## CHAPTER IV.

LEFT alone in the drawing-room, Moody looked at the unfastened envelope on the table.

Considering the value of the inclosure, might he feel justified in wetting the gum and securing the envelope for safety's sake? After thinking it over, Moody decided that he was not justified in meddling with the letter. On reflection, her Ladyship might have changes to make in it or might have a postscript to add to what she had already written. Apart too, from these considerations, was it reasonable to act as if Lady Lydiard's house was a hotel, perpetually open to the intrusion of strangers? Objects worth twice five hundred pounds in the aggregate were scattered about on the tables and in the unlocked cabinets all round him. Moody withdrew, without further hesitation, to order the light restorative prescribed for himself by Mr. Sweetsir.

The footman who took the curacoa into the picture gallery found Felix recumbent on a sofa, admiring the famous Hobbema.

"Don't interrupt me," he said peevishly, catching the servant in the act of staring at him. "Put down the bottle and go!" Forbidden to look at Mr. Sweetsir, the man's eyes as he left the gallery turned wonderingly towards the famous landscape. And what did he see? He saw one towering big cloud in the sky that threatened rain, two withered mahogany-colored trees sorely in want of rain, a muddy road greatly the worse for rain,

and a vagabond boy running home who was afraid of the rain. That was the picture, to the footman's eye. He took a gloomy view of the state of Mr. Sweetsir's brains on his return to the servants' hall. "A slate loose, poor devil!" That was the footman's report of the brilliant Felix.

Immediately on the servant's departure, the silence in the picture-gallery was broken by voices penetrating into it from the drawing-room. Felix rose to a sitting position on the sofa. He had recognized the voice of Alfred Hardyman saying, "Don't disturb Lady Lydiard," and the voice of Moody answering, "I will just knock at the door of her Ladyship's room, sir; you will find Mr. Sweetsir in the picture-gallery."

The curtains over the archway parted, and disclosed the figure of a tall man, with a closely cropped head set a little stiffly on his shoulders. The immovable gravity of face and manner which every Englishman seems to acquire who lives constantly in the society of horses, was the gravity which this gentleman displayed as he entered the picture-gallery. He was a finely made, sinewy man, with clearly cut, regular features. If he had not been affected with horses on the brain he would doubtless have been personally popular with the women. As it was, the serene and hippic gloom of the handsome horse-breeder daunted the daughters of Eve, and they failed to make up their minds about the exact value of him, socially considered. Alfred Hardyman was nevertheless a remarkable man in his way. He had been offered the customary alternatives submitted

to the younger sons of the nobility--the Church or the diplomatic service--and had refused the one and the other. "I like horses," he said, "and I mean to get my living out of them. Don't talk to me about my position in the world. Talk to my eldest brother, who gets the money and the title." Starting in life with these sensible views, and with a small capital of five thousand pounds, Hardyman took his own place in the sphere that was fitted for him. At the period of this narrative he was already a rich man, and one of the greatest authorities on horse-breeding in England. His prosperity made no change in him. He was always the same grave, quiet, obstinately resolute man--true to the few friends whom he admitted to his intimacy, and sincere to a fault in the expression of his feelings among persons whom he distrusted or disliked. As he entered the picture-gallery and paused for a moment looking at Felix on the sofa, his large, cold, steady gray eyes rested on the little man with an indifference that just verged on contempt. Felix, on the other hand, sprang to his feet with alert politeness and greeted his friend with exuberant cordiality.

"Dear old boy! This is so good of you," he began. "I feel it--I do assure you I feel it!"

"You needn't trouble yourself to feel it," was the quietly-ungracious answer. "Lady Lydiard brings me here. I come to see the house--and the dog." He looked round the gallery in his gravely attentive way. "I don't understand pictures," he remarked resignedly. "I shall go back to the drawing-room."

After a moment's consideration, Felix followed him into the drawing-room, with the air of a man who was determined not to be repelled.

"Well?" asked Hardyman. "What is it?"

"About that matter?" Felix said, inquiringly.

"What matter?"

"Oh, you know. Will next week do?"

"Next week won't do."

Mr. Felix Sweetsir cast one look at his friend. His friend was too intently occupied with the decorations of the drawing-room to notice the look.

"Will to-morrow do?" Felix resumed, after an interval.

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"Between twelve and one in the afternoon."

"Between twelve and one in the afternoon," Felix repeated. He looked again at Hardyman and took his hat. "Make my apologies to my aunt," he said. "You must introduce yourself to her Ladyship. I can't wait here any longer." He walked out of the room, having deliberately returned the contemptuous indifference of Hardyman by a similar indifference on his own side, at parting.

Left by himself, Hardyman took a chair and glanced at the door which led into the boudoir. The steward had knocked at that door, had disappeared through it, and had not appeared again. How much longer was Lady Lydiard's visitor to be left unnoticed in Lady Lydiard's house?

As the question passed through his mind the boudoir door opened. For once in his life, Alfred Hardyman's composure deserted him. He started to his feet, like an ordinary mortal taken completely by surprise.

Instead of Mr. Moody, instead of Lady Lydiard, there appeared in the open doorway a young woman in a state of embarrassment, who actually quickened the beat of Mr. Hardyman's heart the moment he set eyes on her. Was the person who produced this amazing impression at first sight a person of importance? Nothing of the sort. She was only "Isabel" surnamed "Miller." Even her name had nothing in it. Only "Isabel Miller!"

Had she any pretensions to distinction in virtue of her personal

appearance?

It is not easy to answer the question. The women (let us put the worst judges first) had long since discovered that she wanted that indispensable elegance of figure which is derived from slimness of waist and length of limb. The men (who were better acquainted with the subject) looked at her figure from their point of view; and, finding it essentially embraceable, asked for nothing more. It might have been her bright complexion or it might have been the bold luster of her eyes (as the women considered it), that dazzled the lords of creation generally, and made them all alike incompetent to discover her faults. Still, she had compensating attractions which no severity of criticism could dispute. Her smile, beginning at her lips, flowed brightly and instantly over her whole face. A delicious atmosphere of health, freshness, and good humor seemed to radiate from her wherever she went and whatever she did. For the rest her brown hair grew low over her broad white forehead, and was topped by a neat little lace cap with ribbons of a violet color. A plain collar and plain cuffs encircled her smooth, round neck, and her plump dimpled hands. Her merino dress, covering but not hiding the charming outline of her bosom, matched the color of the cap-ribbons, and was brightened by a white muslin apron coquettishly trimmed about the pockets, a gift from Lady Lydiard. Blushing and smiling, she let the door fall to behind her, and, shyly approaching the stranger, said to him, in her small, clear voice, "If you please, sir, are you Mr. Hardyman?"

The gravity of the great horse-breeder deserted him at her first question. He smiled as he acknowledged that he was "Mr. Hardyman"--he smiled as he offered her a chair.

"No, thank you, sir," she said, with a quaintly pretty inclination of her head. "I am only sent here to make her Ladyship's apologies. She has put the poor dear dog into a warm bath, and she can't leave him. And Mr. Moody can't come instead of me, because I was too frightened to be of any use, and so he had to hold the dog. That's all. We are very anxious sir, to know if the warm bath is the right thing. Please come into the room and tell us."

She led the way back to the door. Hardyman, naturally enough, was slow to follow her. When a man is fascinated by the charm of youth and beauty, he is in no hurry to transfer his attention to a sick animal in a bath. Hardyman seized on the first excuse that he could devise for keeping Isabel to himself--that is to say, for keeping her in the drawing-room.

"I think I shall be better able to help you," he said, "if you will tell me something about the dog first."

Even his accent in speaking had altered to a certain degree. The quiet, dreary monotone in which he habitually spoke quickened a little under his present excitement. As for Isabel, she was too deeply interested

in Tommie's welfare to suspect that she was being made the victim of a stratagem. She left the door and returned to Hardyman with eager eyes. "What can I tell you, sir?" she asked innocently.

Hardyman pressed his advantage without mercy.

"You can tell me what sort of dog he is?"

"Yes, sir."

"How old he is?"

"Yes, sir."

"What his name is?--what his temper is?--what his illness is? what diseases his father and mother had?--what--"

Isabel's head began to turn giddy. "One thing at a time, sir!" she interposed, with a gesture of entreaty. "The dog sleeps on my bed, and I had a bad night with him, he disturbed me so, and I am afraid I am very stupid this morning. His name is Tommie. We are obliged to call him by it, because he won't answer to any other than the name he had when my Lady bought him. But we spell it with an i e at the end, which makes it less vulgar than Tommy with a y. I am very sorry, sir--I forget what else you wanted to know. Please to come in here and my Lady will tell you everything."

She tried to get back to the door of the boudoir. Hardyman, feasting his eyes on the pretty, changeful face that looked up at him with such innocent confidence in his authority, drew her away from the door by the one means at his disposal. He returned to his questions about Tommie.

"Wait a little, please. What sort of dog is he?"

Isabel turned back again from the door. To describe Tommie was a labor of love. "He is the most beautiful dog in the world!" the girl began, with kindling eyes. "He has the most exquisite white curly hair and two light brown patches on his back--and, oh! such lovely dark eyes! They call him a Scotch terrier. When he is well his appetite is truly wonderful--nothing comes amiss to him, sir, from pate de foie gras to potatoes. He has his enemies, poor dear, though you wouldn't think it. People who won't put up with being bitten by him (what shocking tempers one does meet with, to be sure!) call him a mongrel. Isn't it a shame? Please come in and see him, sir; my Lady will be tired of waiting."

Another journey to the door followed those words, checked instantly by a serious objection.

"Stop a minute! You must tell me what his temper is, or I can do nothing for him."

Isabel returned once more, feeling that it was really serious this time.

Her gravity was even more charming than her gayety. As she lifted her face to him, with large solemn eyes, expressive of her sense of responsibility, Hardyman would have given every horse in his stables to have had the privilege of taking her in his arms and kissing her.

"Tommie has the temper of an angel with the people he likes," she said. "When he bites, it generally means that he objects to strangers. He loves my Lady, and he loves Mr. Moody, and he loves me, and--and I think that's all. This way, sir, if you please, I am sure I heard my Lady call."

"No," said Hardyman, in his immovably obstinate way. "Nobody called. About this dog's temper? Doesn't he take to any strangers? What sort of people does he bite in general?"

Isabel's pretty lips began to curl upward at the corners in a quaint smile. Hardyman's last imbecile question had opened her eyes to the true state of the case. Still, Tommie's future was in this strange gentleman's hands; she felt bound to consider that. And, moreover, it was no everyday event, in Isabel's experience, to fascinate a famous personage, who was also a magnificent and perfectly dressed man. She ran the risk of wasting another minute or two, and went on with the memoirs of Tommie.

"I must own, sir," she resumed, "that he behaves a little ungratefully--even to strangers who take an interest in him. When he

gets lost in the streets (which is very often), he sits down on the pavement and howls till he collects a pitying crowd round him; and when they try to read his name and address on his collar he snaps at them. The servants generally find him and bring him back; and as soon as he gets home he turns round on the doorstep and snaps at the servants. I think it must be his fun. You should see him sitting up in his chair at dinner-time, waiting to be helped, with his fore paws on the edge of the table, like the hands of a gentleman at a public dinner making a speech. But, oh!" cried Isabel, checking herself, with the tears in her eyes, "how can I talk of him in this way when he is so dreadfully ill! Some of them say it's bronchitis, and some say it's his liver. Only yesterday I took him to the front door to give him a little air, and he stood still on the pavement, quite stupefied. For the first time in his life, he snapped at nobody who went by; and, oh, dear, he hadn't even the heart to smell a lamp-post!"

Isabel had barely stated this last afflicting circumstance when the memoirs of Tommie were suddenly cut short by the voice of Lady Lydiard--really calling this time--from the inner room.

"Isabel! Isabel!" cried her Ladyship, "what are you about?"

Isabel ran to the door of the boudoir and threw it open. "Go in, sir! Pray go in!" she said.

"Without you?" Hardyman asked.

"I will follow you, sir. I have something to do for her Ladyship first."

She still held the door open, and pointed entreatingly to the passage which led to the boudoir "I shall be blamed, sir," she said, "if you don't go in."

This statement of the case left Hardyman no alternative. He presented himself to Lady Lydiard without another moment of delay.

Having closed the drawing-room door on him, Isabel waited a little, absorbed in her own thoughts.

She was now perfectly well aware of the effect which she had produced on Hardyman. Her vanity, it is not to be denied, was flattered by his admiration--he was so grand and so tall, and he had such fine large eyes. The girl looked prettier than ever as she stood with her head down and her color heightened, smiling to herself. A clock on the chimney-piece striking the half-hour roused her. She cast one look at the glass, as she passed it, and went to the table at which Lady Lydiard had been writing.

Methodical Mr. Moody, in submitting to be employed as bath-attendant upon Tommie, had not forgotten the interests of his mistress. He reminded her Ladyship that she had left her letter, with a bank-note inclosed in it, unsealed. Absorbed in the dog, Lady Lydiard answered,

"Isabel is doing nothing, let Isabel seal it. Show Mr. Hardyman in here," she continued, turning to Isabel, "and then seal a letter of mine which you will find on the table." "And when you have sealed it," careful Mr. Moody added, "put it back on the table; I will take charge of it when her Ladyship has done with me."

Such were the special instructions which now detained Isabel in the drawing-room. She lighted the taper, and closed and sealed the open envelope, without feeling curiosity enough even to look at the address. Mr. Hardyman was the uppermost subject in her thoughts. Leaving the sealed letter on the table, she returned to the fireplace, and studied her own charming face attentively in the looking-glass. The time passed--and Isabel's reflection was still the subject of Isabel's contemplation. "He must see many beautiful ladies," she thought, veering backward and forward between pride and humility. "I wonder what he sees in Me?"

The clock struck the hour. Almost at the same moment the boudoir-door opened, and Robert Moody, released at last from attendance on Tommie, entered the drawing-room.