

CHAPTER XV.

ISABEL looked down at the letter in her hand--considered it in silence--and turned to Moody. "I feel tempted to open it already," she said.

"After giving your promise?" Moody gently remonstrated.

Isabel met that objection with a woman's logic.

"Does a promise matter?" she asked, "when one gives it to a dirty, disreputable, presuming old wretch like Mr. Sharon? It's a wonder to me that you trust such a creature. I wouldn't!"

"I doubted him just as you do," Moody answered, "when I first saw him in company with Mr. Troy. But there was something in the advice he gave us at that first consultation which altered my opinion of him for the better. I dislike his appearance and his manners as much as you do--I may even say I felt ashamed of bringing such a person to see you. And yet I can't think that I have acted unwisely in employing Mr. Sharon."

Isabel listened absently. She had something more to say, and she was considering how she should say it. "May I ask you a bold question?" she began.

"Any question you like."

"Have you--" she hesitated and looked embarrassed. "Have you paid Mr. Sharon much money?" she resumed, suddenly rallying her courage. Instead of answering, Moody suggested that it was time to think of returning to Miss Pink's villa. "Your aunt may be getting anxious about you." he said.

Isabel led the way out of the farmhouse in silence. She reverted to Mr. Sharon and the money, however, as they returned by the path across the fields.

"I am sure you will not be offended with me," she said gently, "if I own that I am uneasy about the expense. I am allowing you to use your purse as if it was mine--and I have hardly any savings of my own."

Moody entreated her not to speak of it. "How can I put my money to a better use than in serving your interests?" he asked. "My one object in life is to relieve you of your present anxieties. I shall be the happiest man living if you only owe a moment's happiness to my exertions!"

Isabel took his hand, and looked at him with grateful tears in her eyes.

"How good you are to me, Mr. Moody!" she said. "I wish I could tell you how deeply I feel your kindness."

"You can do it easily," he answered, with a smile. "Call me 'Robert'--don't call me 'Mr. Moody.'"

She took his arm with a sudden familiarity that charmed him. "If you had been my brother I should have called you 'Robert,'" she said; "and no brother could have been more devoted to me than you are."

He looked eagerly at her bright face turned up to his. "May I never hope to be something nearer and dearer to you than a brother?" he asked timidly.

She hung her head and said nothing. Moody's memory recalled Sharon's coarse reference to her "sweetheart." She had blushed when he put the question? What had she done when Moody put his question? Her face answered for her--she had turned pale; she was looking more serious than usual. Ignorant as he was of the ways of women, his instinct told him that this was a bad sign. Surely her rising color would have confessed it, if time and gratitude together were teaching her to love him? He sighed as the inevitable conclusion forced itself on his mind.

"I hope I have not offended you?" he said sadly.

"Oh, no."

"I wish I had not spoken. Pray don't think that I am serving you with any selfish motive."

"I don't think that, Robert. I never could think it of you."

He was not quite satisfied yet. "Even if you were to marry some other man," he went on earnestly, "it would make no difference in what I am trying to do for you. No matter what I might suffer, I should still go on--for your sake."

"Why do you talk so?" she burst out passionately. "No other man has such a claim as you to my gratitude and regard. How can you let such thoughts come to you? I have done nothing in secret. I have no friends who are not known to you. Be satisfied with that, Robert--and let us drop the subject."

"Never to take it up again?" he asked, with the infatuated pertinacity of a man clinging to his last hope.

At other times and under other circumstances, Isabel might have answered him sharply. She spoke with perfect gentleness now.

"Not for the present," she said. "I don't know my own heart. Give me time."

His gratitude caught at those words, as the drowning man is said to catch at the proverbial straw. He lifted her hand, and suddenly and fondly pressed his lips on it. She showed no confusion. Was she sorry

for him, poor wretch!--and was that all?

They walked on, arm-in-arm, in silence.

Crossing the last field, they entered again on the high road leading to the row of villas in which Miss Pink lived. The minds of both were preoccupied. Neither of them noticed a gentleman approaching on horseback, followed by a mounted groom. He was advancing slowly, at the walking-pace of his horse, and he only observed the two foot-passengers when he was close to them.

"Miss Isabel!"

She started, looked up, and discovered--Alfred Hardyman.

He was dressed in a perfectly-made travelling suit of light brown, with a peaked felt hat of a darker shade of the same color, which, in a picturesque sense, greatly improved his personal appearance. His pleasure at discovering Isabel gave the animation to his features which they wanted on ordinary occasions. He sat his horse, a superb hunter, easily and gracefully. His light amber-colored gloves fitted him perfectly. His obedient servant, on another magnificent horse, waited behind him. He looked the impersonation of rank and breeding--of wealth and prosperity. What a contrast, in a woman's eyes, to the shy, pale, melancholy man, in the ill-fitting black clothes, with the wandering, uneasy glances, who stood beneath him, and felt, and showed that he

felt, his inferior position keenly! In spite of herself, the treacherous blush flew over Isabel's face, in Moody's presence, and with Moody's eyes distrustfully watching her.

"This is a piece of good fortune that I hardly hoped for," said Hardyman, his cool, quiet, dreary way of speaking quickened as usual, in Isabel's presence. "I only got back from France this morning, and I called on Lady Lydiard in the hope of seeing you. She was not at home--and you were in the country--and the servants didn't know the address. I could get nothing out of them, except that you were on a visit to a relation." He looked at Moody while he was speaking. "Haven't I seen you before?" he said, carelessly. "Yes; at Lady Lydiard's. You're her steward, are you not? How d'ye do?" Moody, with his eyes on the ground, answered silently by a bow. Hardyman, perfectly indifferent whether Lady Lydiard's steward spoke or not, turned on his saddle and looked admiringly at Isabel. "I begin to think I am a lucky man at last," he went on with a smile. "I was jogging along to my farm, and despairing of ever seeing Miss Isabel again--and Miss Isabel herself meets me at the roadside! I wonder whether you are as glad to see me as I am to see you? You won't tell me--eh? May I ask you something else? Are you staying in our neighborhood?"

There was no alternative before Isabel but to answer this last question. Hardyman had met her out walking, and had no doubt drawn the inevitable inference--although he was too polite to say so in plain words.

"Yes, sir," she answered, shyly, "I am staying in this neighborhood."

"And who is your relation?" Hardyman proceeded, in his easy, matter-of-course way. "Lady Lydiard told me, when I had the pleasure of meeting you at her house, that you had an aunt living in the country. I have a good memory, Miss Isabel, for anything that I hear about You! It's your aunt, isn't it? Yes? I know everybody about hew. What is your aunt's name?"

Isabel, still resting her hand on Robert's arm, felt it tremble a little as Hardyman made this last inquiry. If she had been speaking to one of her equals she would have known how to dispose of the question without directly answering it. But what could she say to the magnificent gentleman on the stately horse? He had only to send his servant into the village to ask who the young lady from London was staying with, and the answer, in a dozen mouths at least, would direct him to her aunt. She cast one appealing look at Moody and pronounced the distinguished name of Miss Pink.

"Miss Pink?" Hardyman repeated. "Surely I know Miss Pink?" (He had not the faintest remembrances of her.) "Where did I meet her last?" (He ran over in his memory the different local festivals at which strangers had been introduced to him.) "Was it at the archery meeting? or at the grammar-school when the prizes were given? No? It must have been at the flower show, then, surely?"

It had been at the flower show. Isabel had heard it from Miss Pink fifty times at least, and was obliged to admit it now.

"I am quite ashamed of never having called," Hardyman proceeded. "The fact is, I have so much to do. I am a bad one at paying visits. Are you on your way home? Let me follow you and make my apologies personally to Miss Pink."

Moody looked at Isabel. It was only a momentary glance, but she perfectly understood it.

"I am afraid, sir, my aunt cannot have the honor of seeing you to-day," she said.

Hardyman was all compliance. He smiled and patted his horse's neck. "To-morrow, then," he said. "My compliments, and I will call in the afternoon. Let me see: Miss Pink lives at--?" He waited, as if he expected Isabel to assist his treacherous memory once more. She hesitated again. Hardyman looked round at his groom. The groom could find out the address, even if he did not happen to know it already. Besides, there was the little row of houses visible at the further end of the road. Isabel pointed to the villas, as a necessary concession to good manners, before the groom could anticipate her. "My aunt lives there, sir; at the house called The Lawn."

"Ah! to be sure!" said Hardyman. "I oughtn't to have wanted reminding;

but I have so many things to think of at the farm. And I am afraid I must be getting old--my memory isn't as good as it was. I am so glad to have seen you, Miss Isabel. You and your aunt must come and look at my horses. Do you like horses? Are you fond of riding? I have a quiet roan mare that is used to carrying ladies; she would be just the thing for you. Did I beg you to give my best compliments to your aunt? Yes? How well you are looking! our air here agrees with you. I hope I haven't kept you standing too long? I didn't think of it in the pleasure of meeting you. Good-by, Miss Isabel; good-by, till to-morrow!"

He took off his hat to Isabel, nodded to Moody, and pursued his way to the farm.

Isabel looked at her companion. His eyes were still on the ground. Pale, silent, motionless, he waited by her like a dog, until she gave the signal of walking on again towards the house.

"You are not angry with me for speaking to Mr. Hardyman?" she asked, anxiously.

He lifted his head at the sound of her voice. "Angry with you, my dear! why should I be angry?"

"You seem so changed, Robert, since we met Mr. Hardyman. I couldn't help speaking to him--could I?"

"Certainly not."

They moved on towards the villa. Isabel was still uneasy. There was something in Moody's silent submission to all that she said and all that she did which pained and humiliated her. "You're not jealous?" she said, smiling timidly.

He tried to speak lightly on his side. "I have no time to be jealous while I have your affairs to look after," he answered.

She pressed his arm tenderly. "Never fear, Robert, that new friends will make me forget the best and dearest friend who is now at my side." She paused, and looked up at him with a compassionate fondness that was very pretty to see. "I can keep out of the way to-morrow, when Mr. Hardyman calls," she said. "It is my aunt he is coming to see--not me."

It was generously meant. But while her mind was only occupied with the present time, Moody's mind was looking into the future. He was learning the hard lesson of self-sacrifice already. "Do what you think is right," he said quietly; "don't think of me."

They reached the gate of the villa. He held out his hand to say good-by.

"Won't you come in?" she asked. "Do come in!"

"Not now, my dear. I must get back to London as soon as I can. There is

some more work to be done for you, and the sooner I do it the better."

She heard his excuse without heeding it.

"You are not like yourself, Robert," she said. "Why is it? What are you thinking of?"

He was thinking of the bright blush that overspread her face when Hardyman first spoke to her; he was thinking of the invitation to her to see the stud-farm, and to ride the roan mare; he was thinking of the utterly powerless position in which he stood towards Isabel and towards the highly-born gentleman who admired her. But he kept his doubts and fears to himself. "The train won't wait for me," he said, and held out his hand once more.

She was not only perplexed; she was really distressed. "Don't take leave of me in that cold way!" she pleaded. Her eyes dropped before his, and her lips trembled a little. "Give me a kiss, Robert, at parting." She said those bold words softly and sadly, out of the depth of her pity for him. He started; his face brightened suddenly; his sinking hope rose again. In another moment the change came; in another moment he understood her. As he touched her cheek with his lips, he turned pale again. "Don't quite forget me," he said, in low, faltering tones--and left her.

Miss Pink met Isabel in the hall. Refreshed by unbroken repose, the

ex-schoolmistress was in the happiest frame of mind for the reception of her niece's news.

Informed that Moody had travelled to South Morden to personally report the progress of the inquiries, Miss Pink highly approved of him as a substitute for Mr. Troy. "Mr. Moody, as a banker's son, is a gentleman by birth," she remarked; "he has condescended, in becoming Lady Lydiard's steward. What I saw of him, when he came here with you, prepossessed me in his favor. He has my confidence, Isabel, as well as yours--he is in every respect a superior person to Mr. Troy. Did you meet any friends, my dear, when you were out walking?"

The answer to this question produced a species of transformation in Miss Pink. The rapturous rank-worship of her nation feasted, so to speak, on Hardyman's message. She looked taller and younger than usual--she was all smiles and sweetness. "At last, Isabel, you have seen birth and breeding under their right aspect," she said. "In the society of Lady Lydiard, you cannot possibly have formed correct ideas of the English aristocracy. Observe Mr. Hardyman when he does me the honor to call to-morrow--and you will see the difference."

"Mr. Hardyman is your visitor, aunt--not mine. I was going to ask you to let me remain upstairs in my room."

Miss Pink was unaffectedly shocked. "This is what you learn at Lady Lydiard's!" she observed. "No, Isabel, your absence would be a breach

of good manners--I cannot possibly permit it. You will be present to receive our distinguished friend with me. And mind this!" added Miss Pink, in her most impressive manner, "If Mr. Hardyman should by any chance ask why you have left Lady Lydiard, not one word about those disgraceful circumstances which connect you with the loss of the banknote! I should sink into the earth if the smallest hint of what has really happened should reach Mr. Hardyman's ears. My child, I stand towards you in the place of your lamented mother; I have the right to command your silence on this horrible subject, and I do imperatively command it."

In these words foolish Miss Pink sowed the seed for the harvest of trouble that was soon to come.