

CHAPTER IX - MRS ROYLAKE'S GAME: FIRST MOVE

The dinner at Trimley Deen has left in my memory little that I can distinctly recall. Only a faintly-marked vision of Lady Lena rewards me for doing my best to remember her. A tall slim graceful person, dressed in white with a simplicity which is the perfection of art, presents to my admiration gentle blue eyes, a pale complexion delicately touched with color, a well-carried head crowned by lovely light brown hair. So far, time helps the reviving past to come to life again--and permits nothing more. I cannot say that I now remember the voice once so musical in my ears, or that I am able to repeat the easy unaffected talk which once interested me, or that I see again (in my thoughts) the perfect charm of manner which delighted everybody, not forgetting myself. My unworthy self, I might say; for I was the only young man, honored by an introduction to Lady Lena, who stopped at admiration, and never made use of opportunity to approach love.

On the other hand, I distinctly recollect what my stepmother and I said to each other when our guests had wished us good-night.

If I am asked to account for this, I can only reply that the conspiracy to lead me into proposing marriage to Lady Lena first showed itself on the occasion to which I have referred. In her eagerness to reach her ends, Mrs. Roylake failed to handle the fine weapons of deception as cleverly as usual. Even I, with my small experience of worldly women, discovered the object that she had in view.

I had retired to the seclusion of the smoking-room, and was already encircled by the clouds which float on the heaven of tobacco, when I heard a rustling of silk outside, and saw the smile of Mrs. Roylake beginning to captivate me through the open door.

"If you throw away your cigar," cried this amiable person, "you will drive me out of the room. Dear Gerard, I like your smoke."

My fat man in black, coming in at the moment to bring me some soda water, looked at his mistress with an expression of amazement and horror, which told me that he now saw Mrs. Roylake in the smoking-room for the first time. I involved myself in new clouds. If I suffocated my stepmother, her own polite equivocation would justify the act. She settled herself opposite to me in an armchair. The agonies that she must have suffered, in preventing her face from expressing emotions of disgust, I dare not attempt to imagine,

even at this distance of time.

"Now, Gerard, let us talk about the two ladies. What do you think of my friend, Lady Rachel?"

"I don't like your friend, Lady Rachel."

"You astonish me. Why?"

"I think she's a false woman."

"Heavens, what a thing to say of a lady--and that lady my friend! Her politics may very reasonably have surprised you. But surely her vigorous intellect ought to have challenged your admiration; you can't deny that?"

I was not clever enough to be able to deny it. But I was bold enough to say that Lady Rachel seemed to me to be a woman who talked for the sake of producing effect. She expressed opinions, as I ventured to declare, which (in her position) I did not believe she could honestly entertain.

Mrs. Roylake entered a vigorous protest. She assured me that I was completely mistaken. "Lady Rachel," she said, "is the most perfectly candid person in the whole circle of my acquaintance."

With the best intentions on my part, this was more than I could patiently endure.

"Isn't she the daughter of a nobleman?" I asked. "Doesn't she owe her rank and her splendor, and the respect that people show to her, to the fortunate circumstance of her birth? And yet she talks as if she was a red republican. You yourself heard her say that she was a thorough Radical, and hoped she might live to see the House of Lords abolished. Oh, I heard her! And what is more, I listened so attentively to such sentiments as these, from a lady with a title, that I can repeat, word for word, what she said next. "We hav'n't deserved our own titles; we hav'n't earned our own incomes; and we legislate for the country, without having been trusted by the country. In short, we are a set of impostors, and the time is coming when we shall be found out." Do you believe she really meant that? All as false as false can be--that's what I say of it."

There I stopped, privately admiring my own eloquence.

Quite a mistake on my part; my eloquence had done just what Mrs. Roylake

wished me to do. She wanted an opportunity of dropping Lady Rachel, and taking up Lady Lena, with a producible reason which forbade the imputation of a personal motive on her part. I had furnished her with the reason. Thus far, I cannot deny it, my stepmother was equal to herself.

"Really, Gerard, you are so violent in your opinions that I am sorry I spoke of Lady Rachel. Shall I find you equally prejudiced, and equally severe, if I change the subject to dear Lady Lena? Oh, don't say you think She is false, too!"

Here Mrs. Roylake made her first mistake. She over-acted her part; and, when it was too late, she arrived, I suspect, at that conclusion herself.

"If you hav'n't seen that I sincerely admire Lady Lena," I said, as smartly as I could, "the sooner you disfigure yourself with a pair of spectacles, my dear lady, the better. She is very pretty, perfectly unaffected, and, if I may presume to judge, delightfully well-bred and well-dressed."

My stepmother's face actually brightened with pleasure. Reflecting on it now, I am strongly disposed to think that she had not allowed her feelings to express themselves so unreservedly, since the time when she was a girl. After all, Mrs. Roylake was paying her step-son a compliment in trying to entrap him into a splendid marriage. It was my duty to think kindly of my ambitious relative. I did my duty.

"You really like my sweet Lena?" she said. "I am so glad. What were you talking about, with her? She made you exert all your powers of conversation, and she seemed to be deeply interested."

More over-acting! Another mistake! And I could see through it! With no English subject which we could discuss in common, Lady Lena's ready tact alluded to my past life. Mrs. Roylake had told her that I was educated at a German University. She had heard vaguely of students with long hair, who wore Hessian boots, and fought duels; and she appealed to my experience to tell her something more. I did my best to interest her, with very indifferent success, and was undeservedly rewarded by a patient attention, which presented the unselfish refinements of courtesy under their most perfect form.

But let me do my step-mother justice. She contrived to bend me to her will, before she left the smoking-room--I am sure I don't know how.

"You have entertained the charming daughters at dinner," she reminded me;

"and the least you can do, after that, is to pay your respects to their noble father. In your position, my dear boy, you cannot neglect our English customs without producing the worst possible impression."

In two words, I found myself pledged, under pretence of visiting my lord, to improve my acquaintance with Lady Lena on the next day.

"And pray be careful," Mrs. Roylake proceeded, still braving the atmosphere of the smoking-room, "not to look surprised if you find Lord Uppercliff's house presenting rather a poor appearance just now."

I was dying for another cigar, and I entirely misunderstood the words of warning which had just been addressed to me. I tried to bring our interview to a close by making a generous proposal.

"Does he want money?" I asked. "I'll lend him some with the greatest pleasure."

Mrs. Roylake's horror expressed itself in a little thin wiry scream.

"Oh, Gerard, what people you must have lived among! What shocking ignorance of my lord's enormous fortune! He and his family have only just returned to their country seat, after a long absence--parliament you know, and foreign baths, and so on--and their English establishment is not yet complete. I don't know what mistake you may not make next. Do listen to what I want to say to you."

Listening, I must acknowledge, with an absent mind, my attention was suddenly seized by Mrs. Roylake--without the slightest conscious effort towards that end, on the part of the lady herself.

The first words that startled me, in her flow of speech, were these:

"And I must not forget to tell you of poor Lord Uppercliff's misfortune. He had a fall, some time since, and broke his leg. As I think, he was so unwise as to let a plausible young surgeon set the broken bone. Anyway, the end of it is that my lord slightly limps when he walks; and pray remember that he hates to see it noticed. Lady Rachel doesn't agree with me in attributing her father's lameness to his surgeon's want of experience. Between ourselves, the man seems to have interested her. Very handsome, very clever, very agreeable, and the manners of a gentleman. When his medical services came to an end, he was quite an acquisition at their parties in London--with one drawback: he mysteriously disappeared, and has never been heard of since.

Ask Lady Lena about it. She will give you all the details, without her elder sister's bias in favour of the handsome young man. What a pretty compliment you are paying me! You really look as if I had interested you."

Knowing what I knew, I was unquestionably interested.

Although the recent return of Lord Uppercliff and his daughter to their country home had, as yet, allowed no opportunity of a meeting, out of doors, between the deaf Lodger and the friends whom he had lost sight of--no doubt at the time of his serious illness--still, the inevitable discovery might happen on any day. What result would follow? And what would be the effect on Lady Rachel, when she met with the fascinating young surgeon, and discovered the terrible change in him?