

## CHAPTER XIX.

THE narrative returns to South Morden, and follows the events which attended Isabel's marriage engagement.

To say that Miss Pink, inflated by the triumph, rose, morally speaking, from the earth and floated among the clouds, is to indicate faintly the effect produced on the ex-schoolmistress when her niece first informed her of what had happened at the farm. Attacked on one side by her aunt, and on the other by Hardyman, and feebly defended, at the best, by her own doubts and misgivings, Isabel ended by surrendering at discretion. Like thousands of other women in a similar position, she was in the last degree uncertain as to the state of her own heart. To what extent she was insensibly influenced by Hardyman's commanding position in believing herself to be sincerely attached to him, it was beyond her power of self-examination to discover. He doubly dazzled her by his birth and by his celebrity. Not in England only, but throughout Europe, he was a recognized authority on his own subject. How could she--how could any woman--resist the influence of his steady mind, his firmness of purpose, his manly resolution to owe everything to himself and nothing to his rank, set off as these attractive qualities were by the outward and personal advantages which exercise an ascendancy of their own? Isabel was fascinated, and yet Isabel was not at ease. In her lonely moments she was troubled by regretful thoughts of Moody, which perplexed and irritated her. She had always behaved honestly to him; she had never encouraged him to hope that his love for her had the faintest prospect

of being returned. Yet, knowing, as she did, that her conduct was blameless so far, there were nevertheless perverse sympathies in her which took his part. In the wakeful hours of the night there were whispering voices in her which said: "Think of Moody!" Had there been a growing kindness towards this good friend in her heart, of which she herself was not aware? She tried to detect it--to weigh it for what it was really worth. But it lay too deep to be discovered and estimated, if it did really exist--if it had any sounder origin than her own morbid fancy. In the broad light of day, in the little bustling duties of life, she forgot it again. She could think of what she ought to wear on the wedding day; she could even try privately how her new signature, "Isabel Hardyman," would look when she had the right to use it. On the whole, it may be said that the time passed smoothly--with some occasional checks and drawbacks, which were the more easily endured seeing that they took their rise in Isabel's own conduct. Compliant as she was in general, there were two instances, among others, in which her resolution to take her own way was not to be overcome. She refused to write either to Moody or to Lady Lydiard informing them of her engagement; and she steadily disapproved of Miss Pink's policy of concealment, in the matter of the robbery at Lady Lydiard's house. Her aunt could only secure her as a passive accomplice by stating family considerations in the strongest possible terms. "If the disgrace was confined to you, my dear, I might leave you to decide. But I am involved in it, as your nearest relative; and, what is more, even the sacred memories of your father and mother might feel the slur cast on them." This exaggerated language--like all exaggerated language, a mischievous weapon in the arsenal of weakness

and prejudice--had its effect on Isabel. Reluctantly and sadly, she consented to be silent.

Miss Pink wrote word of the engagement to Moody first; reserving to a later day the superior pleasure of informing Lady Lydiard of the very event which that audacious woman had declared to be impossible. To her aunt's surprise, just as she was about to close the envelope Isabel stepped forward, and inconsistently requested leave to add a postscript to the very letter which she had refused to write! Miss Pink was not even permitted to see the postscript. Isabel secured the envelope the moment she laid down her pen, and retired to her room with a headache (which was heartache in disguise) for the rest of the day.

While the question of marriage was still in debate, an event occurred which exercised a serious influence on Hardyman's future plans.

He received a letter from the Continent which claimed his immediate attention. One of the sovereigns of Europe had decided on making some radical changes in the mounting and equipment of a cavalry regiment; and he required the assistance of Hardyman in that important part of the contemplated reform which was connected with the choice and purchase of horses. Setting his own interests out of the question, Hardyman owed obligations to the kindness of his illustrious correspondent which made it impossible for him to send an excuse. In a fortnight's time, at the latest, it would be necessary for him to leave England; and a month or more might elapse before it would be possible for him to return.

Under these circumstances, he proposed, in his own precipitate way, to hasten the date of the marriage. The necessary legal delay would permit the ceremony to be performed on that day fortnight. Isabel might then accompany him on his journey, and spend a brilliant honeymoon at the foreign Court. She at once refused, not only to accept his proposal, but even to take it into consideration. While Miss Pink dwelt eloquently on the shortness of the notice, Miss Pink's niece based her resolution on far more important grounds. Hardyman had not yet announced the contemplated marriage to his parents and friends; and Isabel was determined not to become his wife until she could be first assured of a courteous and tolerant reception by the family--if she could hope for no warmer welcome at their hands.

Hardyman was not a man who yielded easily, even in trifles. In the present case, his dearest interests were concerned in inducing Isabel to reconsider her decision. He was still vainly trying to shake her resolution, when the afternoon post brought a letter for Miss Pink which introduced a new element of disturbance into the discussion. The letter was nothing less than Lady Lydiard's reply to the written announcement of Isabel's engagement, despatched on the previous day by Miss Pink.

Her Ladyship's answer was a surprisingly short one. It only contained these lines:

"Lady Lydiard begs to acknowledge the receipt of Miss Pink's letter

requesting that she will say nothing to Mr. Hardyman of the loss of a bank-note in her house, and, assigning as a reason that Miss Isabel Miller is engaged to be married to Mr. Hardyman, and might be prejudiced in his estimation if the facts were made known. Miss Pink may make her mind easy. Lady Lydiard had not the slightest intention of taking Mr. Hardyman into her confidence on the subject of her domestic affairs. With regard to the proposed marriage, Lady Lydiard casts no doubt on Miss Pink's perfect sincerity and good faith; but, at the same time, she positively declines to believe that Mr. Hardyman means to make Miss Isabel Miller his wife. Lady L. will yield to the evidence of a properly-attested certificate--and to nothing else."

A folded piece of paper, directed to Isabel, dropped out of this characteristic letter as Miss Pink turned from the first page to the second. Lady Lydiard addressed her adopted daughter in these words:

"I was on the point of leaving home to visit you again, when I received your aunt's letter. My poor deluded child, no words can tell how distressed I am about you. You are already sacrificed to the folly of the most foolish woman living. For God's sake, take care you do not fall a victim next to the designs of a profligate man. Come to me instantly, Isabel, and I promise to take care of you."

Fortified by these letters, and aided by Miss Pink's indignation, Hardyman pressed his proposal on Isabel with renewed resolution. She

made no attempt to combat his arguments--she only held firmly to her decision. Without some encouragement from Hardyman's father and mother she still steadily refused to become his wife. Irritated already by Lady Lydiard's letters, he lost the self-command which so eminently distinguished him in the ordinary affairs of life, and showed the domineering and despotic temper which was an inbred part of his disposition. Isabel's high spirit at once resented the harsh terms in which he spoke to her. In the plainest words, she released him from his engagement, and, without waiting for his excuses, quitted the room.

Left together, Hardyman and Miss Pink devised an arrangement which paid due respect to Isabel's scruples, and at the same time met Lady Lydiard's insulting assertion of disbelief in Hardyman's honor, by a formal and public announcement of the marriage.

It was proposed to give a garden party at the farm in a week's time for the express purpose of introducing Isabel to Hardyman's family and friends in the character of his betrothed wife. If his father and mother accepted the invitation, Isabel's only objection to hastening the union would fall to the ground. Hardyman might, in that case, plead with his Imperial correspondent for a delay in his departure of a few days more; and the marriage might still take place before he left England. Isabel, at Miss Pink's intercession, was induced to accept her lover's excuses, and, in the event of her favorable reception by Hardyman's parents at the farm, to give her consent (not very willingly even yet) to hastening the ceremony which was to make her Hardyman's wife.

On the next morning the whole of the invitations were sent out, excepting the invitation to Hardyman's father and mother. Without mentioning it to Isabel, Hardyman decided on personally appealing to his mother before he ventured on taking the head of the family into his confidence.

The result of the interview was partially successful--and no more. Lord Rotherfield declined to see his youngest son; and he had engagements which would, under any circumstances, prevent his being present at the garden party. But at the express request of Lady Rotherfield, he was willing to make certain concessions.

"I have always regarded Alfred as a barely sane person," said his Lordship, "since he turned his back on his prospects to become a horse dealer. If we decline altogether to sanction this new act--I won't say, of insanity, I will say, of absurdity--on his part, it is impossible to predict to what discreditable extremities he may not proceed. We must temporise with Alfred. In the meantime I shall endeavor to obtain some information respecting this young person--named Miller, I think you said, and now resident at South Morden. If I am satisfied that she is a woman of reputable character, possessing an average education and presentable manners, we may as well let Alfred take his own way. He is out of the pale of Society, as it is; and Miss Miller has no father and mother to complicate matters, which is distinctly a merit on her part and, in short, if the marriage is not absolutely disgraceful, the wisest

way (as we have no power to prevent it) will be to submit. You will say nothing to Alfred about what I propose to do. I tell you plainly I don't trust him. You will simply inform him from me that I want time to consider, and that, unless he hears to the contrary in the interval, he may expect to have the sanction of your presence at his breakfast, or luncheon, or whatever it is. I must go to town in a day or two, and I shall ascertain what Alfred's friends know about this last of his many follies, if I meet any of them at the club."

Returning to South Morden in no serene frame of mind, Hardyman found Isabel in a state of depression which perplexed and alarmed him.

The news that his mother might be expected to be present at the garden party failed entirely to raise her spirits. The only explanation she gave of the change in her was, that the dull heavy weather of the last few days made her feel a little languid and nervous. Naturally dissatisfied with this reply to his inquiries, Hardyman asked for Miss Pink. He was informed that Miss Pink could not see him. She was constitutionally subject to asthma, and, having warnings of the return of the malady, she was (by the doctor's advice) keeping her room. Hardyman returned to the farm in a temper which was felt by everybody in his employment, from the trainer to the stable-boys.

While the apology made for Miss Pink stated no more than the plain truth, it must be confessed that Hardyman was right in declining to be satisfied with Isabel's excuse for the melancholy that oppressed her.



She had that morning received Moody's answer to the lines which she had addressed to him at the end of her aunt's letter; and she had not yet recovered from the effect which it had produced on her spirits.

"It is impossible for me to say honestly that I am not distressed (Moody wrote) by the news of your marriage engagement. The blow has fallen very heavily on me. When I look at the future now, I see only a dreary blank. This is not your fault--you are in no way to blame. I remember the time when I should have been too angry to own this--when I might have said or done things which I should have bitterly repented afterwards. That time is past. My temper has been softened, since I have befriended you in your troubles. That good at least has come out of my foolish hopes, and perhaps out of the true sympathy which I have felt for you. I can honestly ask you to accept my heart's dearest wishes for your happiness--and I can keep the rest to myself.

"Let me say a word now relating to the efforts that I have made to help you, since that sad day when you left Lady Lydiard's house.

"I had hoped (for reasons which it is needless to mention here) to interest Mr. Hardyman himself in aiding our inquiry. But your aunt's wishes, as expressed in her letter to me, close my lips. I will only beg you, at some convenient time, to let me mention the last discoveries that we have made; leaving it to your discretion, when Mr. Hardyman has become your husband, to ask him the questions which, under other circumstances, I should have put to him myself.

"It is, of course, possible that the view I take of Mr. Hardyman's capacity to help us may be a mistaken one. In this case, if you still wish the investigation to be privately carried on, I entreat you to let me continue to direct it, as the greatest favor you can confer on your devoted old friend.

"You need be under no apprehension about the expense to which you are likely to put me. I have unexpectedly inherited what is to me a handsome fortune.

"The same post which brought your aunt's letter brought a line from a lawyer asking me to see him on the subject of my late father's affairs. I waited a day or two before I could summon heart enough to see him, or to see anybody; and then I went to his office. You have heard that my father's bank stopped payment, at a time of commercial panic. His failure was mainly attributable to the treachery of a friend to whom he had lent a large sum of money, and who paid him the yearly interest, without acknowledging that every farthing of it had been lost in unsuccessful speculations. The son of this man has prospered in business, and he has honorably devoted a part of his wealth to the payment of his father's creditors. Half the sum due to my father has thus passed into my hands as his next of kin; and the other half is to follow in course of time. If my hopes had been fulfilled, how gladly I should have shared my prosperity with you! As it is, I have far more than enough for my wants as a lonely man, and plenty left to spend in

your service.

"God bless and prosper you, my dear. I shall ask you to accept a little present from me, among the other offerings that are made to you before the wedding day.--R.M."

The studiously considerate and delicate tone in which these lines were written had an effect on Isabel which was exactly the opposite of the effect intended by the writer. She burst into a passionate fit of tears; and in the safe solitude of her own room, the despairing words escaped her, "I wish I had died before I met with Alfred Hardyman!"

As the days wore on, disappointments and difficulties seemed by a kind of fatality to beset the contemplated announcement of the marriage.

Miss Pink's asthma, developed by the unfavorable weather, set the doctor's art at defiance, and threatened to keep that unfortunate lady a prisoner in her room on the day of the party. Hardyman's invitations were in some cases refused; and in others accepted by husbands with excuses for the absence of their wives. His elder brother made an apology for himself as well as for his wife. Felix Sweetsir wrote, "With pleasure, dear Alfred, if my health permits me to leave the house." Lady Lydiard, invited at Miss Pink's special request, sent no reply. The one encouraging circumstance was the silence of Lady Rotherfield. So long as her son received no intimation to the contrary, it was a sign that Lord

Rotherfield permitted his wife to sanction the marriage by her presence.

Hardyman wrote to his Imperial correspondent, engaging to leave England on the earliest possible day, and asking to be pardoned if he failed to express himself more definitely, in consideration of domestic affairs, which it was necessary to settle before he started for the Continent. If there should not be time enough to write again, he promised to send a telegraphic announcement of his departure. Long afterwards, Hardyman remembered the misgivings that had troubled him when he wrote that letter. In the rough draught of it, he had mentioned, as his excuse for not being yet certain of his own movements, that he expected to be immediately married. In the fair copy, the vague foreboding of some accident to come was so painfully present to his mind, that he struck out the words which referred to his marriage, and substituted the designedly indefinite phrase, "domestic affairs."