

## **CHAPTER XII - WARNED FOR THE LAST TIME!**

My loyalty towards the afflicted man, whose friendly advances I had seen good reason to return, was in no sense shaken. His undeserved misfortunes, his manly appeal to me at the spring, his hopeless attachment to the beautiful girl whose aversion towards him I had unhappily encouraged, all pleaded with me in his favour. I had accepted his invitation; and I had no other engagement to claim me: it would have been an act of meanness amounting to a confession of fear, if I had sent an excuse. Still, while Cristel's entreaties and Cristel's influence had failed to shake me, Gloody's strange language and Gloody's incomprehensible conduct had troubled my mind. I felt vaguely uneasy; irritated by my own depression of spirits. If I had been a philosopher, I should have recognized the symptoms of a very common attack of a very widely-spread moral malady. The meanest of all human infirmities is also the most universal; and the name of it is Self-esteem.

It is perhaps only right to add that my patience had been tried by the progress of domestic events, which affected Lady Lena and myself--viewed as victims.

Calling, with my stepmother, at Lord Uppercliff's house later in the day, I perceived that Lady Rachel and Mrs. Roylake found (or made) an opportunity of talking together confidentially in a corner; and, once or twice, I caught them looking at Lady Lena and at me. Even Lord Uppercliff (perhaps not yet taken into their confidence) noticed the proceedings of the two ladies, and seemed to be at a loss to understand them.

When Mrs. Roylake and I were together again, on our way home, I was prepared to hear the praise of Lady Lena, followed by a delicate examination into the state of my heart. Neither of these anticipations was realized. Once more, my clever stepmother had puzzled me.

Mrs. Roylake talked as fluently as ever; exhausting one common-place subject after another, without the slightest allusion to my lord's daughter, to my matrimonial prospects, or to my visits at the mill. I was secretly annoyed, feeling that my stepmother's singular indifference to domestic interests of paramount importance, at other times, must have some object in view, entirely beyond the reach of my penetration. If I had dared to commit such an act of rudeness, I should have jumped out of the carriage, and have told Mrs. Roylake that I meant to walk home.

The day was Sunday. I loitered about the garden, listening to the distant church-bell ringing for the afternoon service. Without any cause that I knew of to account for it, I was so restless that nothing I could do attracted me or quieted me.

Returning to the house, I tried to occupy myself with my collection of insects, sadly neglected of late. Useless! My own moths failed to interest me.

I went back to the garden. Passing the open window of one of the lower rooms which looked out on the terrace, I saw Mrs. Roylake reading a book in sad-colored binding. She was yawning over it fearfully, when she discovered that I was looking at her. Equal to any emergency, this remarkable woman instantly handed to me a second and similar volume. "The most precious sermons, Gerard, that have been written in our time." I looked at the book; I opened the book; I recovered my presence of mind, and handed it back. If a female humbug was on one side of the window, a male humbug was on the other. "Please keep it for me till the evening," I said; "I am going for a walk."

Which way did I turn my steps?

Men will wonder what possessed me--women will think it a proceeding that did me credit--I took the familiar road which led to the gloomy wood and the guilty river. The longing in me to see Cristel again, was more than I could resist. Not because I was in love with her; only because I had left her in distress.

Beyond the spring, and within a short distance of the river, I saw a lady advancing towards me on the path which led from the mill.

Brisk, smiling, tripping along like a young girl, behold the mock-republican, known in our neighborhood as Lady Rachel! She held out both hands to me. But for her petticoats, I should have thought I had met with a jolly young man.

"I have been wandering in your glorious wood, Mr. Roylake. Anything to escape the respectable classes on Sunday, patronizing piety on the way to afternoon church. I must positively make a sketch of the cottage by the mill--I mean, of course, the picturesque side of it. That fine girl of Toller's was standing at the door. She is really handsomer than ever. Are you going to see her, you wicked man? Which do you admire--that gypsy complexion, or Lena's lovely skin? Both, I have no doubt, at your age. Good-bye."

When we had left each other, I thought of the absent Captain in the Navy who was Lady Rachel's husband. He was a perfect stranger--but I put myself in his place, and felt that I too should have gone to sea.

Old Toller was alone in his kitchen, evidently annoyed and angry.

"We are all at sixes and sevens, Mr. Gerard. I've had another row with that deaf-devil--my new name for him, and I think it's rather clever. He swears, sir, that he won't go at the end of his week's notice. Says, if I think I'm likely to get rid of him before he has married Cristy, I'm mistaken. Threatens, if any man attempts to take her away, he'll shoot her, and shoot the man, and shoot himself. Aha! old as I am, if he believes he's going to have it all his own way, he's mistaken. I'll be even with him. You mark my words: I'll be even with him."

That old Toller--the most exasperating of men, judged by a quick temper--had irritated my friend into speaking rashly was plain enough. Nevertheless, I felt some anxiety (jealous anxiety, I am afraid) about Cristel. After looking round the kitchen again, I asked where she was.

"Sitting forlorn in her bedroom, crying," her father told me. "I went out for a walk by the river, and I sat down, and (being Sunday) I fell asleep. When I woke, and got home again just now, that was how I found her. I don't like to hear my girl crying; she's as good as gold and better. No, sir; our deaf-devil is not to blame for this. He has given Cristy no reason to complain of him. She says so herself--and she never told a lie yet."

"But, Mr. Toller," I objected, "something must have happened to distress her. Has she not told you what it is?"

"Not she! Obstinate about it. Leaves me to guess. It's clear to my mind, Mr. Gerard, that somebody has got at her in my absence, and said something to upset her. You will ask me who the person is. I can't say I have found that out yet."

"But you mean to try?"

"Yes; I mean to try."

He answered me with little of the energy which generally distinguished him. Perhaps he was fatigued, or perhaps he had something else to think of. I offered a suggestion.

"When we are in want of help," I said, "we sometimes find it, nearer than we had ventured to expect--at our own doors."

The ancient miller rose at that hint like a fish at a fly.

"Glody!" he cried.

"Find him at once, Mr. Toller."

He hobbled to the door--and looked round at me. "I've got burdens on my mind," he explained, "or I should have thought of it too." Having done justice to his own abilities, he bustled out. In less than a minute, he was back again in a state of breathless triumph. "Glody has seen the person," he announced; "and (what do you think, sir?) it's a woman!"

I beckoned to Glody, waiting modestly at the door, to come in, and tell me what he had discovered.

"I saw her outside, sir--rapping at the door here, with her parasol." That was the servant's report.

Her parasol? Not being acquainted with the development of dress among female servants in England, I asked if she was a lady. There seemed to be no doubt of it in the man's mind. She was also, as Glody supposed, a person whom he had never seen before.

"How is it you are not sure of that?" I said.

"Well, sir, she was waiting to be let in; and I was behind her, coming out of the wood."

"Who let her in?"

"Miss Cristel." His face brightened with an expression of interest when he mentioned the miller's daughter. He went on with his story without wanting questions to help him. "Miss Cristel looked like a person surprised at seeing a stranger--what I should call a free and easy stranger. She walked in, sir, as if the place belonged to her."

I am not suspicious by nature, as I hope and believe. But I began to be reminded of Lady Rachel already.

"Did you notice the lady's dress?" I asked.

A woman who had seen her would have been able to describe every morsel of her dress from head to foot. The man had only observed her hat; and all he could say was that he thought it "a smartish one."

"Any particular color?" I went on.

"Not that I know of. Dark green, I think."

"Any ornament in it?"

"Yes! A purple feather."

The hat I had seen on the head of that hateful woman was now sufficiently described--for a man. Sly old Toller, leaving Gloody unnoticed, and keeping his eye on me, saw the signs of conviction in my face, and said with his customary audacity: "Who is she?"

I followed, at my humble distance, the example of Sir Walter Scott, when inquisitive people asked him if he was the author of the Waverley Novels. In plain English, I denied all knowledge of the stranger wearing the green hat. But, I was naturally desirous of discovering next what Lady Rachel had said; and I asked to speak with Cristel. Her far-seeing father might or might not have perceived a chance of listening to our conversation. He led me to the door of his daughter's room; and stood close by, when I knocked softly, and begged that she would come out.

The tone of the poor girl's voice--answering, "Forgive me, sir; I can't do it"--convicted the she-socialist (as I thought) of merciless conduct of some sort. Assuming this conclusion to be the right one, I determined, then and there, that Lady Rachel should not pass the doors of Trimley Deen again. If her bosom-friend resented that wise act of severity by leaving the house, I should submit with resignation, and should remember the circumstance with pleasure.

"I am afraid you are ill, Cristel?" was all I could find to say, under the double disadvantage of speaking through a door, and having a father listening at my side.

"Oh no, Mr. Gerard, not ill. A little low in my mind, that's all. I don't mean to be rude, sir--pray be kinder to me than ever! pray let me be!"

I said I would return on the next day; and left the room with a sore heart.

Old Toller highly approved of my conduct. He rubbed his fleshless hands, and whispered: "You'll get it out of Cristy to-morrow, and I'll help you."

I found Gloody waiting for me outside the cottage. He was anxious about Miss Cristel; his only excuse, he told me, being the fear that she might be ill. Having set him at ease, in that particular, I said: "You seem to be interested in Miss Cristel."

His answer raised him a step higher in my estimation.

"How can I help it, sir?"

An odd man, with a personal appearance that might excite a prejudice against him, in some minds. I failed to see it myself in that light. It struck me, as I walked home, that Cristel might have made many a worse friend than the retired prize-fighter.

A change in my manner was of course remarked by Mrs. Roylake's ready observation. I told her that I had been annoyed, and offered no other explanation. Wonderful to relate, she showed no curiosity and no surprise. More wonderful still, at every fair opportunity that offered, she kept out of my way.

My next day's engagement being for seven o'clock in the evening, I put Mrs. Roylake's self-control to a new test. With prefatory excuses, I informed her that I should not be able to dine at home as usual. Impossible as it was that she could have been prepared to hear this, her presence of mind was equal to the occasion. I left the house, followed by my stepmother's best wishes for a pleasant evening.

Hoping to speak with Cristel alone, I had arranged to reach the cottage before seven o'clock.

On the river-margin of the wood, I was confronted by a wild gleam of beauty in the familiar view, for which previous experience had not prepared me. Am I wrong in believing that all scenery, no matter how magnificent or how homely it may be, derives a splendor not its own from favouring conditions of light and shade? Our gloomy trees and our repellent river presented an aspect superbly transfigured, under the shadows of the towering clouds, the fantastic wreaths of the mist, and the lurid reddening of the sun as it stooped to its setting. Lovely interfusions of sobered color rested, faded, returned again, on the upper leaves of the foliage as they lightly moved. The

mist, rolling capriciously over the waters, revealed the grandly deliberate course of the flowing current, while it dimmed the turbid earthy yellow that discolored and degraded the stream under the full glare of day. While my eyes followed the successive transformations of the view, as the hour advanced, tender and solemn influences breathed their balm over my mind. Days, happy days that were past, revived. Again, I walked hand in hand with my mother, among the scenes that were round me, and learnt from her to be grateful for the beauty of the earth, with a heart that felt it. We were tracing our way along our favorite woodland path; and we found a companion of tender years, hiding from us. She showed herself; blushing, hesitating, offering a nosegay of wild flowers. My mother whispered to me--I thanked the little mill-girl, and gave her a kiss. Did I feel the child's breath, in my day-dream, still fluttering on my cheek? Was I conscious of her touch? I started, trembled, returned reluctantly to my present self. A visible hand touched my arm. As I turned suddenly, a living breath played on my face. The child had faded into a vanishing shade: the perfected woman who had grown from her had stolen on me unawares, and was asking me to pardon her. "Mr. Gerard, you were lost in your thoughts; I spoke, and you never heard me."

I looked at her in silence.

Was this the dear Cristel so well known to me? Or was it a mockery of her that had taken her place?

"I hope I have not offended you?" she said.

"You have surprised me," I answered. "Something must have happened, since I saw you last. What is it?"

"Nothing."

I advanced a step, and drew her closer to me. A dark flush discolored her face. An overpowering brilliancy flashed from her eyes; there was an hysterical defiance in her manner. "Are you excited? are you angry? are you trying to startle me by acting a part?" I urged those questions on her, one after another; and I was loudly and confidently answered.

"I dare say I am excited, Mr. Gerard, by the honor that has been done me. You are going to keep your engagement, of course? Well, your friend, your favorite friend, has invited me to meet you. No! that's not quite true. I invited myself--the deaf gentleman submitted."

"Why did you invite yourself?"

"Because a tea-party is not complete without a woman."

Her manner was as strangely altered as her looks. That she was beside herself for the moment, I clearly saw. That she had answered me unreservedly, it was impossible to believe. I began to feel angry, when I ought to have made allowances for her.

"Is this Lady Rachel's doing?" I said.

"What do you know of Lady Rachel, sir?"

"I know that she has visited you, and spoken to you."

"Do you know what she has said?"

"I can guess."

"Mr. Gerard, don't abuse that good and kind lady. She deserves your gratitude as well as mine."

Her manner had become quieter; her face was more composed; her expression almost recovered its natural charm while she spoke of Lady Rachel. I was stupefied.

"Try, sir, to forget it and forgive it," she resumed gently, "if I have misbehaved myself. I don't rightly know what I am saying or doing."

I pointed to the new side of the cottage, behind us.

"Is the cause there?" I asked.

"No! no indeed! I have not seen him; I have not heard from him. His servant often brings me messages. Not one message to-day."

"Have you seen Gloody to-day?"

"Oh, yes! There's one thing, if I may make so bold, I should like to know. Mr. Gloody is as good to me as good can be; we see each other continually, living in the same place. But you are different; and he tells me himself he has only seen you twice. What have you done, Mr. Gerard, to make him like you so well, in that short time?"



I told her that he had been found in my garden, looking at the flowers. "As he had done no harm," I said, "I wouldn't allow the servant to turn him out; and I walked round the flower-beds with him. Little enough to deserve such gratitude as the poor fellow expressed--and felt, I don't doubt it."

I had intended to say no more than this. But the remembrance of Gloody's mysterious prevarication, and of the uneasiness which I had undoubtedly felt when I thought of it afterwards, led me (I cannot pretend to say how) into associating Cristel's agitation with something which this man might have said to her. I was on the point of putting the question, when she held up her hand, and said, "Hush!"

The wind was blowing towards us from the river-side village, to which I have already alluded. I am not sure whether I have mentioned that the name of the place was Kylam. It was situated behind a promontory of the river-bank, clothed thickly with trees, and was not visible from the mill. In the present direction of the wind, we could hear the striking of the church clock. Cristel counted the strokes.

"Seven," she said. "Are you determined to keep your engagement?"

She had repeated--in an unsteady voice, and with a sudden change in her color to paleness--the strange question put to me by Gloody. In his case I had failed to trace the motive. I tried to discover it now.

"Tell me why I ought to break my engagement," I said.

"Remember what I told you at the spring," she answered. "You are deceived by a false friend who lies to you and hates you."

The man she was speaking of turned the corner of the new cottage. He waved his hand gaily, and approached us along the road.

"Go!" she said. "Your guardian angel has forgotten you. It's too late now."

Instead of letting me precede her, as I had anticipated, she ran on before me--made a sign to the deaf man, as she passed him, not to stop her--and disappeared through the open door of her father's side of the cottage.

I was left to decide for myself. What should I have done, if I had been twenty years older?

Say that my moral courage would have risen superior to the poorest of all fears, the fear of appearing to be afraid, and that I should have made my excuses to my host of the evening--how would my moral courage have answered him, if he had asked for an explanation? Useless to speculate on it! Had I possessed the wisdom of middle life, his book of leaves would not have told him, in my own handwriting, that I believed in his better nature, and accepted his friendly letter in the spirit in which he had written.

Explain it who can--I knew that I was going to drink tea with him, and yet I was unwilling to advance a few steps, and meet him on the road!

"I find a new bond of union between us," he said, as he joined me. "We both feel that." He pointed to the grandly darkening view. "The two men who could have painted the mystery of those growing shadows and fading lights, lie in the graves of Rembrandt and Turner. Shall we go to tea?"

On our way to his room we stopped at the miller's door.

"Will you inquire," he said, "if Miss Cristel is ready?"

I went in. Old Toller was in the kitchen, smoking his pipe without appearing to enjoy it.

"What's come to my girl?" he asked, the moment he saw me. "Yesterday she was in her room, crying. To-day she's in her room, praying."

The warnings which I had neglected rose in judgment against me. I was silent; I was awed. Before I recovered myself, Cristel entered the kitchen. Her father whispered, "Look at her!"

Of the excitement which had disturbed--I had almost said, profaned--her beautiful face, not a vestige remained. Pale, composed, resolute, she said, "I am ready," and led the way out.

The man whom she hated offered his arm. She took it!