

CHAPTER X.

RETURNING to his office, Mr. Troy discovered, among the correspondence that was waiting for him, a letter from the very person whose welfare was still the uppermost subject in his mind. Isabel Miller wrote in these terms:

"Dear Sir--My aunt, Miss Pink, is very desirous of consulting you professionally at the earliest opportunity. Although South Morden is within little more than half an hour's railway ride from London, Miss Pink does not presume to ask you to visit her, being well aware of the value of your time. Will you, therefore, be so kind as to let me know when it will be convenient to you to receive my aunt at your office in London? Believe me, dear sir, respectfully yours, ISABEL MILLER.
P.S.--I am further instructed to say that the regrettable event at Lady Lydiard's house is the proposed subject of the consultation. The Lawn, South Morden. Thursday."

Mr. Troy smiled as he read the letter. "Too formal for a young girl!" he said to himself. "Every word of it has been dictated by Miss Pink." He was not long in deciding what course he should take. There was a pressing necessity for cautioning Isabel, and here was his opportunity. He sent for his head clerk, and looked at his list of engagements for the day. There was nothing set down in the book which the clerk was not quite as well able to do as the master. Mr. Troy consulted his railway-guide, ordered his cab, and caught the next train to South Mord

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South Morden was then (and remains to this day) one of those primitive agricultural villages, passed over by the march of modern progress, which are still to be found in the near neighborhood of London. Only the slow trains stopped at the station and there was so little to do that the station-master and his porter grew flowers on the embankment, and trained creepers over the waiting-room window. Turning your back on the railway, and walking along the one street of South Morden, you found yourself in the old England of two centuries since. Gabled cottages, with fast-closed windows; pigs and poultry in quiet possession of the road; the venerable church surrounded by its shady burial-ground; the grocer's shop which sold everything, and the butcher's shop which sold nothing; the scarce inhabitants who liked a good look at a stranger, and the unwashed children who were pictures of dirty health; the clash of the iron-chained bucket in the public well, and the thump of the falling nine-pins in the skittle-ground behind the public-house; the horse-pond on the one bit of open ground, and the old elm-tree with the wooden seat round it on the other--these were some of the objects that you saw, and some of the noises that you heard in South Morden, as you passed from one end of the village to the other.

About half a mile beyond the last of the old cottages, modern England met you again under the form of a row of little villas, set up by an adventurous London builder who had bought the land a bargain. Each villa stood in its own little garden, and looked across a stony road at the

meadow lands and softly-rising wooded hills beyond. Each villa faced you in the sunshine with the horrid glare of new red brick, and forced its nonsensical name on your attention, traced in bright paint on the posts of its entrance gate. Consulting the posts as he advanced, Mr. Troy arrived in due course of time at the villa called The Lawn, which derived its name apparently from a circular patch of grass in front of the house. The gate resisting his efforts to open it, he rang the bell.

Admitted by a trim, clean, shy little maid-servant, Mr. Troy looked about him in amazement. Turn which way he might, he found himself silently confronted by posted and painted instructions to visitors, which forbade him to do this, and commanded him to do that, at every step of his progress from the gate to the house. On the side of the lawn a label informed him that he was not to walk on the grass. On the other side a painted hand pointed along a boundary-wall to an inscription which warned him to go that way if he had business in the kitchen. On the gravel walk at the foot of the housesteps words, neatly traced in little white shells, reminded him not to "forget the scraper". On the doorstep he was informed, in letters of lead, that he was "Welcome!" On the mat in the passage bristly black words burst on his attention, commanding him to "wipe his shoes." Even the hat-stand in the hall was not allowed to speak for itself; it had "Hats and Cloaks" inscribed on it, and it issued its directions imperatively in the matter of your wet umbrella--"Put it here!"

Giving the trim little servant his card, Mr. Troy was introduced to a

reception-room on the lower floor. Before he had time to look round him the door was opened again from without, and Isabel stole into the room on tiptoe. She looked worn and anxious. When she shook hands with the old lawyer the charming smile that he remembered so well was gone.

"Don't say you have seen me," she whispered. "I am not to come into the room till my aunt sends for me. Tell me two things before I run away again. How is Lady Lydiard? And have you discovered the thief?"

"Lady Lydiard was well when I last saw her; and we have not yet succeeded in discovering the thief." Having answered the questions in those terms, Mr. Troy decided on cautioning Isabel on the subject of the steward while he had the chance. "One question on my side," he said, holding her back from the door by the arm. "Do you expect Moody to visit you here?"

"I am sure he will visit me," Isabel answered warmly. "He has promised to come here at my request. I never knew what a kind heart Robert Moody had till this misfortune fell on me. My aunt, who is not easily taken with strangers, respects and admires him. I can't tell you how good he was to me on the journey here--and how kindly, how nobly, he spoke to me when we parted." She paused, and turned her head away. The tears were rising in her eyes. "In my situation," she said faintly, "kindness is very keenly felt. Don't notice me, Mr. Troy."

The lawyer waited a moment to let her recover herself.

"I agree entirely, my dear, in your opinion of Moody," he said. "At the same time, I think it right to warn you that his zeal in your service may possibly outrun his discretion. He may feel too confidently about penetrating the mystery of the missing money; and, unless you are on your guard, he may raise false hopes in you when you next see him. Listen to any advice that he may give you, by all means. But, before you decide on being guided by his opinion, consult my older experience, and hear what I have to say on the subject. Don't suppose that I am attempting to make you distrust this good friend," he added, noticing the look of uneasy surprise which Isabel fixed on him. "No such idea is in my mind. I only warn you that Moody's eagerness to be of service to you may mislead him. You understand me."

"Yes, sir," replied Isabel coldly; "I understand you. Please let me go now. My aunt will be down directly; and she must not find me here." She curtseyed with distant respect, and left the room.

"So much for trying to put two ideas together into a girl's mind!" thought Mr. Troy, when he was alone again. "The little fool evidently thinks I am jealous of Moody's place in her estimation. Well! I have done my duty--and I can do no more."

He looked round the room. Not a chair was out of its place, not a speck of dust was to be seen. The brightly-perfect polish of the table made your eyes ache; the ornaments on it looked as if they had never been

touched by mortal hand; the piano was an object for distant admiration, not an instrument to be played on; the carpet made Mr. Troy look nervously at the soles of his shoes; and the sofa (protected by layers of white crochet-work) said as plainly as if in words, "Sit on me if you dare!" Mr. Troy retreated to a bookcase at the further end of the room. The books fitted the shelves to such absolute perfection that he had some difficulty in taking one of them out. When he had succeeded, he found himself in possession of a volume of the History of England. On the fly-leaf he encountered another written warning:--"This book belongs to Miss Pink's Academy for Young Ladies, and is not to be removed from the library." The date, which was added, referred to a period of ten years since. Miss Pink now stood revealed as a retired schoolmistress, and Mr. Troy began to understand some of the characteristic peculiarities of that lady's establishment which had puzzled him up to the present time.

He had just succeeded in putting the book back again when the door opened once more, and Isabel's aunt entered the room.

If Miss Pink could, by any possible conjuncture of circumstances, have disappeared mysteriously from her house and her friends, the police would have found the greatest difficulty in composing the necessary description of the missing lady. The acutest observer could have discovered nothing that was noticeable or characteristic in her personal appearance. The pen of the present writer portrays her in despair by a series of negatives. She was not young, she was not old; she was neither

tall nor short, nor stout nor thin; nobody could call her features attractive, and nobody could call them ugly; there was nothing in her voice, her expression, her manner, or her dress that differed in any appreciable degree from the voice, expression, manner, and dress of five hundred thousand other single ladies of her age and position in the world. If you had asked her to describe herself, she would have answered, "I am a gentlewoman"; and if you had further inquired which of her numerous accomplishments took highest rank in her own esteem, she would have replied, "My powers of conversation." For the rest, she was Miss Pink, of South Morden; and, when that has been said, all has been said.

"Pray be seated, sir. We have had a beautiful day, after the long-continued wet weather. I am told that the season is very unfavorable for wall-fruit. May I offer you some refreshment after your journey?" In these terms and in the smoothest of voices, Miss Pink opened the interview.

Mr. Troy made a polite reply, and added a few strictly conventional remarks on the beauty of the neighborhood. Not even a lawyer could sit in Miss Pink's presence, and hear Miss Pink's conversation, without feeling himself called upon (in the nursery phrase) to "be on his best behavior".

"It is extremely kind of you, Mr. Troy, to favor me with this visit," Miss Pink resumed. "I am well aware that the time of professional

gentlemen is of especial value to them; and I will therefore ask you to excuse me if I proceed abruptly to the subject on which I desire to consult your experience."

Here the lady modestly smoothed out her dress over her knees, and the lawyer made a bow. Miss Pink's highly-trained conversation had perhaps one fault--it was not, strictly speaking, conversation at all. In its effect on her hearers it rather resembled the contents of a fluently conventional letter, read aloud.

"The circumstances under which my niece Isabel has left Lady Lydiard's house," Miss Pink proceeded, "are so indescribably painful--I will go further, I will say so deeply humiliating--that I have forbidden her to refer to them again in my presence, or to mention them in the future to any living creature besides myself. You are acquainted with those circumstances, Mr. Troy; and you will understand my indignation when I first learnt that my sister's child had been suspected of theft. I have not the honor of being acquainted with Lady Lydiard. She is not a Countess, I believe? Just so! Her husband was only a Baron. I am not acquainted with Lady Lydiard; and I will not trust myself to say what I think of her conduct to my niece."

"Pardon me, madam," Mr. Troy interposed. "Before you say any more about Lady Lydiard, I really must beg leave to observe--"

"Pardon me," Miss Pink rejoined. "I never form a hasty judgment. Lady

Lydiard's conduct is beyond the reach of any defense, no matter how ingenious it may be. You may not be aware, sir, that in receiving my niece under her roof her Ladyship was receiving a gentlewoman by birth as well as by education. My late lamented sister was the daughter of a clergyman of the Church of England. I need hardly remind you that, as such, she was a born lady. Under favoring circumstances, Isabel's maternal grandfather might have been Archbishop of Canterbury, and have taken precedence of the whole House of Peers, the Princes of the blood Royal alone excepted. I am not prepared to say that my niece is equally well connected on her father's side. My sister surprised--I will not add shocked--us when she married a chemist. At the same time, a chemist is not a tradesman. He is a gentleman at one end of the profession of Medicine, and a titled physician is a gentleman at the other end. That is all. In inviting Isabel to reside with her, Lady Lydiard, I repeat, was bound to remember that she was associating herself with a young gentlewoman. She has not remembered this, which is one insult; and she has suspected my niece of theft, which is another."

Miss Pink paused to take breath. Mr. Troy made a second attempt to get a hearing.

"Will you kindly permit me, madam, to say a few words?"

"No!" said Miss Pink, asserting the most immovable obstinacy under the blandest politeness of manner. "Your time, Mr. Troy, is really too valuable! Not even your trained intellect can excuse conduct which is

manifestly inexcusable on the face of it. Now you know my opinion of Lady Lydiard, you will not be surprised to hear that I decline to trust her Ladyship. She may, or she may not, cause the necessary inquiries to be made for the vindication of my niece's character. In a matter so serious as this--I may say, in a duty which I owe to the memories of my sister and my parents--I will not leave the responsibility to Lady Lydiard. I will take it on myself. Let me add that I am able to pay the necessary expenses. The earlier years of my life, Mr. Troy, have been passed in the tuition of young ladies. I have been happy in meriting the confidence of parents; and I have been strict in observing the golden rules of economy. On my retirement, I have been able to invest a modest, a very modest, little fortune in the Funds. A portion of it is at the service of my niece for the recovery of her good name; and I desire to place the necessary investigation confidentially in your hands. You are acquainted with the case, and the case naturally goes to you. I could not prevail on myself--I really could not prevail on myself--to mention it to a stranger. That is the business on which I wished to consult you. Please say nothing more about Lady Lydiard--the subject is inexpressibly disagreeable to me. I will only trespass on your kindness to tell me if I have succeeded in making myself understood."

Miss Pink leaned back in her chair, at the exact angle permitted by the laws of propriety; rested her left elbow on the palm of her right hand, and lightly supported her cheek with her forefinger and thumb. In this position she waited Mr. Troy's answer--the living picture of human obstinacy in its most respectable form.

If Mr. Troy had not been a lawyer--in other words, if he had not been professionally capable of persisting in his own course, in the face of every conceivable difficulty and discouragement--Miss Pink might have remained in undisturbed possession of her own opinions. As it was, Mr. Troy had got his hearing at last; and no matter how obstinately she might close her eyes to it, Miss Pink was now destined to have the other side of the case presented to her view.

"I am sincerely obliged to you, madam, for the expression of your confidence in me," Mr. Troy began; "at the same time, I must beg you to excuse me if I decline to accept your proposal."

Miss Pink had not expected to receive such an answer as this. The lawyer's brief refusal surprised and annoyed her.

"Why do you decline to assist me?" she asked.

"Because," answered Mr. Troy, "my services are already engaged, in Miss Isabel's interest, by a client whom I have served for more than twenty years. My client is--"

Miss Pink anticipated the coming disclosure. "You need not trouble yourself, sir, to mention your client's name," she said.

"My client," persisted Mr. Troy, "loves Miss Isabel dearly."

"That is a matter of opinion," Miss Pink interposed.

"And believes in Miss Isabel's innocence," proceeded the irrepressible lawyer, "as firmly as you believe in it yourself."

Miss Pink (being human) had a temper; and Mr. Troy had found his way to it.

"If Lady Lydiard believes in my niece's innocence," said Miss Pink, suddenly sitting bolt upright in her chair, "why has my niece been compelled, in justice to herself, to leave Lady Lydiard's house?"

"You will admit, madam," Mr. Troy answered cautiously, "that we are all of us liable, in this wicked world, to be the victims of appearances. Your niece is a victim--an innocent victim. She wisely withdraws from Lady Lydiard's house until appearances are proved to be false and her position is cleared up."

Miss Pink had her reply ready. "That is simply acknowledging, in other words, that my niece is suspected. I am only a woman, Mr. Troy--but it is not quite so easy to mislead me as you seem to suppose."

Mr. Troy's temper was admirably trained. But it began to acknowledge that Miss Pink's powers of irritation could sting to some purpose.

"No intention of misleading you, madam, has ever crossed my mind," he rejoined warmly. "As for your niece, I can tell you this. In all my experience of Lady Lydiard, I never saw her so distressed as she was when Miss Isabel left the house!"

"Indeed!" said Miss Pink, with an incredulous smile. "In my rank of life, when we feel distressed about a person, we do our best to comfort that person by a kind letter or an early visit. But then I am not a lady of title."

"Lady Lydiard engaged herself to call on Miss Isabel in my hearing," said Mr. Troy. "Lady Lydiard is the most generous woman living!"

"Lady Lydiard is here!" cried a joyful voice on the other side of the door.

At the same moment, Isabel burst into the room in a state of excitement which actually ignored the formidable presence of Miss Pink. "I beg your pardon, aunt! I was upstairs at the window, and I saw the carriage stop at the gate. And Tommie has come, too! The darling saw me at the window!" cried the poor girl, her eyes sparkling with delight as a perfect explosion of barking made itself heard over the tramp of horses' feet and the crash of carriage wheels outside.

Miss Pink rose slowly, with a dignity that looked capable of adequately receiving--not one noble lady only, but the whole peerage of England.

"Control yourself, dear Isabel," she said. "No well-bred young lady permits herself to become unduly excited. Stand by my side--a little behind me."

Isabel obeyed. Mr. Troy kept his place, and privately enjoyed his triumph over Miss Pink. If Lady Lydiard had been actually in league with him, she could not have chosen a more opportune time for her visit. A momentary interval passed. The carriage drew up at the door; the horses trampled on the gravel; the bell rung madly; the uproar of Tommie, released from the carriage and clamoring to be let in, redoubled its fury. Never before had such an unruly burst of noises invaded the tranquility of Miss Pink's villa!