

## **CHAPTER X - WARNED!**

We were alone in the glade, by the side of the spring. At that early hour there were no interruptions to dread; but Cristel was ill at ease. She seemed to be eager to get back to the cottage as soon as possible.

"Father tells me," she began abruptly, "he saw you at the boathouse. And it seemed to him, that you were behaving yourself like a friend to that terrible man."

I reminded her of my having expressed the fear that we had been needlessly hard on him; and, I added that he had written a letter which confirmed me in that opinion. She looked, not only disappointed, but even alarmed.

"I had hoped," she said sadly, "that father was mistaken."

"So little mistaken," I assured her, "that I am going to drink tea with the man who seems to frighten you. I hope he will ask you to meet--"

She recoiled from the bare idea of an invitation.

"Will you hear what I want to tell you?" she said earnestly. "You may alter your opinion if you know what I have been foolish enough to do, when you saw me go to the other side of the cottage."

"Dear Cristel, I know what I owe to your kind interest in me on that occasion!" Before I could say a word of apology for having wronged her by my suspicions, she insisted on an explanation of what I had just said.

"Did he mention it in his letter?" she asked.

I owned that I had obtained my information in this way. And I declared that he had expressed his admiration of her, and his belief in her, in terms which made it a subject of regret to me not to be able to show what he had written.

Cristel forgot her fear of our being interrupted. Her dismay expressed itself in a cry that rang through the wood.

"You even believe in his letter?" she exclaimed. "Mr. Gerard! His writing in that way to You about Me is a proof that he lies; and I'll make you see it. If you were anybody else but yourself, I would leave you to your fate. Yes, your

fate," she passionately repeated. "Oh, forgive me, sir! I'm behaving disrespectfully; I beg your pardon. No, no; let me go on. When I spoke to him in your best interests (as I did most truly believe) I never suspected what mischief I had done, till I looked in his face. Then, I saw how he hated you, and how vilely he was thinking in secret of me--"

Pure delusion! How could I allow it to go on? I interrupted her.

"My dear, you have quite mistaken him. As I have already said, he sincerely respects you--and he owns that he misjudged me when he and I first met."

"What! Is that in his letter too? It's worse even than I feared. Again, and again, and again, I say it"--she stamped on the ground in the fervor of her conviction--"he hates you with the hatred that never forgives and never forgets. You think him a good man. Do you suppose I would have begged and prayed of my father to send him away, without having reasons that justified me? Mr. Gerard, you force me to tell you what my unlucky visit did put into his head. Yes, he does believe--believes firmly--that you have forgotten what is due to your rank; that I have been wicked enough to forget it too; and that you are going to take me away from him. Say what he may, and write what he may, he is deceiving you for his own wicked ends. If you go to drink tea with him, God only knows what cause you may have to regret it. Forgive me for being so violent, sir; I have done now. You have made me very wretched, but you are too good and kind to mean it. Good-bye."

I took her hand, I pressed it tenderly; I was touched, deeply touched.

No! let me write honestly. Her eyes betrayed her, her voice betrayed her, while she said her parting words. What I saw, what I heard, was no longer within the limits of doubt. The sweet girl's interest in my welfare was not the merely friendly interest which she herself believed it to be. And I said just now that I was "touched." Cant! Lies! I loved her more dearly than I had ever loved her yet. There is the truth--stripped of poor prudery, and the mean fear of being called Vain!

What I might have said to her, if the opportunity had offered itself, may be easily imagined. Before I could open my lips, a man appeared on the path which led from the mill to the spring--the man whom Cristel had secretly suspected of a design to follow her.

I felt her hand trembling in my hand, and gave it a little encouraging squeeze. "Let us judge him," I suggested, "by what he says and does, on finding us together."

Without an attempt at concealment on his part, he advanced towards us briskly, smiling and waving his hand.

"What, Mr. Roylake, you have already found out the virtues of your wonderful spring, and you are drinking the water before breakfast! I have often done it myself when I was not too lazy to get up. And this charming girl," he went on, turning to Cristel, "has she been trying the virtues of the spring by your advice? She won't listen to me, or I should have recommended it long since. See me set the example."

He took a silver mug from his pocket, and descended the few steps that led to the spring. Allowing for the dreadful deaf monotony in his voice, no man could have been more innocently joyous and agreeable. While he was taking his morning draught, I appealed to Cristel's better sense.

"Is this the hypocrite, who is deceiving me for his own wicked ends?" I asked. "Does he look like the jealous monster who is plotting my destruction, and who will succeed if I am fool enough to accept his invitation?"

Poor dear, she was as obstinate as ever! "Think over what I have said to you-think, for your own sake," was her only reply.

"And a little for your sake?" I ventured to add.

She ran away from me, taking the path which would lead her home again. The deaf man and I were left together. He looked after her until she was out of sight. Then he produced his book of blank leaves. But, instead of handing it to me as usual, he began to write in it himself.

"I have something to say to you," he explained.

It was only possible, while the book was in his possession, to remind him that I could hear, and that he could speak, by using the language of signs. I touched my lips, and pointed to him; I touched my ear, and pointed to myself.

"Yes," he said, understanding me with his customary quickness; "but I want you to remember as well as to hear. When I have filled this leaf, I shall beg you to keep it about you, and to refer to it from time to time."

He wrote on steadily, until he had filled both sides of the slip of paper.

"Quite a little letter," he said. "Pray read it."

This is what I read:

"You must have seen for yourself that I was incapable of insulting you and Miss Cristel by an outbreak of jealousy, when I found you together just now. Only remember that we all have our weaknesses, and that it is my hard lot to be in a state of contest with the inherited evil which is the calamity of my life. With your encouragement, I may resist temptation in the future, and keep the better part of me in authority over my thoughts and actions. But, be on your guard, and advise Miss Cristel to be on her guard, against false appearances. As we all know, they lie like truth. Consider me. Pity me. I ask no more."

Straightforward and manly and modest--I appeal to any unprejudiced mind whether I should not have committed a mean action, if I had placed an evil construction on this?

"Am I understood?" he asked.

I signed to him to give me his book, and relieved him of anxiety in these words:

"If I had failed to understand you, I should have felt ashamed of myself. May I show what you have written to Cristel?"

He smiled, more sweetly and pleasantly than I had seen him smile yet.

"If you wish it," he answered. "I leave it entirely to you. Thank you--and good morning."

Having advanced a few steps on his way to the cottage, he paused, and reminded me of the tea-drinking: "Don't forget to-morrow evening, at seven o'clock."