened as that? My sense of my own importance was up in arms at the bare suspicion of it!

"My dear child," I said grandly, "do you really suppose I am afraid of that poor wretch? Am I to give up the pleasure of seeing you, because a mad fellow is simple enough to think you will marry him? Absurd, Cristel--absurd!"

The poor girl wrung her hands in despair.

"Oh, sir, don't distress me by talking in that way! Do please remember who you are, and who I am. If I was the miserable means of your coming to any harm--I can't bear even to speak of it! Pray don't think me bold; I don't know how to express myself. You ought never to have come here; you ought to go; you must go!"

Driven by strong impulse, she ran to the place in which I had left my hat,

and brought it to me, and opened the door with a look of entreaty which it was impossible to resist. It would have been an act of downright cruelty to persist in opposing her. "I wouldn't distress you, Cristel, for the whole world," I said--and left her to conclude that I had felt the influence of her entreaties in the right way. She tried to thank me; the tears rose in her eyes--she signed to me to leave her, poor soul, as if she felt ashamed of herself. I was shocked; I was grieved; I was more than ever secretly resolved to go back to her. When we said good-bye--I have been told that I did wrong; I meant no harm--I kissed her.

Having traversed the short distance between the cottage and the wood, I remembered that I had left my walking-stick behind me, and returned to get it.

Cristel was leaving the kitchen; I saw her at the door which communicated with the Lodger's side of the cottage. Her back was turned towards me; astonishment held me silent. She opened the door, passed through it, and closed it behind her.

Going to that man, after she had repelled his advances, in my presence! Going to the enemy against whom she had warned me, after I had first been persuaded to leave her! Angry thoughts these--and surely thoughts unworthy of me? If it had been the case of another man I should have said he was jealous. Jealous of the miller's daughter--in my position? Absurd! contemptible! But I was still in such a vile temper that I determined to let Cristel know she had been discovered. Taking one of my visiting cards, I wrote on it: "I came back for my stick, and saw you go to him." After I had pinned this spiteful little message to the door, so that she might see it when she returned, I suffered a disappointment. I was not half so well satisfied with myself as I had anticipated.