CHAPTER VI.

FOR a quarter of an hour the drawing-room remained empty. At the end of that time the council in the boudoir broke up. Lady Lydiard led the way back into the drawing-room, followed by Hardyman, Isabel being left to look after the dog. Before the door closed behind him, Hardyman turned round to reiterate his last medical directions--or, in plainer words, to take a last look at Isabel.

"Plenty of water, Miss Isabel, for the dog to lap, and a little bread or biscuit, if he wants something to eat. Nothing more, if you please, till I see him to-morrow."

"Thank you, sir. I will take the greatest care--"

At that point Lady Lydiard cut short the interchange of instructions and civilities. "Shut the door, if you please, Mr. Hardyman. I feel the draught. Many thanks! I am really at a loss to tell you how gratefully I feel your kindness. But for you my poor little dog might be dead by this time."

Hardyman answered, in the quiet melancholy monotone which was habitual with him, "Your Ladyship need feel no further anxiety about the dog. Only be careful not to overfeed him. He will do very well under Miss Isabel's care. By the bye, her family name is Miller--is it not? Is she related to the Warwickshire Millers of Duxborough House?"

Lady Lydiard looked at him with an expression of satirical surprise. "Mr. Hardyman," she said, "this makes the fourth time you have questioned me about Isabel. You seem to take a great interest in my little companion. Don't make any apologies, pray! You pay Isabel a compliment, and, as I am very fond of her, I am naturally gratified when I find her admired. At the same time," she added, with one of her abrupt transitions of language, "I had my eye on you, and I had my eye on her, when you were talking in the next room; and I don't mean to let you make a fool of the girl. She is not in your line of life, and the sooner you know it the better. You make me laugh when you ask if she is related to gentlefolks. She is the orphan daughter of a chemist in the country. Her relations haven't a penny to bless themselves with, except an old aunt, who lives in a village on two or three hundred a year. I heard of the girl by accident. When she lost her father and mother, her aunt offered to take her. Isabel said, 'No, thank you; I will not be a burden on a relation who has only enough for herself. A girl can earn an honest living if she tries; and I mean to try'--that's what she said. I admired her independence," her Ladyship proceeded, ascending again to the higher regions of thought and expression. "My niece's marriage, just at that time, had left me alone in this great house. I proposed to Isabel to come to me as companion and reader for a few weeks, and to decide for herself whether she liked the life or not. We have never been separated since that time. I could hardly be fonder of her if she were my own daughter; and she returns my affection with all her heart. She has excellent qualities--prudent, cheerful, sweet-tempered; with good sense

enough to understand what her place is in the world, as distinguished from her place in my regard. I have taken care, for her own sake, never to leave that part of the question in any doubt. It would be cruel kindness to deceive her as to her future position when she marries. I shall take good care that the man who pays his addresses to her is a man in her rank of life. I know but too well, in the case of one of my own relatives, what miseries unequal marriages bring with them. Excuse me for troubling you at this length on domestic matters. I am very fond of Isabel; and a girl's head is so easily turned. Now you know what her position really is, you will also know what limits there must be to the expression of your interest in her. I am sure we understand each other; and I say no more."

Hardyman listened to this long harangue with the immovable gravity which was part of his character--except when Isabel had taken him by surprise. When her Ladyship gave him the opportunity of speaking on his side, he had very little to say, and that little did not suggest that he had greatly profited by what he had heard. His mind had been full of Isabel when Lady Lydiard began, and it remained just as full of her, in just the same way, when Lady Lydiard had done.

"Yes," he remarked quietly, "Miss Isabel is an uncommonly nice girl, as you say. Very pretty, and such frank, unaffected manners. I don't deny that I feel an interest in her. The young ladies one meets in society are not much to my taste. Miss Isabel is my taste."

Lady Lydiard's face assumed a look of blank dismay. "I am afraid I have failed to convey my exact meaning to you," she said.

Hardyman gravely declared that he understood her perfectly. "Perfectly!" he repeated, with his impenetrable obstinacy. "Your Ladyship exactly expresses my opinion of Miss Isabel. Prudent, and cheerful, and sweet-tempered, as you say--all the qualities in a woman that I admire. With good looks, too--of course, with good looks. She will be a perfect treasure (as you remarked just now) to the man who marries her. I may claim to know something about it. I have twice narrowly escaped being married myself; and, though I can't exactly explain it, I'm all the harder to please in consequence. Miss Isabel pleases me. I think I have said that before? Pardon me for saying it again. I'll call again to-morrow morning and look at the dog as early as eleven o'clock, if you will allow me. Later in the day I must be off to France to attend a sale of horses. Glad to have been of any use to your Ladyship, I am sure. Good-morning."

Lady Lydiard let him go, wisely resigning any further attempt to establish an understanding between her visitor and herself.

"He is either a person of very limited intelligence when he is away from his stables," she thought, "or he deliberately declines to take a plain hint when it is given to him. I can't drop his acquaintance, on Tommie's account. The only other alternative is to keep Isabel out of his way. My good little girl shall not drift into a false position while I am living

to look after her. When Mr. Hardyman calls to-morrow she shall be out on an errand. When he calls the next time she shall be upstairs with a headache. And if he tries it again she shall be away at my house in the country. If he makes any remarks on her absence--well, he will find that I can be just as dull of understanding as he is when the occasion calls for it."

Having arrived at this satisfactory solution of the difficulty, Lady Lydiard became conscious of an irresistible impulse to summon Isabel to her presence and caress her. In the nature of a warm-hearted woman, this was only the inevitable reaction which followed the subsidence of anxiety about the girl, after her own resolution had set that anxiety at rest. She threw open the door and made one of her sudden appearances at the boudoir. Even in the fervent outpouring of her affection, there was still the inherent abruptness of manner which so strongly marked Lady Lydiard's character in all the relations of life.

"Did I give you a kiss, this morning?" she asked, when Isabel rose to receive her.

"Yes, my Lady," said the girl, with her charming smile.

"Come, then, and give me a kiss in return. Do you love me? Very well, then, treat me like your mother. Never mind 'my lady' this time. Give me a good hug!"

Something in those homely words, or something perhaps in the look that accompanied them, touched sympathies in Isabel which seldom showed themselves on the surface. Her smiling lips trembled, the bright tears rose in her eyes. "You are too good to me," she murmured, with her head on Lady Lydiard's bosom. "How can I ever love you enough in return?"

Lady Lydiard patted the pretty head that rested on her with such filial tenderness. "There! there!" she said, "Go back and play with Tommie, my dear. We may be as fond of each other as we like; but we mustn't cry. God bless you! Go away--go away!"

She turned aside quickly; her own eyes were moistening, and it was part of her character to be reluctant to let Isabel see it. "Why have I made a fool of myself?" she wondered, as she approached the drawing-room door. "It doesn't matter. I am all the better for it. Odd, that Mr. Hardyman should have made me feel fonder of Isabel than ever!"

With those reflections she re-entered the drawing-room--and suddenly checked herself with a start. "Good Heavens!" she exclaimed irritably, "how you frightened me! Why was I not told you were here?"

Having left the drawing-room in a state of solitude, Lady Lydiard on her return found herself suddenly confronted with a gentleman, mysteriously planted on the hearth-rug in her absence. The new visitor may be rightly described as a gray man. He had gray hair, eyebrows, and whiskers; he wore a gray coat, waistcoat, and trousers, and gray gloves. For

the rest, his appearance was eminently suggestive of wealth and respectability and, in this case, appearances were really to be trusted. The gray man was no other than Lady Lydiard's legal adviser, Mr. Troy.

"I regret, my Lady, that I should have been so unfortunate as to startle you," he said, with a certain underlying embarrassment in his manner. "I had the honor of sending word by Mr. Moody that I would call at this hour, on some matters of business connected with your Ladyship's house property. I presumed that you expected to find me here, waiting your pleasure--"

Thus far Lady Lydiard had listened to her legal adviser, fixing her eyes on his face in her usually frank, straightforward way. She now stopped him in the middle of a sentence, with a change of expression in her own face which was undisguisedly a change to alarm.

"Don't apologize, Mr. Troy," she said. "I am to blame for forgetting your appointment and for not keeping my nerves under proper control." She paused for a moment and took a seat before she said her next words. "May I ask," she resumed, "if there is something unpleasant in the business that brings you here?"

"Nothing whatever, my Lady; mere formalities, which can wait till to-morrow or next day, if you wish it."

Lady Lydiard's fingers drummed impatiently on the table. "You have known

me long enough, Mr. Troy, to know that I cannot endure suspense. You have something unpleasant to tell me."

The lawyer respectfully remonstrated. "Really, Lady Lydiard!--" he began.

"It won't do, Mr. Troy! I know how you look at me on ordinary occasions, and I see how you look at me now. You are a very clever lawyer; but, happily for the interests that I commit to your charge, you are also a thoroughly honest man. After twenty years' experience of you, you can't deceive me. You bring me bad news. Speak at once, sir, and speak plainly."

Mr. Troy yielded--inch by inch, as it were. "I bring news which, I fear, may annoy your Ladyship." He paused, and advanced another inch. "It is news which I only became acquainted with myself on entering this house."

He waited again, and made another advance. "I happened to meet your Ladyship's steward, Mr. Moody, in the hall--"

"Where is he?" Lady Lydiard interposed angrily. "I can make him speak out, and I will. Send him here instantly."

The lawyer made a last effort to hold off the coming disclosure a little longer. "Mr. Moody will be here directly," he said. "Mr. Moody requested me to prepare your Ladyship--"

"Will you ring the bell, Mr. Troy, or must I?"

Moody had evidently been waiting outside while the lawyer spoke for him. He saved Mr. Troy the trouble of ringing the bell by presenting himself in the drawing-room. Lady Lydiard's eyes searched his face as he approached. Her bright complexion faded suddenly. Not a word more passed her lips. She looked, and waited.

In silence on his part, Moody laid an open sheet of paper on the table. The paper quivered in his trembling hand.

Lady Lydiard recovered herself first. "Is that for me?" she asked.

"Yes, my Lady."

She took up the paper without an instant's hesitation. Both the men watched her anxiously as she read it.

The handwriting was strange to her. The words were these:--

"I hereby certify that the bearer of these lines, Robert Moody by name, has presented to me the letter with which he was charged, addressed to myself, with the seal intact. I regret to add that there is, to say the least of it, some mistake. The inclosure referred to by the anonymous writer of the letter, who signs 'a friend in need,' has not reached me.

No five-hundred pound bank-note was in the letter when I opened it. My wife was present when I broke the seal, and can certify to this statement if necessary. Not knowing who my charitable correspondent is (Mr. Moody being forbidden to give me any information), I can only take this means of stating the case exactly as it stands, and hold myself at the disposal of the writer of the letter. My private address is at the head of the page.--Samuel Bradstock, Rector, St. Anne's, Deansbury, London."

Lady Lydiard dropped the paper on the table. For the moment, plainly as the Rector's statement was expressed, she appeared to be incapable of understanding it. "What, in God's name, does this mean?" she asked.

The lawyer and the steward looked at each other. Which of the two was entitled to speak first? Lady Lydiard gave them no time to decide. "Moody," she said sternly, "you took charge of the letter--I look to you for an explanation."

Moody's dark eyes flashed. He answered Lady Lydiard without caring to conceal that he resented the tone in which she had spoken to him.

"I undertook to deliver the letter at its address," he said. "I found it, sealed, on the table. Your Ladyship has the clergyman's written testimony that I handed it to him with the seal unbroken. I have done my duty; and I have no explanation to offer."

Before Lady Lydiard could speak again, Mr. Troy discreetly interfered. He saw plainly that his experience was required to lead the investigation in the right direction.

"Pardon me, my Lady," he said, with that happy mixture of the positive and the polite in his manner, of which lawyers alone possess the secret. "There is only one way of arriving at the truth in painful matters of this sort. We must begin at the beginning. May I venture to ask your Ladyship a question?"

Lady Lydiard felt the composing influence of Mr. Troy. "I am at your disposal, sir," she said, quietly.

"Are you absolutely certain that you inclosed the bank-note in the letter?" the lawyer asked.

"I certainly believe I inclosed it," Lady Lydiard answered. "But I was so alarmed at the time by the sudden illness of my dog, that I do not feel justified in speaking positively."

"Was anybody in the room with your Ladyship when you put the inclosure in the letter--as you believe?"

"I was in the room," said Moody. "I can swear that I saw her Ladyship put the bank-note in the letter, and the letter in the envelope."

"And seal the envelope?" asked Mr. Troy.

"No, sir. Her Ladyship was called away into the next room to the dog, before she could seal the envelope."

Mr. Troy addressed himself once more to Lady Lydiard. "Did your Ladyship take the letter into the next room with you?"

"I was too much alarmed to think of it, Mr. Troy. I left it here, on the table."

"With the envelope open?"

"Yes."

"How long were you absent in the other room?"

"Half an hour or more."

"Ha!" said Mr. Troy to himself. "This complicates it a little." He reflected for a while, and then turned again to Moody. "Did any of the servants know of this bank-note being in her Ladyship's possession?"

"Not one of them," Moody answered.

"Do you suspect any of the servants?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Are there any workmen employed in the house?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know of any persons who had access to the room while Lady Lydiard was absent from it?"

"Two visitors called, sir."

"Who were they?"

"Her Ladyship's nephew, Mr. Felix Sweetsir, and the Honorable Alfred Hardyman."

Mr. Troy shook his head irritably. "I am not speaking of gentlemen of high position and repute," he said. "It's absurd even to mention Mr. Sweetsir and Mr. Hardyman. My question related to strangers who might have obtained access to the drawing-room--people calling, with her Ladyship's sanction, for subscriptions, for instance; or people calling with articles of dress or ornament to be submitted to her Ladyship's inspection."

"No such persons came to the house with my knowledge," Moody answered.

Mr. Troy suspended the investigation, and took a turn thoughtfully in the room. The theory on which his inquiries had proceeded thus far had failed to produce any results. His experience warned him to waste no more time on it, and to return to the starting-point of the investigation--in other words, to the letter. Shifting his point of view, he turned again to Lady Lydiard, and tried his questions in a new direction.

"Mr. Moody mentioned just now," he said, "that your Ladyship was called into the next room before you could seal your letter. On your return to this room, did you seal the letter?"

"I was busy with the dog," Lady Lydiard answered. "Isabel Miller was of no use in the boudoir, and I told her to seal it for me."

Mr. Troy started. The new direction in which he was pushing his inquiries began to look like the right direction already. "Miss Isabel Miller," he proceeded, "has been a resident under your Ladyship's roof for some little time, I believe?"

"For nearly two years, Mr. Troy."

"As your Ladyship's companion and reader?"

"As my adopted daughter," her Ladyship answered, with marked emphasis.

Wise Mr. Troy rightly interpreted the emphasis as a warning to him to suspend the examination of her Ladyship, and to address to Mr. Moody the far more serious questions which were now to come.

"Did anyone give you the letter before you left the house with it?" he said to the steward. "Or did you take it yourself?"

"I took it myself, from the table here."

"Was it sealed?"

"Yes."

"Was anybody present when you took the letter from the table?"

"Miss Isabel was present."

"Did you find her alone in the room?"

"Yes, sir."

Lady Lydiard opened her lips to speak, and checked herself. Mr. Troy, having cleared the ground before him, put the fatal question.

"Mr. Moody," he said, "when Miss Isabel was instructed to seal the

letter, did she know that a bank-note was inclosed in it?"

Instead of replying, Robert drew back from the lawyer with a look of horror. Lady Lydiard started to her feet--and checked herself again, on the point of speaking.

"Answer him, Moody," she said, putting a strong constraint on herself.

Robert answered very unwillingly. "I took the liberty of reminding her ladyship that she had left her letter unsealed," he said. "And I mentioned as my excuse for speaking,"--he stopped, and corrected himself--"I believe I mentioned that a valuable inclosure was in the letter."

"You believe?" Mr. Troy repeated. "Can't you speak more positively than that?"

"I can speak positively," said Lady Lydiard, with her eyes on the lawyer. "Moody did mention the inclosure in the letter--in Isabel Miller's hearing as well as in mine." She paused, steadily controlling herself. "And what of that, Mr. Troy?" she added, very quietly and firmly.

Mr. Troy answered quietly and firmly, on his side. "I am surprised that your Ladyship should ask the question," he said.

"I persist in repeating the question," Lady Lydiard rejoined. "I say that Isabel Miller knew of the inclosure in my letter--and I ask, What of that?"

"And I answer," retorted the impenetrable lawyer, "that the suspicion of theft rests on your Ladyship's adopted daughter, and on nobody else."

"It's false!" cried Robert, with a burst of honest indignation. "I wish to God I had never said a word to you about the loss of the bank-note! Oh, my Lady! my Lady! don't let him distress you! What does he know about it?"

"Hush!" said Lady Lydiard. "Control yourself, and hear what he has to say." She rested her hand on Moody's shoulder, partly to encourage him, partly to support herself; and, fixing her eyes again on Mr. Troy, repeated his last words, "'Suspicion rests on my adopted daughter, and on nobody else.' Why on nobody else?"

"Is your Ladyship prepared to suspect the Rector of St. Anne's of embezzlement, or your own relatives and equals of theft?" Mr. Troy asked. "Does a shadow of doubt rest on the servants? Not if Mr. Moody's evidence is to be believed. Who, to our own certain knowledge, had access to the letter while it was unsealed? Who was alone in the room with it? And who knew of the inclosure in it? I leave the answer to your Ladyship."

"Isabel Miller is as incapable of an act of theft as I am. There is my answer, Mr. Troy."

The lawyer bowed resignedly, and advanced to the door.

"Am I to take your Ladyship's generous assertion as finally disposing of the question of the lost bank-note?" he inquired.

Lady Lydiard met the challenge without shrinking from it.

"No!" she said. "The loss of the bank-note is known out of my house. Other persons may suspect this innocent girl as you suspect her. It is due to Isabel's reputation--her unstained reputation, Mr. Troy!--that she should know what has happened, and should have an opportunity of defending herself. She is in the next room, Moody. Bring her here."

Robert's courage failed him: he trembled at the bare idea of exposing Isabel to the terrible ordeal that awaited her. "Oh, my Lady!" he pleaded, "think again before you tell the poor girl that she is suspected of theft. Keep it a secret from her--the shame of it will break her heart!"

"Keep it a secret," said Lady Lydiard, "when the Rector and the Rector's wife both know of it! Do you think they will let the matter rest where it is, even if I could consent to hush it up? I must write to them; and I can't write anonymously after what has happened. Put yourself in

Isabel's place, and tell me if you would thank the person who knew you to be innocently exposed to a disgraceful suspicion, and who concealed it from you? Go, Moody! The longer you delay, the harder it will be."

With his head sunk on his breast, with anguish written in every line of his face, Moody obeyed. Passing slowly down the short passage which connected the two rooms, and still shrinking from the duty that had been imposed on him, he paused, looking through the curtains which hung over the entrance to the boudoir.