

CHAPTER XX.

THE day of the garden party arrived. There was no rain; but the air was heavy, and the sky was overcast by lowering clouds.

Some hours before the guests were expected, Isabel arrived alone at the farm, bearing the apologies of unfortunate Miss Pink, still kept a prisoner in her bed-chamber by the asthma. In the confusion produced at the cottage by the preparations for entertaining the company, the one room in which Hardyman could receive Isabel with the certainty of not being interrupted was the smoking-room. To this haven of refuge he led her--still reserved and silent, still not restored to her customary spirits. "If any visitors come before the time," Hardyman said to his servant, "tell them I am engaged at the stables. I must have an hour's quiet talk with you," he continued, turning to Isabel, "or I shall be in too bad a temper to receive my guests with common politeness. The worry of giving this party is not to be told in words. I almost wish I had been content with presenting you to my mother, and had let the rest of my acquaintances go to the devil."

A quiet half hour passed; and the first visitor, a stranger to the servants, appeared at the cottage-gate. He was a middle-aged man, and he had no wish to disturb Mr. Hardyman. "I will wait in the grounds," he said, "and trouble nobody." The middle-aged man, who expressed himself in these modest terms, was Robert Moody.

Five minutes later, a carriage drove up to the gate. An elderly lady got out of it, followed by a fat white Scotch terrier, who growled at every stranger within his reach. It is needless to introduce Lady Lydiard and Tommie.

Informed that Mr. Hardyman was at the stables, Lady Lydiard gave the servant her card. "Take that to your master, and say I won't detain him five minutes." With these words, her Ladyship sauntered into the grounds. She looked about her with observant eyes; not only noticing the tent which had been set up on the grass to accommodate the expected guests, but entering it, and looking at the waiters who were engaged in placing the luncheon on the table. Returning to the outer world, she next remarked that Mr. Hardyman's lawn was in very bad order. Barren sun-dried patches, and little holes and crevices opened here and there by the action of the summer heat, announced that the lawn, like everything else at the farm, had been neglected, in the exclusive attention paid to the claims of the horses. Reaching a shrubbery which bounded one side of the grounds next, her Ladyship became aware of a man slowly approaching her, to all appearance absorbed in thought. The man drew a little nearer. She lifted her glasses to her eyes and recognized--Moody.

No embarrassment was produced on either side by this unexpected meeting. Lady Lydiard had, not long since, sent to ask her former steward to visit her; regretting, in her warm-hearted way, the terms on which they had separated, and wishing to atone for the harsh language that had

escaped her at their parting interview. In the friendly talk which followed the reconciliation, Lady Lydiard not only heard the news of Moody's pecuniary inheritance--but, noticing the change in his appearance for the worse, contrived to extract from him the confession of his ill-starred passion for Isabel. To discover him now, after all that he had acknowledged, walking about the grounds at Hardyman's farm, took her Ladyship completely by surprise. "Good Heavens!" she exclaimed, in her loudest tones, "what are you doing here?"

"You mentioned Mr. Hardyman's garden party, my Lady, when I had the honor of waiting on you," Moody answered. "Thinking over it afterward, it seemed the fittest occasion I could find for making a little wedding present to Miss Isabel. Is there any harm in my asking Mr. Hardyman to let me put the present on her plate, so that she may see it when she sits down to luncheon? If your Ladyship thinks so, I will go away directly, and send the gift by post."

Lady Lydiard looked at him attentively. "You don't despise the girl," she asked, "for selling herself for rank and money? I do--I can tell you!"

Moody's worn white face flushed a little. "No, my Lady," he answered, "I can't hear you say that! Isabel would not have engaged herself to Mr. Hardyman unless she had been fond of him--as fond, I dare say, as I once hoped she might be of me. It's a hard thing to confess that; but I do confess it, in justice to her--God bless her!"

The generosity that spoke in those simple words touched the finest sympathies in Lady Lydiard's nature. "Give me your hand," she said, with her own generous spirit kindling in her eyes. "You have a great heart, Moody. Isabel Miller is a fool for not marrying you--and one day she will know it!"

Before a word more could pass between them, Hardyman's voice was audible

on the other side of the shrubbery, calling irritably to his servant to find Lady Lydiard.

Moody retired to the further end of the walk, while Lady Lydiard advanced in the opposite direction, so as to meet Hardyman at the entrance to the shrubbery. He bowed stiffly, and begged to know why her Ladyship had honored him with a visit.

Lady Lydiard replied without noticing the coldness of her reception.

"I have not been very well, Mr. Hardyman, or you would have seen me before this. My only object in presenting myself here is to make my excuses personally for having written of you in terms which expressed a doubt of your honor. I have done you an injustice, and I beg you to forgive me."

Hardyman acknowledged this frank apology as unreservedly as it had been

offered to him. "Say no more, Lady Lydiard. And let me hope, now you are here, that you will honor my little party with your presence."

Lady Lydiard gravely stated her reasons for not accepting the invitation.

"I disapprove so strongly of unequal marriages," she said, walking on slowly towards the cottage, "that I cannot, in common consistency, become one of your guests. I shall always feel interested in Isabel Miller's welfare; and I can honestly say I shall be glad if your married life proves that my old-fashioned prejudices are without justification in your case. Accept my thanks for your invitation; and let me hope that my plain speaking has not offended you."

She bowed, and looked about her for Tommie before she advanced to the carriage waiting for her at the gate. In the surprise of seeing Moody she had forgotten to look back for the dog when she entered the shrubbery. She now called to him, and blew the whistle at her watch-chain. Not a sign of Tommie was to be seen. Hardyman instantly directed the servants to search in the cottage and out of the cottage for the dog. The order was obeyed with all needful activity and intelligence, and entirely without success. For the time being at any rate, Tommie was lost.

Hardyman promised to have the dog looked for in every part of the farm, and to send him back in the care of one of his own men. With these

polite assurances Lady Lydiard was obliged to be satisfied. She drove away in a very despondent frame of mind. "First Isabel, and now Tommie," thought her Ladyship. "I am losing the only companions who made life tolerable to me."

Returning from the garden gate, after taking leave of his visitor, Hardyman received from his servant a handful of letters which had just arrived for him. Walking slowly over the lawn as he opened them, he found nothing but excuses for the absence of guests who had already accepted their invitations. He had just thrust the letters into his pocket, when he heard footsteps behind him, and, looking round, found himself confronted by Moody.

"Hullo! have you come to lunch?" Hardyman asked, roughly.

"I have come here, sir, with a little gift for Miss Isabel, in honor of her marriage," Moody answered quietly, "and I ask your permission to put it on the table, so that she may see it when your guests sit down to luncheon."

He opened a jeweler's case as he spoke, containing a plain gold bracelet with an inscription engraved on the inner side: "To Miss Isabel Miller, with the sincere good wishes of Robert Moody."

Plain as it was, the design of the bracelet was unusually beautiful.

Hardyman had noticed Moody's agitation on the day when he had met Isabel

near her aunt's house, and had drawn his own conclusions from it. His face darkened with a momentary jealousy as he looked at the bracelet. "All right, old fellow!" he said, with contemptuous familiarity. "Don't be modest. Wait and give it to her with your own hand."

"No, sir," said Moody "I would rather leave it, if you please, to speak for itself."

Hardyman understood the delicacy of feeling which dictated those words, and, without well knowing why, resented it. He was on the point of speaking, under the influence of this unworthy motive, when Isabel's voice reached his ears, calling to him from the cottage.

Moody's face contracted with a sudden expression of pain as he, too, recognized the voice. "Don't let me detain you, sir," he said, sadly. "Good-morning!"

Hardyman left him without ceremony. Moody, slowly following, entered the tent. All the preparations for the luncheon had been completed; nobody was there. The places to be occupied by the guests were indicated by cards bearing their names. Moody found Isabel's card, and put his bracelet inside the folded napkin on her plate. For a while he stood with his hand on the table, thinking. The temptation to communicate once more with Isabel before he lost her forever, was fast getting the better of his powers of resistance.

"If I could persuade her to write a word to say she liked her bracelet," he thought, "it would be a comfort when I go back to my solitary life." He tore a leaf out of his pocket book and wrote on it, "One line to say you accept my gift and my good wishes. Put it under the cushion of your chair, and I shall find it when the company have left the tent." He slipped the paper into the case which held the bracelet, and instead of leaving the farm as he had intended, turned back to the shelter of the shrubbery.