

CHAPTER XI.

THE trim little maid-servant ran upstairs from her modest little kitchen, trembling at the terrible prospect of having to open the door. Miss Pink, deafened by the barking, had just time to say, "What a very ill-behaved dog!" when a sound of small objects overthrown in the hall, and a scurrying of furious claws across the oil-cloth, announced that Tommie had invaded the house. As the servant appeared, introducing Lady Lydiard, the dog ran in. He made one frantic leap at Isabel, which would certainly have knocked her down but for the chair that happened to be standing behind her. Received on her lap, the faithful creature half smothered her with his caresses. He barked, he shrieked, in his joy at seeing her again. He jumped off her lap and tore round and round the room at the top of his speed; and every time he passed Miss Pink he showed the whole range of his teeth and snarled ferociously at her ankles. Having at last exhausted his superfluous energy, he leaped back again on Isabel's lap, with his tongue quivering in his open mouth--his tail wagging softly, and his eye on Miss Pink, inquiring how she liked a dog in her drawing-room!

"I hope my dog has not disturbed you, ma'am?" said Lady Lydiard, advancing from the mat at the doorway, on which she had patiently waited until the raptures of Tommie subsided into repose.

Miss Pink, trembling between terror and indignation, acknowledged Lady Lydiard's polite inquiry by a ceremonious bow, and an answer which

administered by implication a dignified reproof. "Your Ladyship's dog does not appear to be a very well-trained animal," the ex-schoolmistress remarked.

"Well trained?" Lady Lydiard repeated, as if the expression was perfectly unintelligible to her. "I don't think you have had much experience of dogs, ma'am." She turned to Isabel, and embraced her tenderly. "Give me a kiss, my dear--you don't know how wretched I have been since you left me." She looked back again at Miss Pink. "You are not, perhaps, aware, ma'am, that my dog is devotedly attached to your niece. A dog's love has been considered by many great men (whose names at the moment escape me) as the most touching and disinterested of all earthly affections." She looked the other way, and discovered the lawyer. "How do you do, Mr. Troy? It's a pleasant surprise to find you here. The house was so dull without Isabel that I really couldn't put off seeing her any longer. When you are more used to Tommie, Miss Pink, you will understand and admire him. You understand and admire him, Isabel--don't you? My child! you are not looking well. I shall take you back with me, when the horses have had their rest. We shall never be happy away from each other."

Having expressed her sentiments, distributed her greetings, and defended her dog--all, as it were, in one breath--Lady Lydiard sat down by Isabel's side, and opened a large green fan that hung at her girdle. "You have no idea, Miss Pink, how fat people suffer in hot weather," said the old lady, using her fan vigorously.

Miss Pink's eyes dropped modestly to the ground--"fat" was such a coarse word to use, if a lady must speak of her own superfluous flesh! "May I offer some refreshment?" Miss Pink asked, mincingly. "A cup of tea?"

Lady Lydiard shook her head.

"A glass of water?"

Lady Lydiard declined this last hospitable proposal with an exclamation of disgust. "Have you got any beer?" she inquired.

"I beg your Ladyship's pardon," said Miss Pink, doubting the evidence of her own ears. "Did you say--beer?"

Lady Lydiard gesticulated vehemently with her fan. "Yes, to be sure! Beer! beer!"

Miss Pink rose, with a countenance expressive of genteel disgust, and rang the bell. "I think you have beer downstairs, Susan?" she said, when the maid appeared at the door.

"Yes, miss."

"A glass of beer for Lady Lydiard," said Miss Pink--under protest.

"Bring it in a jug," shouted her Ladyship, as the maid left the room.

"I like to froth it up for myself," she continued, addressing Miss Pink.

"Isabel sometimes does it for me, when she is at home--don't you, my dear?"

Miss Pink had been waiting her opportunity to assert her own claim to the possession of her own niece, from the time when Lady Lydiard had coolly declared her intention of taking Isabel back with her. The opportunity now presented itself.

"Your Ladyship will pardon me," she said, "if I remark that my niece's home is under my humble roof. I am properly sensible, I hope, of your kindness to Isabel, but while she remains the object of a disgraceful suspicion she remains with me."

Lady Lydiard closed her fan with an angry snap.

"You are completely mistaken, Miss Pink. You may not mean it--but you speak most unjustly if you say that your niece is an object of suspicion to me, or to anybody in my house."

Mr. Troy, quietly listening up to this point now interposed to stop the discussion before it could degenerate into a personal quarrel. His keen observation, aided by his accurate knowledge of his client's character, had plainly revealed to him what was passing in Lady Lydiard's mind. She had entered the house, feeling (perhaps unconsciously) a jealousy of

Miss Pink, as her predecessor in Isabel's affections, and as the natural protectress of the girl under existing circumstances. Miss Pink's reception of her dog had additionally irritated the old lady. She had taken a malicious pleasure in shocking the schoolmistress's sense of propriety--and she was now only too ready to proceed to further extremities on the delicate question of Isabel's justification for leaving her house. For Isabel's own sake, therefore--to say nothing of other reasons--it was urgently desirable to keep the peace between the two ladies. With this excellent object in view, Mr. Troy seized his opportunity of striking into the conversation for the first time.

"Pardon me, Lady Lydiard," he said, "you are speaking of a subject which has been already sufficiently discussed between Miss Pink and myself. I think we shall do better not to dwell uselessly on past events, but to direct our attention to the future. We are all equally satisfied of the complete rectitude of Miss Isabel's conduct, and we are all equally interested in the vindication of her good name."

Whether these temperate words would of themselves have exercised the pacifying influence at which Mr. Troy aimed may be doubtful. But, as he ceased speaking, a powerful auxiliary appeared in the shape of the beer. Lady Lydiard seized on the jug, and filled the tumbler for herself with an unsteady hand. Miss Pink, trembling for the integrity of her carpet, and scandalized at seeing a peeress drinking beer like a washer-woman, forgot the sharp answer that was just rising to her lips when the lawyer interfered. "Small!" said Lady Lydiard, setting down the empty tumbler,

and referring to the quality of the beer. "But very pleasant and refreshing. What's the servant's name? Susan? Well, Susan, I was dying of thirst and you have saved my life. You can leave the jug--I dare say I shall empty it before I go."

Mr. Troy, watching Miss Pink's face, saw that it was time to change the subject again.

"Did you notice the old village, Lady Lydiard, on your way here?" he asked. "The artists consider it one of the most picturesque places in England."

"I noticed that it was a very dirty village," Lady Lydiard answered, still bent on making herself disagreeable to Miss Pink. "The artists may say what they please; I see nothing to admire in rotten cottages, and bad drainage, and ignorant people. I suppose the neighborhood has its advantages. It looks dull enough, to my mind."

Isabel had hitherto modestly restricted her exertions to keeping Tommie quiet on her lap. Like Mr. Troy, she occasionally looked at her aunt--and she now made a timid attempt to defend the neighborhood as a duty that she owed to Miss Pink.

"Oh, my Lady! don't say it's a dull neighborhood," she pleaded. "There are such pretty walks all round us. And, when you get to the hills, the view is beautiful."

Lady Lydiard's answer to this was a little masterpiece of good-humored contempt. She patted Isabel's cheek, and said, "Pooh! Pooh!"

"Your Ladyship does not admire the beauties of Nature," Miss Pink remarked, with a compassionate smile. "As we get older, no doubt our sight begins to fail--"

"And we leave off canting about the beauties of Nature," added Lady Lydiard. "I hate the country. Give me London, and the pleasures of society."

"Come! come! Do the country justice, Lady Lydiard!" put in peace-making Mr. Troy. "There is plenty of society to be found out of London--as good society as the world can show."

"The sort of society," added Miss Pink, "which is to be found, for example, in this neighborhood. Her Ladyship is evidently not aware that persons of distinction surround us, whichever way we turn. I may instance among others, the Honorable Mr. Hardyman--"

Lady Lydiard, in the act of pouring out a second glassful of beer, suddenly set down the jug.

"Who is that you're talking of, Miss Pink?"

"I am talking of our neighbor, Lady Lydiard--the Honorable Mr. Hardyman."

"Do you mean Alfred Hardyman--the man who breeds the horses?"

"The distinguished gentleman who owns the famous stud-farm," said Miss Pink, correcting the bluntly-direct form in which Lady Lydiard had put her question.

"Is he in the habit of visiting here?" the old lady inquired, with a sudden appearance of anxiety. "Do you know him?"

"I had the honor of being introduced to Mr. Hardyman at our last flower show," Miss Pink replied. "He has not yet favored me with a visit."

Lady Lydiard's anxiety appeared to be to some extent relieved.

"I knew that Hardyman's farm was in this county," she said; "but I had no notion that it was in the neighborhood of South Morden. How far away is he--ten or a dozen miles, eh?"

"Not more than three miles," answered Miss Pink. "We consider him quite a near neighbor of ours."

Renewed anxiety showed itself in Lady Lydiard. She looked round sharply at Isabel. The girl's head was bent so low over the rough head of the

dog that her face was almost entirely concealed from view. So far as appearances went, she seemed to be entirely absorbed in fondling Tommie. Lady Lydiard roused her with a tap of the green fan.

"Take Tommie out, Isabel, for a run in the garden," she said. "He won't sit still much longer--and he may annoy Miss Pink. Mr. Troy, will you kindly help Isabel to keep my ill-trained dog in order?"

Mr. Troy got on his feet, and, not very willingly, followed Isabel out of the room. "They will quarrel now, to a dead certainty!" he thought to himself, as he closed the door. "Have you any idea of what this means?" he said to his companion, as he joined her in the hall. "What has Mr. Hardyman done to excite all this interest in him?"

Isabel's guilty color rose. She knew perfectly well that Hardyman's unconcealed admiration of her was the guiding motive of Lady Lydiard's inquiries. If she had told the truth, Mr. Troy would have unquestionably returned to the drawing-room, with or without an acceptable excuse for intruding himself. But Isabel was a woman; and her answer, it is needless to say, was "I don't know, I'm sure."

In the mean time, the interview between the two ladies began in a manner which would have astonished Mr. Troy--they were both silent. For once in her life Lady Lydiard was considering what she should say, before she said it. Miss Pink, on her side, naturally waited to hear what object her Ladyship had in view--waited, until her small reserve of patience

gave way. Urged by irresistible curiosity, she spoke first.

"Have you anything to say to me in private?" she asked.

Lady Lydiard had not got to the end of her reflections. She said

"Yes!"--and she said no more.

"Is it anything relating to my niece?" persisted Miss Pink.

Still immersed in her reflections, Lady Lydiard suddenly rose to the surface, and spoke her mind, as usual.

"About your niece, ma'am. The other day Mr. Hardyman called at my house, and saw Isabel."

"Yes," said Miss Pink, politely attentive, but not in the least interested, so far.

"That's not all ma'am. Mr. Hardyman admires Isabel; he owned it to me himself in so many words."

Miss Pink listened, with a courteous inclination of her head. She looked mildly gratified, nothing more. Lady Lydiard proceeded:

"You and I think differently on many matters," she said. "But we are both agreed, I am sure, in feeling the sincerest interest in Isabel's

welfare. I beg to suggest to you, Miss Pink, that Mr. Hardyman, as a near neighbor of yours, is a very undesirable neighbor while Isabel remains in your house."

Saying those words, under a strong conviction of the serious importance of the subject, Lady Lydiard insensibly recovered the manner and resumed the language which befitted a lady of her rank. Miss Pink, noticing the change, set it down to an expression of pride on the part of her visitor which, in referring to Isabel, assailed indirectly the social position of Isabel's aunt.

"I fail entirely to understand what your Ladyship means," she said coldly.

Lady Lydiard, on her side, looked in undisguised amazement at Miss Pink.

"Haven't I told you already that Mr. Hardyman admires your niece?" she asked.

"Naturally," said Miss Pink. "Isabel inherits her lamented mother's personal advantages. If Mr. Hardyman admires her, Mr. Hardyman shows his good taste."

Lady Lydiard's eyes opened wider and wider in wonder. "My good lady!" she exclaimed, "is it possible you don't know that when a man admires

a women he doesn't stop there? He falls in love with her (as the saying is) next."

"So I have heard," said Miss Pink.

"So you have heard?" repeated Lady Lydiard. "If Mr. Hardyman finds his way to Isabel I can tell you what you will see. Catch the two together, ma'am--and you will see Mr. Hardyman making love to your niece."

"Under due restrictions, Lady Lydiard, and with my permission first obtained, of course, I see no objection to Mr. Hardyman paying his addresses to Isabel."

"The woman is mad!" cried Lady Lydiard. "Do you actually suppose, Miss Pink, that Alfred Hardyman could, by any earthly possibility, marry your niece!"

Not even Miss Pink's politeness could submit to such a question as this. She rose indignantly from her chair. "As you aware, Lady Lydiard, that the doubt you have just expressed is an insult to my niece, and a insult to Me?"

"Are you aware of who Mr. Hardyman really is?" retorted her Ladyship.

"Or do you judge of his position by the vocation in life which he has perversely chosen to adopt? I can tell you, if you do, that Alfred

Hardyman is the younger son of one of the oldest barons in the English Peerage, and that his mother is related by marriage to the Royal family of Wurtemberg."

Miss Pink received the full shock of this information without receding from her position by a hair-breadth.

"An English gentlewoman offers a fit alliance to any man living who seeks her hand in marriage," said Miss Pink. "Isabel's mother (you may not be aware of it) was the daughter of an English clergyman--"

"And Isabel's father was a chemist in a country town," added Lady Lydiard.

"Isabel's father," rejoined Miss Pink, "was attached in a most responsible capacity to the useful and honorable profession of Medicine. Isabel is, in the strictest sense of the word, a young gentlewoman. If you contradict that for a single instant, Lady Lydiard, you will oblige me to leave the room."

Those last words produced a result which Miss Pink had not anticipated--they roused Lady Lydiard to assert herself. As usual in such cases, she rose superior to her own eccentricity. Confronting Miss Pink, she now spoke and looked with the gracious courtesy and the unassuming self-confidence of the order to which she belonged.

"For Isabel's own sake, and for the quieting of my conscience," she answered, "I will say one word more, Miss Pink, before I relieve you of my presence. Considering my age and my opportunities, I may claim to know quite as much as you do of the laws and customs which regulate society in our time. Without contesting your niece's social position--and without the slightest intention of insulting you--I repeat that the rank which Mr. Hardyman inherits makes it simply impossible for him even to think of marrying Isabel. You will do well not to give him any opportunities of meeting with her alone. And you will do better still (seeing that he is so near a neighbor of yours) if you permit Isabel to return to my protection, for a time at least. I will wait to hear from you when you have thought the matter over at your leisure. In the mean time, if I have inadvertently offended you, I ask your pardon--and I wish you good-evening."

She bowed, and walked to the door. Miss Pink, as resolute as ever in maintaining her pretensions, made an effort to match the great lady on her own ground.

"Before you go, Lady Lydiard, I beg to apologize if I have spoken too warmly on my side," she said. "Permit me to send for your carriage."

"Thank you, Miss Pink. My carriage is only at the village inn. I shall enjoy a little walk in the cool evening air. Mr. Troy, I have no doubt, will give me his arm." She bowed once more, and quietly left the room.

Reaching the little back garden of the villa, through an open door at the further end of the hall, Lady Lydiard found Tommie rolling luxuriously on Miss Pink's flower-beds, and Isabel and Mr. Troy in close consultation on the gravel walk.

She spoke to the lawyer first.

"They are baiting the horses at the inn," she said. "I want your arm, Mr. Troy, as far as the village--and, in return, I will take you back to London with me. I have to ask your advice about one or two little matters, and this is a good opportunity."

"With the greatest pleasure, Lady Lydiard. I suppose I must say good-by to Miss Pink?"

"A word of advice to you, Mr. Troy. Take care how you ruffle Miss Pink's sense of her own importance. Another word for your private ear. Miss Pink is a fool."

On the lawyer's withdrawal, Lady Lydiard put her arm fondly round Isabel's waist. "What were you and Mr. Troy so busy in talking about?" she asked.

"We were talking, my Lady, about tracing the person who stole the money," Isabel answered, rather sadly. "It seems a far more difficult matter than I supposed it to be. I try not to lose patience and

hope--but it is a little hard to feel that appearances are against me, and to wait day after day in vain for the discovery that is to set me right."

"You are a dear good child," said Lady Lydiard; "and you are more precious to me than ever. Don't despair, Isabel. With Mr. Troy's means of inquiring, and with my means of paying, the discovery of the thief cannot be much longer delayed. If you don't return to me soon, I shall come back and see you again. Your aunt hates the sight of me--but I don't care two straws for that," remarked Lady Lydiard, showing the undignified side of her character once more. "Listen to me, Isabel! I have no wish to lower your aunt in your estimation, but I feel far more confidence in your good sense than in hers. Mr. Hardyman's business has taken him to France for the present. It is at least possible that you may meet with him on his return. If you do, keep him at a distance, my dear--politely, of course. There! there! you needn't turn red; I am not blaming you; I am only giving you a little good advice. In your position you cannot possibly be too careful. Here is Mr. Troy! You must come to the gate with us, Isabel, or we shall never get Tommie away from you; I am only his second favorite; you have the first place in his affections. God bless and prosper you, my child!--I wish to heaven you were going back to London with me! Well, Mr. Troy, how have you done with Miss Pink? Have you offended that terrible 'gentlewoman' (hateful word!); or has it been all the other way, and has she given you a kiss at parting?"

Mr. Troy smiled mysteriously, and changed the subject. His brief parting

interview with the lady of the house was not of a nature to be rashly related. Miss Pink had not only positively assured him that her visitor was the most ill-bred woman she had ever met with, but had further accused Lady Lydiard of shaking her confidence in the aristocracy of her native country. "For the first time in my life," said Miss Pink, "I feel that something is to be said for the Republican point of view; and I am not indisposed to admit that the constitution of the United States has its advantages!"