

CHAPTER XIII.

WHILE the strange proceedings of the steward were the subject of conversation between Lady Lydiard and Mr. Troy, Moody was alone in his room, occupied in writing to Isabel. Being unwilling that any eyes but his own should see the address, he had himself posted his letter; the time that he had chosen for leaving the house proving, unfortunately, to be also the time proposed by her Ladyship for his interview with the lawyer. In ten minutes after the footman had reported his absence, Moody returned. It was then too late to present himself in the drawing-room. In the interval, Mr. Troy had taken his leave, and Moody's position had dropped a degree lower in Lady Lydiard's estimation.

Isabel received her letter by the next morning's post. If any justification of Mr. Troy's suspicions had been needed, the terms in which Moody wrote would have amply supplied it.

"DEAR ISABEL (I hope I may call you 'Isabel' without offending you, in your present trouble?)--I have a proposal to make, which, whether you accept it or not, I beg you will keep a secret from every living creature but ourselves. You will understand my request, when I add that these lines relate to the matter of tracing the stolen bank-note.

"I have been privately in communication with a person in London, who is, as I believe, the one person competent to help us in gaining our end.

He has already made many inquiries in private. With some of them I am acquainted; the rest he has thus far kept to himself. The person to whom I allude, particularly wishes to have half an hour's conversation with you in my presence. I am bound to warn you that he is a very strange and very ugly old man; and I can only hope that you will look over his personal appearance in consideration of what he is likely to do for your future advantage.

"Can you conveniently meet us, at the further end of the row of villas in which your aunt lives, the day after to-morrow, at four o'clock? Let me have a line to say if you will keep the appointment, and if the hour named will suit you. And believe me your devoted friend and servant,

"ROBERT MOODY."

The lawyer's warning to her to be careful how she yielded too readily to any proposal of Moody's recurred to Isabel's mind while she read those lines. Being pledged to secrecy, she could not consult Mr. Troy--she was left to decide for herself.

No obstacle stood in the way of her free choice of alternatives. After their early dinner at three o'clock, Miss Pink habitually retired to her own room "to meditate," as she expressed it. Her "meditations" inevitably ended in a sound sleep of some hours; and during that interval Isabel was at liberty to do as she pleased. After considerable

hesitation, her implicit belief in Moody's truth and devotion, assisted by a strong feeling of curiosity to see the companion with whom the steward had associated himself, decided Isabel on consenting to keep the appointment.

Taking up her position beyond the houses, on the day and at the hour mentioned by Moody, she believed herself to be fully prepared for the most unfavorable impression which the most disagreeable of all possible strangers could produce.

But the first appearance of Old Sharon--as dirty as ever, clothed in a long, frowzy, gray overcoat, with his pug-dog at his heels, and his smoke-blackened pipe in his mouth, with a tan white hat on his head, which looked as if it had been picked up in a gutter, a hideous leer in his eyes, and a jaunty trip in his walk--took her so completely by surprise that she could only return Moody's friendly greeting by silently pressing his hand. As for Moody's companion, to look at him for a second time was more than she had resolution to do. She kept her eyes fixed on the pug-dog, and with good reason; as far as appearances went, he was indisputably the nobler animal of the two.

Under the circumstances, the interview threatened to begin in a very embarrassing manner. Moody, disheartened by Isabel's silence, made no attempt to set the conversation going; he looked as if he meditated a hasty retreat to the railway station which he had just left.

Fortunately, he had at his side the right man (for once) in the right

place. Old Sharon's effrontery was equal to any emergency.

"I am not a nice-looking old man, my dear, am I?" he said, leering at Isabel with cunning, half-closed eyes. "Bless your heart! you'll soon get used to me! You see, I am the sort of color, as they say at the linen-drapers, that doesn't wash well. It's all through love; upon my life it is! Early in the present century I had my young affections blighted; and I've neglected myself ever since. Disappointment takes different forms, miss, in different men. I don't think I have had heart enough to brush my hair for the last fifty years. She was a magnificent woman, Mr. Moody, and she dropped me like a hot potato. Dreadful! dreadful! Let us pursue this painful subject no further. Ha! here's a pretty country! Here's a nice blue sky! I admire the country, miss; I see so little of it, you know. Have you any objection to walk along into the fields? The fields, my dear, bring out all the poetry of my nature. Where's the dog? Here, Puggy! Puggy! hunt about, my man, and find some dog-grass. Does his inside good, you know, after a meat diet in London. Lord! how I feel my spirits rising in this fine air! Does my complexion look any brighter, miss? Will you run a race with me, Mr. Moody, or will you oblige me with a back at leap-frog? I'm not mad, my dear young lady; I'm only merry. I live, you see, in the London stink; and the smell of the hedges and the wild flowers is too much for me at first. It gets into my head, it does. I'm drunk! As I live by bread, I'm drunk on fresh air! Oh! what a jolly day! Oh! how young and innocent I do feel!" Here his innocence got the better of him, and he began to sing, "I wish I were a little fly, in my love's bosom for to lie!" "Hullo! here we are

on the nice soft grass! and, oh, my gracious! there's a bank running down into a hollow! I can't stand that, you know. Mr. Moody, hold my hat, and take the greatest care of it. Here goes for a roll down the bank!"

He handed his horrible hat to the astonished Moody, laid himself flat on the top of the bank, and deliberately rolled down it, exactly as he might have done when he was a boy. The tails of his long gray coat flew madly in the wind: the dog pursued him, jumping over him, and barking with delight; he shouted and screamed in answer to the dog as he rolled over and over faster and faster; and, when he got up, on the level ground, and called out cheerfully to his companions standing above him, "I say, you two, I feel twenty years younger already!"--human gravity could hold out no longer. The sad and silent Moody smiled, and Isabel burst into fits of laughter.

"There," he said "didn't I tell you you would get used to me, Miss? There's a deal of life left in the old man yet--isn't there? Shy me down my hat, Mr. Moody. And now we'll get to business!" He turned round to the dog still barking at his heels. "Business, Puggy!" he called out sharply, and Puggy instantly shut up his mouth, and said no more.

"Well, now," Old Sharon resumed when he had joined his friends and had got his breath again, "let's have a little talk about yourself, miss. Has Mr. Moody told you who I am, and what I want with you? Very good. May I offer you my arm? No! You like to be independent, don't you? All

right--I don't object. I am an amiable old man, I am. About this Lady Lydiard, now? Suppose you tell me how you first got acquainted with her?"

In some surprise at this question, Isabel told her little story.

Observing Sharon's face while she was speaking, Moody saw that he was not paying the smallest attention to the narrative. His sharp, shameless black eyes watched the girl's face absently; his gross lips curled upwards in a sardonic and self-satisfied smile. He was evidently setting a trap for her of some kind. Without a word of warning--while Isabel was in the middle of a sentence--the trap opened, with the opening of Old Sharon's lips.

"I say," he burst out. "How came you to seal her Ladyship's letter--eh?"

The question bore no sort of relation, direct or indirect, to what Isabel happened to be saying at the moment. In the sudden surprise of hearing it, she started and fixed her eyes in astonishment on Sharon's face. The old vagabond chuckled to himself. "Did you see that?" he whispered to Moody. "I beg your pardon, miss," he went on; "I won't interrupt you again. Lord! how interesting it is!--ain't it, Mr. Moody? Please to go on, miss."

But Isabel, though she spoke with perfect sweetness and temper, declined to go on. "I had better tell you, sir, how I came to seal her Ladyship's

letter," she said. "If I may venture on giving my opinion, that part of my story seems to be the only part of it which relates to your business with me to-day."

Without further preface she described the circumstances which had led to her assuming the perilous responsibility of sealing the letter. Old Sharon's wandering attention began to wander again: he was evidently occupied in setting another trap. For the second time he interrupted Isabel in the middle of a sentence. Suddenly stopping short, he pointed to some sheep, at the further end of the field through which they happened to be passing at the moment.

"There's a pretty sight," he said. "There are the innocent sheep a-feeding--all following each other as usual. And there's the sly dog waiting behind the gate till the sheep wants his services. Reminds me of Old Sharon and the public!" He chuckled over the discovery of the remarkable similarity between the sheep-dog and himself, and the sheep and the public--and then burst upon Isabel with a second question. "I say! didn't you look at the letter before you sealed it?"

"Certainly not!" Isabel answered.

"Not even at the address?"

"No!"

"Thinking of something else--eh?"

"Very likely," said Isabel.

"Was it your new bonnet, my dear?"

Isabel laughed. "Women are not always thinking of their new bonnets," she answered.

Old Sharon, to all appearance, dropped the subject there. He lifted his lean brown forefinger and pointed again--this time to a house at a short distance from them. "That's a farmhouse, surely?" he said. "I'm thirsty after my roll down the hill. Do you think, Miss, they would give me a drink of milk?"

"I am sure they would," said Isabel. "I know the people. Shall I go and ask them?"

"Thank you, my dear. One word more before you go. About the sealing of that letter? What could you have been thinking of while you were doing it?" He looked hard at her, and took her suddenly by the arm. "Was it your sweetheart?" he asked, in a whisper.

The question instantly reminded Isabel that she had been thinking of Hardyman while she sealed the letter. She blushed as the remembrance crossed her mind. Robert, noticing the embarrassment, spoke sharply to

Old Sharon. "You have no right to put such a question to a young lady," he said. "Be a little more careful for the future."

"There! there! don't be hard on me," pleaded the old rogue. "An ugly old man like me may make his innocent little joke--eh, miss? I'm sure you're too sweet-tempered to be angry when I meant no offense.. Show me that you bear no malice. Go, like a forgiving young angel, and ask for the milk."

Nobody appealed to Isabel's sweetness of temper in vain. "I will do it with pleasure," she said--and hastened away to the farmhouse.