

CHAPTER XI - WARNED AGAIN!

The breakfast hour had not yet arrived when I got home. I went into the garden to refresh my eyes--a little weary of the solemn uniformity of color in Fordwitch Wood--by looking at the flowers.

Reaching the terrace, in the first place, I heard below me a man's voice, speaking in tones of angry authority, and using language which expressed an intention of turning somebody out of the garden. I at once descended the steps which led to the flower-beds. The man in authority proved to be one of my gardeners; and the man threatened with instant expulsion was the oddly-dressed servant of the friend whom I had just left.

The poor fellow's ugly face presented a picture of shame and contrition, the moment I showed myself. He piteously entreated me to look over it, and to forgive him.

"Wait a little," I said. "Let me see if I have anything to forgive." I turned to the gardener. "What is your complaint of this man?"

"He's a trespasser on your grounds, sir. And, his impudence, to say the least of it, is such as I never met with before."

"What harm has he done?"

"Harm, sir?"

"Yes--harm. Has he been picking the flowers?"

The gardener looked round him, longing to refer me to the necessary evidence, and failing to discover it anywhere. The wretched trespasser took heart of grace, and said a word in his own defence.

"Nobody ever knew me to misbehave myself in a gentleman's garden," he said; "I own, sir, to having taken a peep at the flowers, over the wall."

"And they tempted you to look a little closer at them?"

"That's the truth, sir."

"So you are fond of flowers?"

"Yes, sir. I once failed in business as a nurseryman--but I don't blame the flowers."

The delightful simplicity of this was lost on the gardener. I heard the brute mutter to himself: "Gammon!" For once I asserted my authority over my servant.

"Understand this," I said to him: "I don't confine the enjoyment of my garden to myself and my friends. Any well-behaved persons are welcome to come here and look at the flowers. Remember that. Now you may go."

Having issued these instructions, I next addressed myself to my friend in the shabby shooting jacket; telling him to roam wherever he liked, and to stay as long as he pleased. Instead of thanking me and using his liberty, he hesitated, and looked thoroughly ill at ease.

"What's the matter now?" I asked.

"I'm afraid you don't know, sir, who it is you are so kind to. I've been something else in my time, besides a nurseryman."

"What have you been?"

"A prize-fighter."

If he expected me to exhibit indignation or contempt, he was disappointed. My ignorance treated him as civilly as ever.

"What is a prize-fighter?" I inquired.

The unfortunate pugilist looked at me in speechless bewilderment. I told him that I had been brought up among foreigners, and that I had never even seen an English newspaper for the last ten years. This explanation seemed to encourage the man of few words: it set him talking freely at last. He delivered a treatise on the art of prizefighting, and he did something else which I found more amusing--he told me his name. To my small sense of humor his name, so to speak, completed this delightfully odd man: it was Gloody. As to the list of his misfortunes, the endless length of it became so unendurably droll, that we both indulged in unfeeling fits of laughter over the sorrows of Gloody. The first lucky accident of the poor fellow's life had been, literally, the discovery of him by his present master.

This event interested me. I said I should like to hear how it had happened.

Gloody modestly described himself as "one of the starving lot, sir, that looks out for small errands. I got my first dinner for three days, by carrying a gentleman's portmanteau for him. And he, if you please, was afterwards my master. He lived alone. Bless you, he was as deaf then as he is now. He says to me, 'If you bawl in my ears, I'll knock you down.' I thought to myself, you wouldn't say that, master, if you knew how I was employed twenty years ago. He took me into his service, sir, because I was ugly. 'I'm so handsome myself;' he says, 'I want a contrast of something ugly about me.' You may have noticed that he's a bitter one--and bitterly enough he sometimes behaved to me. But there's a good side to him. He gives me his old clothes, and sometimes he speaks almost as kindly to me as you do. But for him, I believe I should have perished of starvation--"

He suddenly checked himself. Whether he was afraid of wearying me, or whether some painful recollection had occurred to him, it was of course impossible to say.

The ugly face, to which he owed his first poor little morsel of prosperity, became overclouded by care and doubt. Bursting into expressions of gratitude which I had certainly not deserved--expressions, so evidently sincere, that they bore witness to constant ill-usage suffered in the course of his hard life--he left me with a headlong haste of movement, driven away as I fancied by an unquiet mind.

I watched him retreating along the path, and saw him stop abruptly, still with his back to me. His deep strong voice travelled farther than he supposed. I heard him say to himself: "What an infernal rascal I am!" He waited a little, and turned my way again. Slowly and reluctantly, he came back to me. As he approached I saw the man, who had lived by the public exhibition of his courage, looking at me with fear plainly visible in the change of his color, and the expression of his face.

"Anything wrong?" I inquired.

"Nothing wrong, sir. Might I be so bold as to ask--"

We waited a little; I gave him time to collect his thoughts. Perhaps the silence confused him. Anyhow, I was obliged to help him to get on.

"What do you wish to ask of me?" I said.

"I wished to speak, sir--"

He stopped again.

"About what?" I asked.

"About to-morrow evening."

"Well?"

He burst out with it, at last. "Are you coming to drink tea with my master?"

"Of course, I am coming! Mr. Gloody, do you know that you rather surprise me?"

"I hope no offence, sir."

"Nonsense! It seems odd, my good fellow, that your master shouldn't have told you I was coming to drink tea with him. Isn't it your business to get the things ready?"

He shifted from one foot to another, and looked as if he wished himself out of my way. At a later time of my life, I have observed that these are signs by which an honest man is apt to confess that he has told, or is going to tell, a lie. As it was, I only noticed that he answered confusedly.

"I can't quite say, Mr. Roylake, that my master didn't mention the thing to me."

"But you failed to understand him--is that it?"

"Well, sir, if I want to ask him anything I have to write it. I'm slow at writing, and bad at writing, and he isn't always patient. However, as you reminded me just now, I have got to get the things ready. To cut it short, perhaps I might say that I didn't quite expect the tea-party would come off."

"Why shouldn't it come off?"

"Well, sir, you might have some other engagement."

Was this a hint? or only an excuse? In either case it was high time, if he still refused to speak out, that I should set him the example.

"You have given me some curious information," I said, "on the subject of fighting with the fists; and you have made me understand the difference between 'fair hitting' and 'foul hitting'. Are you hitting fair now? Very likely I am mistaken--but you seem to me to be trying to prevent my accepting your master's invitation."

He pulled off his hat in a hurry.

"I beg your pardon, sir; I won't detain you any longer. If you will allow me, I'll take my leave."

"Don't go, Mr. Gloody, without telling me whether I am right or wrong. Is there really some objection to my coming to tea tomorrow?"

"Quite a mistake, sir," he said, still in a hurry. "I've led you wrong without meaning it--being an ignorant man, and not knowing how to express myself. Don't think me ungrateful, Mr. Roylake! After your kindness to me, I'd go through fire and water for you--I would!"

His sunken eyes moistened, his big voice faltered. I let him leave me, in mercy to the strong feeling which I had innocently roused. But I shook hands with him first. Yielding to one of my headlong impulses? Yes. And doing a very indiscreet thing? Wait a little--and we shall see.