

CHAPTER VII - THE BEST SOCIETY

Leaving the cottage for the second time, I was met at the door by a fat man of solemn appearance dressed in black, who respectfully touched his hat. My angry humor acknowledged the harmless stranger's salute by a rude inquiry: "What the devil do you want?" Instead of resenting this uncivil language, he indirectly reproved me by becoming more respectful than ever.

"My mistress desires me to tell you, sir, that luncheon is waiting." I was in the presence of a thoroughbred English servant--and I had failed to discover it until he spoke of his mistress! I had also, by keeping luncheon waiting, treated an English institution with contempt. And, worse even than this, as a misfortune which personally affected me, my stepmother evidently knew that I had paid another visit to the mill.

I hurried along the woodland path, followed by the fat domestic in black. Not used apparently to force his legs into rapid motion, he articulated with the greatest difficulty in answering my next question: "How did you know where to find me?"

"Mrs. Roylake ordered inquiries to be made, sir. The head gardener--" There his small reserves of breath failed him.

"The head gardener saw me?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Hours ago, sir--when you went into Toller's cottage."

I troubled my fat friend with no more questions.

Returning to the house, and making polite apologies, I discovered one more among Mrs. Roylake's many accomplishments. She possessed two smiles--a sugary smile (with which I was already acquainted), and an acid smile which she apparently reserved for special occasions. It made its appearance when I led her to the luncheon table.

"Don't let me detain you," my stepmother began.

"Won't you give me some luncheon?" I inquired.

"Dear me! hav'n't you lunched already?"

"Where should I lunch, my dear lady?" I thought this would induce the sugary smile to show itself. I was wrong.

"Where?" Mrs. Roylake repeated. "With your friends at the mill of course. Very inhospitable not to offer you lunch. When are we to have flour cheaper?"

I began to get sulky. All I said was: "I don't know."

"Curious!" Mrs. Roylake observed. "You not only don't get luncheon among your friends: you don't even get information. To know a miller, and not to know the price of flour, is ignorance presented in one of its most pitiable aspects. And how is Miss Toller looking? Perfectly charming?"

I was angry by this time. "You have exactly described her," I said. Mrs. Roylake began to get angry, on her side.

"Surely a little coarse and vulgar?" she suggested, reverting to poor Cristel.

"Would you like to judge for yourself?" I asked. "I shall be happy, Mrs. Roylake, to take you to the mill."

My stepmother's knowledge of the world implied considerable acquaintance--how obtained I do not pretend to know--with the characters of men. Discovering that she was in danger of overstepping the limits of my patience, she drew back with a skill which performed the retrograde movement without permitting it to betray itself.

"We have carried our little joke, my dear Gerard, far enough," she said.

"I fancy your residence in Germany has rather blunted your native English sense of humor. You don't suppose, I hope and trust, that I am so insensible to our relative positions as to think of interfering in your choice of friends or associates. If you are not aware of it already, let me remind you that this house is now yours; not mine. I live here--gladly live here, my dear boy--by your indulgence; fortified (I am sure) by your regard for your excellent father's wishes as expressed in his will--"

I stopped her there. She had got the better of me with a dexterity which I see

now, but which I was not clever enough to appreciate at time. In a burst of generosity, I entreated her to consider Trimley Deen as her house, and never to mention such a shocking subject as my authority again.

After this, need I say that the most amiable of women took me out in her carriage, and introduced me to some of the best society in England?

If I could only remember all the new friends to whom I made my bow, as well as the conversation in which we indulged, I might write a few pages here, interesting in a high degree to persons with well-balanced minds.

Unhappily, so far as my own impressions were concerned, the best society proved to be always the same society. Every house that we entered was in the same beautiful order; every mistress of the house was dressed in the best taste; every master of the house had the same sensible remarks to make on conservative prospects at the coming election; every young gentleman wanted to know how my game preserves had been looked after in my absence; every young lady said: "How nice it must have been, Mr. Roylake, to find yourself again at Trimley Deen." Has anybody ever suffered as I suffered, during that round of visits, under the desire to yawn and the effort to suppress it? Is there any sympathetic soul who can understand me, when I say that I would have given a hundred pounds for a gag, and for the privilege of using it to stop my stepmother's pleasant chat in the carriage, following on our friends' pleasant chat in the drawing-room? Finally, when we got home, and when Mrs. Roylake kindly promised me another round of visits, and more charming people in the neighborhood to see, will any good Christian forgive me, if I own that I took advantage of being alone to damn the neighborhood, and to feel relieved by it?

Now that I was no longer obliged to listen to polite strangers, my thoughts reverted to Cristel, and to the suspicions that she had roused in me.

Recovering its influence, in the interval that had passed, my better nature sharply reproached me. I had presumed to blame Cristel, with nothing to justify me but my own perverted view of her motives. How did I know that she had not opened that door, and gone to that side of the cottage, with a perfectly harmless object in view? I was really anxious, if I could find the right way to do it, to make amends for an act of injustice of which I felt ashamed. If I am asked why I was as eager to set myself right with a miller's daughter, as if she had been a young lady in the higher ranks of life, I can only reply that no such view of our relative positions as this ever occurred to me. A strange state of mind, no doubt. What was the right explanation of it?

The right explanation presented itself at a later time, when troubles had

quicken my intellect, and when I could estimate the powerful influence of circumstances at its true value.

I had returned to England, to fill a prominent place in my own little world, without relations whom I loved, without friends whose society I could enjoy. Hopeful, ardent, eager for the enjoyment of life, I had brought with me to my own country the social habits and the free range of thought of a foreign University; and, as a matter of course, I failed to feel any sympathy with the society--new to me--in which my lot had been cast. Beset by these disadvantages, I had met with a girl, possessed of remarkable personal attractions, and associated with my earliest remembrances of my own happy life and of my mother's kindness--a girl, at once simple and spirited; unspoilt by the world and the world's ways, and placed in a position of peril due to the power of her own beauty, which added to the interest that she naturally inspired. Estimating these circumstances at their true value, did a state of mind which rendered me insensible to the distinctions that separate the classes in England, stand in any need of explanation? As I thought--and think still--it explained itself.

My stepmother and I parted on the garden terrace, which ran along the pleasant southern side of the house.

The habits that I had contracted, among my student friends in Germany, made tobacco and beer necessary accompaniments to the process of thinking. I had nearly exhausted my cigar, my jug, and my thoughts, when I saw two men approaching me from the end of the terrace.

As they came nearer, I recognized in one of the men my fat domestic in black. He stopped the person who was accompanying him and came on to me by himself.

"Will you see that man, sir, waiting behind me?"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, sir. He says he has got a letter to give you, and he must put it in your own hands. I think myself he's a beggar. He's excessively insolent--he insists on seeing you. Shall I tell him to go?"

The servant evidently expected me to say Yes. He was disappointed; my curiosity was roused; I said I would see the insolent stranger.

As he approached me, the man certainly did not look like a beggar. Poor he

might be, judging by his dress. The upper part of him was clothed in an old shooting jacket of velveteen; his legs presented a pair of trousers, once black, now turning brown with age. Both garments were too long for him, and both were kept scrupulously clean. He was a short man, thickly and strongly made. Impenetrable composure appeared on his ugly face. His eyes were sunk deep in his head; his nose had evidently been broken and not successfully mended; his grey hair, when he took off his hat on addressing me, was cut short, and showed his low forehead and his bull neck. An Englishman of the last generation would, as I have since been informed, have set him down as a retired prize-fighter. Thanks to my ignorance of the pugilistic glories of my native country, I was totally at a loss what to make of him.

"Have I the honor of speaking to Mr. Roylake?" he asked. His quiet steady manner prepossessed me in his favour; it showed no servile reverence for the accident of birth, on the one hand, and no insolent assertion of independence, on the other. When I had told him that my name was Roylake, he searched one of the large pockets of his shooting jacket, produced a letter, and silently offered it to me.

Before I took the letter--seeing that he was a stranger, and that he mentioned no name known to me--I thought it desirable to make some inquiry.

"Is it a letter of your own writing?" I asked.

"No, sir."

"Who sends you with it?"

He was apparently a man of few words. "My master," was the guarded answer that this odd servant returned.

I became as inquisitive as old Toller himself.

"Who is your master?" I went on.

The reply staggered me. Speaking as quietly and respectfully as ever, he said: "I can't tell you, sir."

"Do you mean that you are forbidden to tell me?"

"No, sir."

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that I don't know my master's name."

I instantly took the letter from him, and looked at the address. For once in a way, I had jumped at a conclusion and I had proved to be right. The handwriting on the letter, and the handwriting of the confession which I had read overnight, were one and the same.

"Are you to wait for an answer?" I asked, as I opened the envelope.

"I am to wait, sir, if you tell me to do so."

The letter was a long one. After running my eye over the first sentences, I surprised myself by acting discreetly. "You needn't wait," I said; "I will send a reply." The man of few words raised his shabby hat, turned about in silence, and left me.