

CHAPTER II. THE NEW FACES.

IMMEDIATELY on my arrival, I was presented to Mr. Meadowcroft, the father.

The old man had become a confirmed invalid, confined by chronic rheumatism to his chair. He received me kindly, and a little wearily as well. His only unmarried daughter (he had long since been left a widower) was in the room, in attendance on her father. She was a melancholy, middle-aged woman, without visible attractions of any sort--one of those persons who appear to accept the obligation of living under protest, as a burden which they would never have consented to bear if they had only been consulted first. We three had a dreary little interview in a parlor of bare walls; and then I was permitted to go upstairs, and unpack my portmanteau in my own room.

"Supper will be at nine o'clock, sir," said Miss Meadowcroft.

She pronounced those words as if "supper" was a form of domestic offense, habitually committed by the men, and endured by the women. I followed the groom up to my room, not over-well pleased with my first experience of the farm.

No Naomi and no romance, thus far!

My room was clean--oppressively clean. I quite longed to see a little dust somewhere. My library was limited to the Bible and the Prayer-book. My view from the window showed me a dead flat in a partial state of cultivation, fading sadly from view in the waning light. Above the head of my spruce white bed hung a scroll, bearing a damnatory quotation from Scripture in emblazoned letters of red and black. The dismal presence of Miss Meadowcroft had passed over my bedroom, and had blighted it. My spirits sank as I looked round me. Supper-time was still an event in the future. I lighted the candles and took from my portmanteau what I firmly believe to have been the first French novel ever produced at Morwick Farm. It was one of the masterly and charming stories of Dumas the elder. In five minutes I was in a new world, and my melancholy room was full of the liveliest French company. The sound of an imperative and uncompromising bell recalled me in due time to the regions of reality. I looked at my watch. Nine o'clock.

Ambrose met me at the bottom of the stairs, and showed me the way to the

supper-room.

Mr. Meadowcroft's invalid chair had been wheeled to the head of the table. On his right-hand side sat his sad and silent daughter. She signed to me, with a ghostly solemnity, to take the vacant place on the left of her father. Silas Meadowcroft came in at the same moment, and was presented to me by his brother. There was a strong family likeness between them, Ambrose being the taller and the handsomer man of the two. But there was no marked character in either face. I set them down as men with undeveloped qualities, waiting (the good and evil qualities alike) for time and circumstances to bring them to their full growth.

The door opened again while I was still studying the two brothers, without, I honestly confess, being very favorably impressed by either of them. A new member of the family circle, who instantly attracted my attention, entered the room.

He was short, spare, and wiry; singularly pale for a person whose life was passed in the country. The face was in other respects, besides this, a striking face to see. As to the lower part, it was covered with a thick black beard and mustache, at a time when shaving was the rule, and beards the rare exception, in America. As to the upper part of the face, it was irradiated by a pair of wild, glittering brown eyes, the expression of which suggested to me that there was something not quite right with the man's mental balance. A perfectly sane person in all his sayings and doings, so far as I could see, there was still something in those wild brown eyes which suggested to me that, under exceptionally trying circumstances, he might surprise his oldest friends by acting in some exceptionally violent or foolish way. "A little cracked"--that in the popular phrase was my impression of the stranger who now made his appearance in the supper-room.

Mr. Meadowcroft the elder, having not spoken one word thus far, himself introduced the newcomer to me, with a side-glance at his sons, which had something like defiance in it--a glance which, as I was sorry to notice, was returned with the defiance on their side by the two young men.

"Philip Lefrank, this is my overlooker, Mr. Jago," said the old man, formally presenting us. "John Jago, this is my young relative by marriage, Mr. Lefrank. He is not well; he has come over the ocean for rest, and change of scene. Mr. Jago is an American, Philip. I hope you have no prejudice against Americans. Make acquaintance with Mr. Jago. Sit together." He cast another dark look at his sons; and the sons again returned it. They pointedly drew back from John Jago as he approached the empty chair next to me and

moved round to the opposite side of the table. It was plain that the man with the beard stood high in the father's favor, and that he was cordially disliked for that or for some other reason by the sons.

The door opened once more. A young lady quietly joined the party at the supper-table.

Was the young lady Naomi Colebrook? I looked at Ambrose, and saw the answer in his face. Naomi Colebrook at last!

A pretty girl, and, so far as I could judge by appearances, a good girl too. Describing her generally, I may say that she had a small head, well carried, and well set on her shoulders; bright gray eyes, that looked at you honestly, and meant what they looked; a trim, slight little figure--too slight for our English notions of beauty; a strong American accent; and (a rare thing in America) a pleasantly toned voice, which made the accent agreeable to English ears. Our first impressions of people are, in nine cases out of ten, the right impressions. I liked Naomi Colebrook at first sight; liked her pleasant smile; liked her hearty shake of the hand when we were presented to each other. "If I get on well with nobody else in this house," I thought to myself, "I shall certainly get on well with you."

For once in a way, I proved a true prophet. In the atmosphere of smoldering enmities at Morwick Farm, the pretty American girl and I remained firm and true friends from first to last. Ambrose made room for Naomi to sit between his brother and himself. She changed color for a moment, and looked at him, with a pretty, reluctant tenderness, as she took her chair. I strongly suspected the young farmer of squeezing her hand privately, under cover of the tablecloth.

The supper was not a merry one. The only cheerful conversation was the conversation across the table between Naomi and me.

For some incomprehensible reason, John Jago seemed to be ill at ease in the presence of his young countrywoman. He looked up at Naomi doubtfully from his plate, and looked down again slowly with a frown. When I addressed him, he answered constrainedly. Even when he spoke to Mr. Meadowcroft, he was still on his guard--on his guard against the two young men, as I fancied by the direction which his eyes took on these occasions. When we began our meal, I had noticed for the first time that Silas Meadowcroft's left hand was strapped up with surgical plaster; and I now further observed that John Jago's wandering brown eyes, furtively looking at everybody round the table in turn, looked with a curious, cynical scrutiny at

the young man's injured hand.

By way of making my first evening at the farm all the more embarrassing to me as a stranger, I discovered before long that the father and sons were talking indirectly at each other, through Mr. Jago and through me. When old Mr. Meadowcroft spoke disparagingly to his overlooker of some past mistake made in the cultivation of the arable land of the farm, old Mr. Meadowcroft's eyes pointed the application of his hostile criticism straight in the direction of his two sons. When the two sons seized a stray remark of mine about animals in general, and applied it satirically to the mismanagement of sheep and oxen in particular, they looked at John Jago, while they talked to me. On occasions of this sort--and they happened frequently--Naomi struck in resolutely at the right moment, and turned the talk to some harmless topic. Every time she took a prominent part in this way in keeping the peace, melancholy Miss Meadowcroft looked slowly round at her in stern and silent disparagement of her interference. A more dreary and more disunited family party I never sat at the table with. Envy, hatred, malice and uncharitableness are never so essentially detestable to my mind as when they are animated by a sense of propriety, and work under the surface. But for my interest in Naomi, and my other interest in the little love-looks which I now and then surprised passing between her and Ambrose, I should never have sat through that supper. I should certainly have taken refuge in my French novel and my own room.

At last the unendurably long meal, served with ostentatious profusion, was at an end. Miss Meadowcroft rose with her ghostly solemnity, and granted me my dismissal in these words:

"We are early people at the farm, Mr. Lefrank. I wish you good-night."

She laid her bony hands on the back of Mr. Meadowcroft's invalid-chair, cut him short in his farewell salutation to me, and wheeled him out to his bed as if she were wheeling him out to his grave.

"Do you go to your room immediately, sir? If not, may I offer you a cigar--provided the young gentlemen will permit it?"

So, picking his words with painful deliberation, and pointing his reference to "the young gentlemen" with one sardonic side-look at them, Mr. John Jago performed the duties of hospitality on his side. I excused myself from accepting the cigar. With studied politeness, the man of the glittering brown eyes wished me a goodnight's rest, and left the room.

Ambrose and Silas both approached me hospitably, with their open cigar-cases in their hands.

"You were quite right to say 'No,'" Ambrose began. "Never smoke with John Jago. His cigars will poison you."

"And never believe a word John Jago says to you," added Silas. "He is the greatest liar in America, let the other be whom he may."

Naomi shook her forefinger reproachfully at them, as if the two sturdy young farmers had been two children.

"What will Mr. Lefrank think," she said, "if you talk in that way of a person whom your father respects and trusts? Go and smoke. I am ashamed of both of you."

Silas slunk away without a word of protest. Ambrose stood his ground, evidently bent on making his peace with Naomi before he left her.

Seeing that I was in the way, I walked aside toward a glass door at the lower end of the room. The door opened on the trim little farm-garden, bathed at that moment in lovely moonlight. I stepped out to enjoy the scene, and found my way to a seat under an elm-tree. The grand repose of nature had never looked so unutterably solemn and beautiful as it now appeared, after what I had seen and heard inside the house. I understood, or thought I understood, the sad despair of humanity which led men into monasteries in the old times. The misanthropical side of my nature (where is the sick man who is not conscious of that side of him?) was fast getting the upper hand of me when I felt a light touch laid on my shoulder, and found myself reconciled to my species once more by Naomi Colebrook.