

Chapter XI. Linley Asserts His Authority.

On the evening of Monday in the new week, the last of the visitors had left Mount Morven. Mrs. Linley dropped into a chair (in, what Randal called, "the heavenly tranquillity of the deserted drawing-room") and owned that the effort of entertaining her guests had completely worn her out. "It's too absurd, at my time of life," she said with a faint smile; "but I am really and truly so tired that I must go to bed before dark, as if I was a child again."

Mrs. Presty--maliciously observant of the governess, sitting silent and apart in a corner--approached her daughter in a hurry; to all appearance with a special object in view. Linley was at no loss to guess what that object might be. "Will you do me a favor, Catherine?" Mrs. Presty began. "I wish to say a word to you in your own room."

"Oh, mamma, have some mercy on me, and put it off till to-morrow!"

Mrs. Presty reluctantly consented to this proposal, on one condition. "It is understood," she stipulated "that I am to see you the first thing in the morning?"

Mrs. Linley was ready to accept that condition, or any condition, which promised her a night of uninterrupted repose. She crossed the room to her husband, and took his arm. "In my state of fatigue, Herbert, I shall never get up our steep stairs, unless you help me."

As they ascended the stairs together, Linley found that his wife had a reason of her own for leaving the drawing-room.

"I am quite weary enough to go to bed," she explained. "But I wanted to speak to you first. It's about Miss Westerfield. (No, no, we needn't stop on the landing.) Do you know, I think I have found out what has altered our little governess so strangely--I seem to startle you?"

"No."

"I am only astonished," Mrs. Linley resumed, "at my own stupidity in not having discovered it before. We must be kinder than ever to the poor girl now; can't you guess why? My dear, how dull you are! Must I remind you that we have had two single men among our visitors? One of them is old and doesn't matter. But the other--I mean Sir George, of course--is young,

handsome, and agreeable. I am so sorry for Sydney Westerfield. It's plain to me that she is hopelessly in love with a man who has run through his fortune, and must marry money if he marries at all. I shall speak to Sydney to-morrow; and I hope and trust I shall succeed in winning her confidence. Thank Heaven, here we are at my door at last! I can't say more now; I'm ready to drop. Good-night, dear; you look tired, too. It's a nice thing to have friends, I know; but, oh, what a relief it is sometimes to get rid of them!"

She kissed him, and let him go.

Left by himself, to compare his wife's innocent mistake with the terrible enlightenment that awaited her, Linley's courage failed him. He leaned on the quaintly-carved rail that protected the outer side of the landing, and looked down at the stone hall far below. If the old woodwork (he thought) would only give way under his weight, there would be an escape from the coming catastrophe, found in an instant.

A timely remembrance of Sydney recalled him to himself. For her sake, he was bound to prevent Mrs. Presty's contemplated interview with his wife on the next morning.

Descending the stairs, he met his brother in the corridor on the first floor.

"The very man I want to see," Randal said. "Tell me, Herbert, what is the matter with that curious old woman?"

"Do you mean Mrs. Presty?"

"Yes. She has just been telling me that our friend Mrs. MacEdwin has taken a fancy to Miss Westerfield, and would be only too glad to deprive us of our pretty governess."

"Did Mrs. Presty say that in Miss Westerfield's presence?"

"No. Soon after you and Catherine left the room, Miss Westerfield left it too. I daresay I am wrong, for I haven't had time to think of it; but Mrs. Presty's manner suggested to me that she would be glad to see the poor girl sent out of the house."

"I am going to speak to her, Randal, on that very subject. Is she still in the drawing-room?"

"Yes."

"Did she say anything more to you?"

"I didn't give her the chance; I don't like Mrs. Presty. You look worn and worried, Herbert. Is there anything wrong?"

"If there is, my dear fellow, you will hear of it tomorrow."

So they parted.

Comfortably established in the drawing-room, Mrs. Presty had just opened her favorite newspaper. Her only companion was Linley's black poodle, resting at her feet. On the opening of the door, the dog rose--advanced to caress his master--and looked up in Linley's face. If Mrs. Presty's attention had happened to be turned that way, she might have seen, in the faithful creature's sudden and silent retreat, a warning of her son-in-law's humor at that moment. But she was, or assumed to be, interested in her reading; and she deliberately overlooked Linley's appearance. After waiting a little to attract her attention, he quietly took the newspaper out of her hand.

"What does this mean?" Mrs. Presty asked.

"It means, ma'am, that I have something to say to you."

"Apparently, something that can't be said with common civility? Be as rude as you please; I am well used to it."

Linley wisely took no notice of this.

"Since you have lived at Mount Morven," he proceeded, "I think you have found me, on the whole, an easy man to get on with. At the same time, when I do make up my mind to be master in my own house, I am master."

Mrs. Presty crossed her hands placidly on her lap, and asked: "Master of what?"

"Master of your suspicions of Miss Westerfield. You are free, of course, to think of her and of me as you please. What I forbid is the expression of your thoughts--either by way of hints to my brother, or officious communications with my wife. Don't suppose that I am afraid of the truth. Mrs. Linley shall know more than you think for, and shall know it to-morrow; not from you, but from me."

Mrs. Presty shook her head compassionately. "My good sir, surely you know me too well to think that I am to be disposed of in that easy way? Must I remind you that your wife's mother has 'the cunning of the devil'?"

Linley recognized his own words. "So you were listening among the trees!" he said.

"Yes; I was listening; and I have only to regret that I didn't hear more. Let us return to our subject. I don't trust my daughter's interests--my much-injured daughter's interests--in your hands. They are not clean hands, Mr. Linley. I have a duty to do; and I shall do it to-morrow."

"No, Mrs. Presty, you won't do it to-morrow."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I shall prevent you."

"In what way, if you please?"

"I don't think it necessary to answer that question. My servants will have their instructions; and I shall see myself that my orders are obeyed."

"Thank you. I begin to understand; I am to be turned out of the house. Very well. We shall see what my daughter says."

"You know as well as I do, Mrs. Presty, that if your daughter is forced to choose between us she will decide for her husband. You have the night before you for consideration. I have no more to say."

Among Mrs. Presty's merits, it is only just to reckon a capacity for making up her mind rapidly, under stress of circumstances. Before Linley had opened the door, on his way out, he was called back.

"I am shocked to trouble you again," Mrs. Presty said, "but I don't propose to interfere with my night's rest by thinking about you. My position is perfectly clear to me, without wasting time in consideration. When a man so completely forgets what is due to the weaker sex as to threaten a woman, the woman has no alternative but to submit. You are aware that I had arranged to see my daughter to-morrow morning. I yield to brute force, sir. Tell your wife that I shall not keep my appointment. Are you satisfied?"

"Quite satisfied," Linley said--and left the room.

His mother-in-law looked after him with a familiar expression of opinion, and a smile of supreme contempt.

"You fool!"

Only two words; and yet there seemed to be some hidden meaning in them--relating perhaps to what might happen on the next day--which gently tickled Mrs. Presty in the region assigned by phrenologists to the sense of self-esteem.