

CHAPTER XVI.

PAYING his court to the ex-schoolmistress on the next day, Hardyman made such excellent use of his opportunities that the visit to the stud-farm took place on the day after. His own carriage was placed at the disposal of Isabel and her aunt; and his own sister was present to confer special distinction on the reception of Miss Pink.

In a country like England, which annually suspends the sitting of its Legislature in honor of a horse-race, it is only natural and proper that the comfort of the horses should be the first object of consideration at a stud-farm. Nine-tenths of the land at Hardyman's farm was devoted, in one way or another, to the noble quadruped with the low forehead and the long nose. Poor humanity was satisfied with second-rate and third-rate accommodation. The ornamental grounds, very poorly laid out, were also very limited in extent--and, as for the dwelling-house, it was literally a cottage. A parlor and a kitchen, a smoking-room, a bed-room, and a spare chamber for a friend, all scantily furnished, sufficed for the modest wants of the owner of the property. If you wished to feast your eyes on luxury you went to the stables.

The stud-farm being described, the introduction to Hardyman's sister follows in due course.

The Honorable Lavinia Hardyman was, as all persons in society know, married rather late in life to General Drumblade. It is saying a great

deal, but it is not saying too much, to describe Mrs. Drumblade as the most mischievous woman of her age in all England. Scandal was the breath of her life; to place people in false positions, to divulge secrets and destroy characters, to undermine friendships, and aggravate enmities--these were the sources of enjoyment from which this dangerous woman drew the inexhaustible fund of good spirits that made her a brilliant light in the social sphere. She was one of the privileged sinners of modern society. The worst mischief that she could work was ascribed to her "exuberant vitality." She had that ready familiarity of manner which is (in her class) so rarely discovered to be insolence in disguise. Her power of easy self-assertion found people ready to accept her on her own terms wherever she went. She was one of those big, overpowering women, with blunt manners, voluble tongues, and goggle eyes, who carry everything before them. The highest society modestly considered itself in danger of being dull in the absence of Mrs. Drumblade. Even Hardyman himself--who saw as little of her as possible, whose frankly straightforward nature recoiled by instinct from contact with his sister--could think of no fitter person to make Miss Pink's reception agreeable to her, while he was devoting his own attentions to her niece. Mrs. Drumblade accepted the position thus offered with the most amiable readiness. In her own private mind she placed an interpretation on her brother's motives which did him the grossest injustice. She believed that Hardyman's designs on Isabel contemplated the most profligate result. To assist this purpose, while the girl's nearest relative was supposed to be taking care of her, was Mrs. Drumblade's idea of "fun." Her worst enemies admitted that the honorable

Lavia had redeeming qualities, and owned that a keen sense of humor was one of her merits.

Was Miss Pink a likely person to resist the fascinations of Mrs.

Drumblade? Alas, for the ex-schoolmistress! before she had been five minutes at the farm, Hardyman's sister had fished for her, caught her, landed her. Poor Miss Pink!

Mrs. Drumblade could assume a grave dignity of manner when the occasion called for it. She was grave, she was dignified, when Hardyman performed the ceremonies of introduction. She would not say she was charmed to meet Miss Pink--the ordinary slang of society was not for Miss Pink's ears--she would say she felt this introduction as a privilege. It was so seldom one met with persons of trained intellect in society. Mrs. Drumblade was already informed of Miss Pink's earlier triumphs in the instruction of youth. Mrs. Drumblade had not been blessed with children herself; but she had nephews and nieces, and she was anxious about their education, especially the nieces. What a sweet, modest girl Miss Isabel was! The fondest wish she could form for her nieces would be that they should resemble Miss Isabel when they grew up. The question was, as to the best method of education. She would own that she had selfish motives in becoming acquainted with Miss Pink. They were at the farm, no doubt, to see Alfred's horses. Mrs. Drumblade did not understand horses; her interest was in the question of education. She might even confess that she had accepted Alfred's invitation in the hope of hearing Miss Pink's views. There would be opportunities, she trusted, for a little

instructive conversation on that subject. It was, perhaps, ridiculous to talk, at her age, of feeling as if she was Miss Pink's pupil; and yet it exactly expressed the nature of the aspiration which was then in her mind.

In these terms, feeling her way with the utmost nicety, Mrs. Drumblade wound the net of flattery round and round Miss Pink until her hold on that innocent lady was, in every sense of the word, secure. Before half the horses had been passed under review, Hardyman and Isabel were out of sight, and Mrs. Drumblade and Miss Pink were lost in the intricacies of the stables. "Excessively stupid of me! We had better go back, and establish ourselves comfortably in the parlor. When my brother misses us, he and your charming niece will return to look for us in the cottage." Under cover of this arrangement the separation became complete. Miss Pink held forth on education to Mrs. Drumblade in the parlor; while Hardyman and Isabel were on their way to a paddock at the farthest limits of the property.

"I am afraid you are getting a little tired," said Hardyman. "Won't you take my arm?"

Isabel was on her guard: she had not forgotten what Lady Lydiard had said to her. "No, thank you, Mr. Hardyman; I am a better walker than you think."

Hardyman continued the conversation in his blunt, resolute way. "I

wonder whether you will believe me," he asked, "if I tell you that this is one of the happiest days of my life."

"I should think you were always happy," Isabel cautiously replied, "having such a pretty place to live in as this."

Hardyman met that answer with one of his quietly-positive denials. "A man is never happy by himself," he said. "He is happy with a companion. For instance, I am happy with you."

Isabel stopped and looked back. Hardyman's language was becoming a little too explicit. "Surely we have lost Mrs. Drumblade and my aunt," she said. "I don't see them anywhere."

"You will see them directly; they are only a long way behind." With this assurance, he returned, in his own obstinate way, to his one object in view. "Miss Isabel, I want to ask you a question. I'm not a ladies' man. I speak my mind plainly to everybody--women included. Do you like being here to-day?"

Isabel's gravity was not proof against this very downright question. "I should be hard to please," she said laughing, "if I didn't enjoy my visit to the farm."

Hardyman pushed steadily forward through the obstacle of the farm to the question of the farm's master. "You like being here," he repeated.

"Do you like Me?"

This was serious. Isabel drew back a little, and looked at him. He waited with the most impenetrable gravity for her reply.

"I think you can hardly expect me to answer that question," she said

"Why not?"

"Our acquaintance has been a very short one, Mr. Hardyman. And, if you are so good as to forget the difference between us, I think I ought to remember it."

"What difference?"

"The difference in rank."

Hardyman suddenly stood still, and emphasized his next words by digging his stick into the grass.

"If anything I have said has vexed you," he began, "tell me so plainly, Miss Isabel, and I'll ask your pardon. But don't throw my rank in my face. I cut adrift from all that nonsense when I took this farm and got my living out of the horses. What has a man's rank to do with a man's feelings?" he went on, with another emphatic dig of his stick. "I am quite serious in asking if you like me--for this good reason, that I

like you. Yes, I do. You remember that day when I bled the old lady's dog--well, I have found out since then that there's a sort of incompleteness in my life which I never suspected before. It's you who have put that idea into my head. You didn't mean it, I dare say, but you have done it all the same. I sat alone here yesterday evening smoking my pipe--and I didn't enjoy it. I breakfasted alone this morning--and I didn't enjoy that. I said to myself, She's coming to lunch, that's one comfort--I shall enjoy lunch. That's what I feel, roughly described. I don't suppose I've been five minutes together without thinking of you, now in one way and now in another, since the day when I first saw you. When a man comes to my time of life, and has had any experience, he knows what that means. It means, in plain English, that his heart is set on a woman. You're the woman."

Isabel had thus far made several attempts to interrupt him, without success. But, when Hardyman's confession attained its culminating point, she insisted on being heard.

"If you will excuse me, sir," she interposed gravely, "I think I had better go back to the cottage. My aunt is a stranger here, and she doesn't know where to look for us."

"We don't want your aunt," Hardyman remarked, in his most positive manner.

"We do want her," Isabel rejoined. "I won't venture to say it's wrong in

you, Mr. Hardyman, to talk to me as you have just done, but I am quite sure it's very wrong of me to listen."

He looked at her with such unaffected surprise and distress that she stopped, on the point of leaving him, and tried to make herself better understood.

"I had no intention of offending you, sir," she said, a little confusedly. "I only wanted to remind you that there are some things which a gentleman in your position--" She stopped, tried to finish the sentence, failed, and began another. "If I had been a young lady in your own rank of life," she went on, "I might have thanked you for paying me a compliment, and have given you a serious answer. As it is, I am afraid that I must say that you have surprised and disappointed me. I can claim very little for myself, I know. But I did imagine--so long as there was nothing unbecoming in my conduct--that I had some right to your respect."

Listening more and more impatiently, Hardyman took her by the hand, and burst out with another of his abrupt questions.

"What can you possibly be thinking of?" he asked.

She gave him no answer; she only looked at him reproachfully, and tried to release herself.

Hardyman held her hand faster than ever.

"I believe you think me an infernal scoundrel!" he said. "I can stand a good deal, Miss Isabel, but I can't stand that. How have I failed in respect toward you, if you please? I have told you you're the woman my heart is set on. Well? Isn't it plain what I want of you, when I say that? Isabel Miller, I want you to be my wife!"

Isabel's only reply to this extraordinary proposal of marriage was a faint cry of astonishment, followed by a sudden trembling that shook her from head to foot.

Hardyman put his arm round her with a gentleness which his oldest friend would have been surprised to see in him.

"Take your time to think of it," he said, dropping back again into his usual quiet tone. "If you had known me a little better you wouldn't have mistaken me, and you wouldn't be looking at me now as if you were afraid to believe your own ears. What is there so very wonderful in my wanting to marry you? I don't set up for being a saint. When I was a younger man I was no better (and no worse) than other young men. I'm getting on now to middle life. I don't want romances and adventures--I want an easy existence with a nice lovable woman who will make me a good wife. You're the woman, I tell you again. I know it by what I've seen of you myself, and by what I have heard of you from Lady Lydiard. She said you were prudent, and sweet-tempered, and affectionate; to which I wish to add

that you have just the face and figure that I like, and the modest manners and the blessed absence of all slang in your talk, which I don't find in the young women I meet with in the present day. That's my view of it: I think for myself. What does it matter to me whether you're the daughter of a Duke or the daughter of a Dairyman? It isn't your father I want to marry--it's you. Listen to reason, there's a dear! We have only one question to settle before we go back to your aunt. You wouldn't answer me when I asked it a little while since. Will you answer now? Do you like me?"

Isabel looked up at him timidly.

"In my position, sir," she asked, "have I any right to like you? What would your relations and friends think, if I said Yes?"

Hardyman gave her waist a little admonitory squeeze with his arm

"What? You're at it again? A nice way to answer a man, to call him 'Sir,' and to get behind his rank as if it was a place of refuge from him! I hate talking of myself, but you force me to it. Here is my position in the world--I have got an elder brother; he is married, and he has a son to succeed him, in the title and the property. You understand, so far? Very well! Years ago I shifted my share of the rank (whatever it may be) on to my brother's shoulders. He is a thorough good fellow, and he has carried my dignity for me, without once dropping it, ever since. As for what people may say, they have said it already, from

my father and mother downward, in the time when I took to the horses and the farm. If they're the wise people I take them for, they won't be at the trouble of saying it all over again. No, no. Twist it how you may, Miss Isabel, whether I'm single or whether I'm married, I'm plain Alfred Hardyman; and everybody who knows me knows that I go on my way, and please myself. If you don't like me, it will be the bitterest disappointment I ever had in my life; but say so honestly, all the same."

Where is the woman in Isabel's place whose capacity for resistance would not have yielded a little to such an appeal as this?

"I should be an insensible wretch," she replied warmly, "if I didn't feel the honor you have done me, and feel it gratefully."

"Does that mean you will have me for a husband?" asked downright Hardyman.

She was fairly driven into a corner; but (being a woman) she tried to slip through his fingers at the last moment.

"Will you forgive me," she said, "if I ask you for a little more time? I am so bewildered, I hardly know what to say or do for the best. You see, Mr. Hardyman, it would be a dreadful thing for me to be the cause of giving offense to your family. I am obliged to think of that. It would be so distressing for you (I will say nothing of myself) if your friends

closed their doors on me. They might say I was a designing girl, who had taken advantage of your good opinion to raise herself in the world. Lady Lydiard warned me long since not to be ambitious about myself and not to forget my station in life, because she treated me like her adopted daughter. Indeed--indeed, I can't tell you how I feel your goodness, and the compliment--the very great compliment, you pay me! My heart is free, and if I followed my own inclinations--" She checked herself, conscious that she was on the brink of saying too much. "Will you give me a few days," she pleaded, "to try if I can think composedly of all this? I am only a girl, and I feel quite dazzled by the prospect that you set before me."

Hardyman seized on those words as offering all the encouragement that he desired to his suit.

"Have your own way in this thing and in everything!" he said, with an unaccustomed fervor of language and manner. "I am so glad to hear that your heart is open to me, and that all your inclinations take my part."

Isabel instantly protested against this misrepresentation of what she had really said, "Oh, Mr. Hardyman, you quite mistake me!"

He answered her very much as he had answered Lady Lydiard, when she had

tried to make him understand his proper relations towards Isabel.

"No, no; I don't mistake you. I agree to every word you say. How can I expect you to marry me, as you very properly remark, unless I give you a day or two to make up your mind? It's quite enough for me that you like the prospect. If Lady Lydiard treated you as her daughter, why shouldn't you be my wife? It stands to reason that you're quite right to marry a man who can raise you in the world. I like you to be ambitious--though Heaven knows it isn't much I can do for you, except to love you with all my heart. Still, it's a great encouragement to hear that her Ladyship's views agree with mine--"

"They don't agree, Mr. Hardyman!" protested poor Isabel. "You are entirely misrepresenting--"

Hardyman cordially concurred in this view of the matter. "Yes! yes! I can't pretend to represent her Ladyship's language, or yours either; I am obliged to take my words as they come to me. Don't disturb yourself: it's all right--I understand. You have made me the happiest man living. I shall ride over to-morrow to your aunt's house, and hear what you have to say to me. Mind you're at home! Not a day must pass now without my seeing you. I do love you, Isabel--I do, indeed!" He stooped, and kissed her heartily. "Only to reward me," he explained, "for giving you time to think."

She drew herself away from him--resolutely, not angrily. Before she could make a third attempt to place the subject in its right light before him, the luncheon bell rang at the cottage--and a servant

appeared evidently sent to look for them.

"Don't forget to-morrow," Hardyman whispered confidentially. "I'll call early--and then go to London, and get the ring."