

CHAPTER VIII - THE DEAF LODGER

The letter was superscribed: "Private and Confidential." It was written in these words:

"Sir,--You will do me grievous wrong if you suppose that I am trying to force myself on your acquaintance. My object in writing is to prevent you (if I can) from misinterpreting my language and my conduct, on the only two occasions when we happen to have met.

"I am conscious that you must have thought me rude and ungrateful--perhaps even a little mad--when I returned your kindness last night, in honoring me with a visit, by using language which has justified you in treating me as a stranger.

"Fortunately for myself, I gave you my autobiography to read. After what you now know of me, I may hope that your sense of justice will make some allowance for a man, tried (I had almost written, cursed) by such suffering as mine.

"There are other deaf persons, as I have heard, who set me a good example.

"They feel the consolations of religion. Their sweet tempers find relief even under the loss of the most precious of all the senses. They mix with society; submitting to their dreadful isolation, and preserving unimpaired sympathy with their happier fellow-creatures who can hear. I am not one of those persons. With sorrow I say it--I never have submitted, I never can submit, to my hard fate.

"Let me not omit to ask your indulgence for my behavior, when we met at the cottage this morning.

"What unfavorable impression I may have produced on you, I dare not inquire. So little capable am I of concealing the vile feelings which sometimes get the better of me, that Miss Cristel (observe that I mention her with respect) appears to have felt positive alarm, on your account, when she looked at me.

"I may tell you, in confidence, that this charming person came to my side of the cottage, as soon as you had taken your departure, to intercede with me in your favour. 'If your wicked mind is planning to do evil to Mr. Roylake,'

she wrote in my book, 'either you will promise me to give it up, or I will never allow you to see me again; I will even leave home secretly, to be out of your way.' In that strong language she expressed--how shall I refer to it?--shall I say the sisterly interest that she felt in your welfare?"

I laid down the letter for a moment. If I had not already reproached myself for having misjudged Cristel--and if I had not, in that way, done her some little justice in my own better thoughts--I should never have recovered my self-respect after reading the deaf man's letter. The good girl! The dear good girl! Yes: that was how I thought of her, under the windows of my stepmother's boudoir--while Mrs. Roylake, for all I knew to the contrary, might be looking down at me, and when Lady Lena, the noble and beautiful, was coming to dinner!

The letter concluded as follows:

"To return to myself. I gave Miss Cristel the promise on which she had insisted; and then, naturally enough, I inquired into her motive for interfering in your favour.

"She frankly admitted that she was interested in you. First: in grateful remembrance of old times, when you and your mother had been always good to her. Secondly: because she had found you as kind and as friendly as ever, now that you were a man and had become the greatest landowner in the county. There was the explanation I had asked for, at my service. And, on that, she left me.

"Did I believe her when I was meditating on our interview, alone in my room? Or did I suspect you of having robbed me of the only consolation that makes my life endurable?"

"No such unworthy suspicion as this was admitted to my mind. With all my heart, I believe her. And with perfect sincerity, I trust You.

"If your knowledge of me has failed to convince you that there is any such thing as a better side to my nature, you will no doubt conclude that this letter is a trick of mine to throw you off your guard; and you will continue to distrust me as obstinately as ever. In that case, I will merely remind you that my letter is private and confidential, and I will not ask you to send me a reply.

"I remain, Sir, yours as you may receive me, "THE DEAF LODGER

I wonder what another man, in my position, would have done when he had read this letter? Would he have seen in it nothing to justify some respect and some kindly feeling towards the writer? Could he have reconciled it to his conscience to leave the afflicted man who had trusted him without a word of reply?

For my part (do not forget what a young man I was in those days), I made up my mind to reply in the friendliest manner--that is to say, in person.

After consulting my watch, I satisfied myself that I could go to the mill, and get back again, before the hour fixed for our late dinner--supper we should have called it in Germany. For the second time that day, and without any hesitation, I took the road that led to Fordwitch Wood.

Crossing the glade, I encountered a stout young woman, filling a can with water from the spring. She curtseyed on seeing me. I asked if she belonged to the village.

The reply informed me that I had taken another of my servants for a stranger. The stout nymph of the spring was my kitchen-maid; and she was fetching the water which we drank at the house; "and there's no water, sir, like yours for all the country round." Furnished with these stores of information, I went my way, and the kitchen-maid went hers. She spoke, of course, of having seen her new master, on returning to the servants' hall. In this manner, as I afterwards heard, the discovery of me at the spring, and my departure by the path that led to the mill, reached Mrs. Roylake's ears--the medium of information being the lady's own maid. So far, Fordwitch Wood seemed to be a place to avoid, in the interests of my domestic tranquillity.

Arriving at the cottage, I found the Lodger standing by the open window at which I had first seen him.

But on this occasion, his personal appearance had undergone a singular process of transformation. The lower part of his face, from his nostrils to his chin, was hidden by a white handkerchief tied round it. He had removed the stopper from a strangely shaped bottle, and was absorbed in watching some interesting condition in a dusky liquid that it contained. To attract his attention by speaking was of course out of the question; I could only wait until he happened to look my way.

My patience was not severely tried: he soon replaced the stopper in the bottle, and, looking up from it, saw me. With his free hand, he quickly

removed the handkerchief, and spoke.

"Let me ask you to wait in the boat-house," he said; "I will come to you directly." He pointed round the corner of the new cottage; indicating of course the side of it that was farthest from the old building.

Following his directions, I first passed the door that he used in leaving or returning to his room, and then gained the bank of the river. On my right hand rose the mill building, with its big waterwheel--and, above it, a little higher up the stream, I recognized the boat-house; built out in the water on piles, and approached by a wooden pier.

No structure of this elaborate and expensive sort would have been set up by my father, for the miller's convenience. The boat-house had been built, many years since, by a rich retired tradesman with a mania for aquatic pursuits. Our ugly river had not answered his expectations, and our neighborhood had abstained from returning his visits. When he left us, with his wherries and canoes and outriggers, the miller took possession of the abandoned boat-house. "It's the sort of fixture that don't pay nohow," old Toller remarked. "Suppose you remove it--there's a waste of money. Suppose you knock it to pieces--is it worth a rich gentleman's while to sell a cartload of firewood?" Neither of these alternatives having been adopted, and nobody wanting an empty boat-house, the clumsy mill boat, hitherto tied to a stake, and exposed to the worst that the weather could do to injure it, was now snugly sheltered under a roof, with empty lockers (once occupied by aquatic luxuries) gaping on either side of it.

I was looking out on the river, and thinking of all that had happened since my first meeting with Cristel by moonlight, when the voice of the deaf man made itself discordantly heard, behind me.

"Let me apologize for receiving you here," he said; "and let me trouble you with one more of my confessions. Like other unfortunate deaf people, I suffer from nervous irritability. Sometimes, we restlessly change our places of abode. And sometimes, as in my case, we take refuge in variety of occupation. You remember the ideal narratives of crime which I was so fond of writing at one time?"

I gave the affirmative answer, in the usual way.

"Well," he went on, "my literary inventions have ceased to interest me. I have latterly resumed the chemical studies, associated with that happy time in my life when I was entering on the medical profession. Unluckily for you, I

have been trying an experiment to-day, which makes such an abominable smell in my room that I dare not ask you to enter it. The fumes are not only disagreeable, but in some degree dangerous. You saw me at the window, perhaps, with my nose and mouth protected before I opened the bottle?"

I repeated the affirmative sign. He produced his little book of blank leaves, and opened it ready for use.

"May I hope," he said, "that your visit is intended as a favorable reply to my letter?"

I took the pencil, and answered him in these terms:

"Your letter has satisfied me that I was mistaken in treating you like a stranger. I have come here to express my regret at having failed to do you justice. Pray be assured that I believe in your better nature, and that I accept your letter in the spirit in which you have written it."

He read my reply, and suddenly looked at me.

Never had I seen his beautiful eyes so brightly soft, so irresistibly tender, as they appeared now. He held out his hand to me. It is one of my small merits to be (in the popular phrase) as good as my word. I took his hand; well knowing that the action committed me to accepting his friendship.

In relating the events which form this narrative, I look back at the chain, as I add to it link by link--sometimes with surprise, sometimes with interest, and sometimes with the discovery that I have omitted a circumstance which it is necessary to replace. But I search my memory in vain, while I dwell on the lines that I have just written, for a recollection of some attendant event which might have warned me of the peril towards which I was advancing blindfold. My remembrance presents us as standing together with clasped hands; but nothing in the slightest degree ominous is associated with the picture. There was no sinister chill communicated from his hand to mine; no shocking accident happened close by us in the river; not even a passing cloud obscured the sunlight, shining in its gayest glory over our heads.

After having shaken hands, neither he nor I had apparently anything more to say. A little embarrassed, I turned to the boat-house window, and looked out. Trifling as the action was, my companion noticed it.

"Do you like that muddy river?" he asked.

I took the pencil again: "Old associations make even the ugly Loke interesting to me."

He sighed as he read those words. "I wish, Mr. Roylake, I could say the same. Your interesting river frightens me."

It was needless to ask for the pencil again. My puzzled face begged for an explanation.

"When you were in my room," he said, "you may have noticed a second window which looks out on The Loke. I have got into a bad habit of sitting by that window on moonlight nights. I watch the flow of the stream, and it seems to associate itself with the flow of my thoughts. Nothing remarkable, so far--while I am awake. But, later, when I get to sleep, dreams come to me. All of them, sir, without exception connect Cristel with the river. Look at the stealthy current that makes no sound. In my last night's sleep, it made itself heard; it was flowing in my ears with a water-music of its own. No longer my deaf ears; I heard, in my dream, as well as you can hear. Yes; the same water-music, singing over and over again the same horrid song: "Fool, fool, no Cristel for you; bid her good-bye, bid her good-bye." I saw her floating away from me on those hideous waters. The cruel current held me back when I tried to follow her. I struggled and screamed and shivered and cried. I woke up with a start that shook me to pieces, and cursed your interesting river. Don't write to me about it again. Don't look at it again. Why did you bring up the subject? I beg your pardon; I had no right to say that. Let me be polite; let me be hospitable. I beg to invite you to come and see me, when my room is purified from its pestilent smell. I can only offer you a cup of tea. Oh, that river, that river, what devil set me talking about it? I'm not mad, Mr. Roylake; only wretched. When may I expect you? Choose your own evening next week."

Who could help pitying him? Compared with my sound sweet dreamless sleep, what dreadful nights were his!

I accepted his invitation as a matter of course. When we had completed our arrangements, it was time for me to think of returning to Trimley Deen. Moving towards the door, I accidentally directed his attention to the pier by which the boat-house was approached.

His face instantly reminded me of Cristel's description of him, when he was strongly and evilly moved. I too saw "his beautiful eyes tell tales, and his pretty complexion change to a color which turned him into an ugly man." He seized my arm, and pointed to the pier, at the end of it which joined the

river-bank. "Pray accept my excuses; I can't answer for my temper if that wretch comes near me." With this apology he hurried away; and sly Giles Toller, having patiently waited until the coast was clear, accosted me with his best bow, and said: "Beautiful weather, isn't it, sir?"

I had no remarks to make on the weather; but I was interested in discovering what had happened at the cottage.

"You have mortally offended the gentleman who has just left me," I said. "What have you done?"

Mr. Toller had purposes of his own to serve, and kept those purposes (as usual) exclusively in view: he presented deaf ears to me now!

"I don't think I ever remember such wonderful weather, sir, in my time; and I'm an old fellow, as I needn't tell you. Being at the mill just now, I saw you in the boat-house, and came to pay my respects. Would you be so good as to look at this slip of paper, Mr. Gerard? If you will kindly ask what it is, you will in a manner help me."

I knew but too well what it was. "The repairs again!" I said resignedly. "Hand it over, you obstinate old man."

Mr. Toller was so tickled by my discovery, and by the cheering prospect consequent on seeing his list of repairs safe in my pocket, that he laughed until I really thought he would shake his lean little body to pieces. By way of bringing his merriment to an end, I assumed a look of severity, and insisted on knowing how he had offended the Lodger. My venerable tenant, trembling for his repairs, drifted into a question of personal experience, and seemed to anticipate that it might improve my temper.

"When you have a woman about the house, Mr. Gerard, you may have noticed that she's an everlasting expense to you--especially when she's a young one. Isn't that so?"

I inquired if he applied this remark to his daughter.

"That's it, sir; I'm talking of Cristy. When her back's up, there isn't her equal in England for strong language. My gentleman has misbehaved himself in some way (since you were with us this morning, sir); how, I don't quite understand. All I can tell you is, I've given him notice to quit. A clear loss of money to me every week, and Cristy's responsible for it. Yes, sir! I've been worked up to it by my girl. If Cristy's mother had asked me to get rid of a

paying lodger, I should have told her to go to---- we won't say where, sir; you'll know where when you're married yourself. The upshot of it is that I have offended my gentleman, for the sake of my girl: which last is a luxury I can't afford, unless I let the rooms again. If you hear of a tenant, say what a good landlord I am, and what sweet pretty rooms I've got to let."

I led the way to the bank of the river, before Mr. Toller could make any more requests.

We passed the side of the old cottage. The door was open; and I saw Cristel employed in the kitchen.

My watch told me that I had still two or three minutes to spare; and my guilty remembrance of the message that I had pinned to the door suggested an immediate expression of regret. I approached Cristel with a petition for pardon on my lips. She looked distrustfully at the door of communication with the new cottage, as if she expected to see it opened from the other side.

"Not now!" she said--and went on sadly with her household work.

"May I see you to-morrow?" I asked.

"It had better not be here, sir," was the only reply she made.

I offered to meet her at any other place which she might appoint. Cristel persisted in leaving it to me; she spoke absently, as if she was thinking all the time of something else. I could propose no better place, at the moment, than the spring in Fordwitch Wood. She consented to meet me there, on the next day, if seven o'clock in the morning would not be too early for me. My German habits had accustomed me to early rising. She heard me tell her this--and looked again at the Lodger's door--and abruptly wished me good evening.

Her polite father was shocked at this unceremonious method of dismissing the great man, who had only to say the word and stop the repairs. "Where are your manners, Cristy?" he asked indignantly. Before he could say another word, I was out of the cottage.

As I passed the spring on my way home, I thought of my two appointments. On that evening, my meeting with the daughter of the lord. On the next morning, my meeting with the daughter of the miller. Lady Lena at dinner; Cristel before breakfast. If Mrs. Roylake found out that social contrast, what would she say? I was a merry young fool; I burst out laughing.