

CHAPTER XI. THE LETTER OF INTRODUCTION.

I LOOKED at the house. It was an inn, of no great size, but of respectable appearance. If I was to be of any use to her that night, the time had come to speak of other subjects than the subject of dreams.

"After all that you have told me," I said, "I will not ask you to admit me any further into your confidence until we meet again. Only let me hear how I can relieve your most pressing anxieties. What are your plans? Can I do anything to help them before you go to rest to-night?"

She thanked me warmly, and hesitated, looking up the street and down the street in evident embarrassment what to say next.

"Do you propose staying in Edinburgh?" I asked.

"Oh no! I don't wish to remain in Scotland. I want to go much further away. I think I should do better in London; at some respectable milliner's, if I could be properly recommended. I am quick at my needle, and I understand cutting out. Or I could keep accounts, if--if anybody would trust me."

She stopped, and looked at me doubtingly, as if she felt far from sure, poor soul, of winning my confidence to begin with. I acted on that hint, with the headlong impetuosity of a man who was in love.

"I can give you exactly the recommendation you want," I said, "whenever you like. Now, if you would prefer it."

Her charming features brightened with pleasure. "Oh, you are indeed a friend to me!" she said, impulsively. Her face clouded again--she saw my proposal in a new light. "Have I any right," she asked, sadly, "to accept what you offer me?"

"Let me give you the letter," I answered, "and you can decide for yourself whether you will use it or not."

I put her arm again in mine, and entered the inn.

She shrunk back in alarm. What would the landlady think if she saw her lodger enter the house at night in company with a stranger, and that stranger a gentleman? The landlady appeared as she made the objection.

Reckless what I said or what I did, I introduced myself as her relative, and asked to be shown into a quiet room in which I could write a letter. After one sharp glance at me, the landlady appeared to be satisfied that she was dealing with a gentleman. She led the way into a sort of parlor behind the "bar," placed writing materials on the table, looked at my companion as only one woman can look at another under certain circumstances, and left us by ourselves.

It was the first time I had ever been in a room with her alone. The embarrassing sense of her position had heightened her color and brightened her eyes. She stood, leaning one hand on the table, confused and irresolute, her firm and supple figure falling into an attitude of unsought grace which it was literally a luxury to look at. I said nothing; my eyes confessed my admiration; the writing materials lay untouched before me on the table. How long the silence might have lasted I cannot say. She abruptly broke it. Her instinct warned her that silence might have its dangers, in our position. She turned to me with an effort; she said, uneasily, "I don't think you ought to write your letter to-night, sir."

"Why not?"

"You know nothing of me. Surely you ought not to recommend a person who is a stranger to you? And I am worse than a stranger. I am a miserable wretch who has tried to commit a great sin--I have tried to destroy myself. Perhaps the misery I was in might be some excuse for me, if you knew it. You ought to know it. But it's so late to-night, and I am so sadly tired--and there are some things, sir, which it is not easy for a woman to speak of in the presence of a man."

Her head sunk on her bosom; her delicate lips trembled a little; she said no more. The way to reassure and console her lay plainly enough before me, if I chose to take it. Without stopping to think, I took it.

Reminding her that she had herself proposed writing to me when we met that evening, I suggested that she should wait to tell the sad story of her troubles until it was convenient to her to send me the narrative in the form of a letter. "In the mean time," I added, "I have the most perfect confidence in you; and I beg as a favor that you will let me put it to the proof. I can introduce you to a dressmaker in London who is at the head of a large establishment, and I will do it before I leave you to-night."

I dipped my pen in the ink as I said the words. Let me confess frankly the lengths to which my infatuation led me. The dressmaker to whom I had

alluded had been my mother's maid in former years, and had been established in business with money lent by my late step-father, Mr. Germaine. I used both their names without scruple; and I wrote my recommendation in terms which the best of living women and the ablest of existing dressmakers could never have hoped to merit. Will anybody find excuses for me? Those rare persons who have been in love, and who have not completely forgotten it yet, may perhaps find excuses for me. It matters little; I don't deserve them.

I handed her the open letter to read.

She blushed delightfully; she cast one tenderly grateful look at me, which I remembered but too well for many and many an after-day. The next moment, to my astonishment, this changeable creature changed again. Some forgotten consideration seemed to have occurred to her. She turned pale; the soft lines of pleasure in her face hardened, little by little; she regarded me with the saddest look of confusion and distress. Putting the letter down before me on the table, she said, timidly:

"Would you mind adding a postscript, sir?"

I suppressed all appearance of surprise as well as I could, and took up the pen again.

"Would you please say," she went on, "that I am only to be taken on trial, at first? I am not to be engaged for more"--her voice sunk lower and lower, so that I could barely hear the next words--"for more than three months, certain."

It was not in human nature--perhaps I ought to say it was not in the nature of a man who was in my situation--to refrain from showing some curiosity, on being asked to supplement a letter of recommendation by such a postscript as this.

"Have you some other employment in prospect?" I asked.

"None," she answered, with her head down, and her eyes avoiding mine.

An unworthy doubt of her--the mean offspring of jealousy--found its way into my mind.

"Have you some absent friend," I went on, "who is likely to prove a better friend than I am, if you only give him time?"

She lifted her noble head. Her grand, guileless gray eyes rested on me with a look of patient reproach.

"I have not got a friend in the world," she said. "For God's sake, ask me no more questions to-night!"

I rose and gave her the letter once more--with the postscript added, in her own words.

We stood together by the table; we looked at each other in a momentary silence.

"How can I thank you?" she murmured, softly. "Oh, sir, I will indeed be worthy of the confidence that you have shown in me!" Her eyes moistened; her variable color came and went; her dress heaved softly over the lovely outline of her bosom. I don't believe the man lives who could have resisted her at that moment. I lost all power of restraint; I caught her in my arms; I whispered, "I love you!" I kissed her passionately. For a moment she lay helpless and trembling on my breast; for a moment her fragrant lips softly returned the kiss. In an instant more it was over. She tore herself away with a shudder that shook her from head to foot, and threw the letter that I had given to her indignantly at my feet.

"How dare you take advantage of me! How dare you touch me!" she said. "Take your letter back, sir; I refuse to receive it; I will never speak to you again. You don't know what you have done. You don't know how deeply you have wounded me. Oh!" she cried, throwing herself in despair on a sofa that stood near her, "shall I ever recover my self-respect? shall I ever forgive myself for what I have done to-night?"

I implored her pardon; I assured her of my repentance and regret in words which did really come from my heart. The violence of her agitation more than distressed me--I was really alarmed by it.

She composed herself after a while. She rose to her feet with modest dignity, and silently held out her hand in token that my repentance was accepted.

"You will give me time for atonement?" I pleaded. "You will not lose all confidence in me? Let me see you again, if it is only to show that I am not quite unworthy of your pardon--at your own time; in the presence of another person, if you like."

"I will write to you," she said.

"To-morrow?"

"To-morrow."

I took up the letter of recommendation from the floor.

"Make your goodness to me complete," I said. "Don't mortify me by refusing to take my letter."

"I will take your letter," she answered, quietly. "Thank you for writing it. Leave me now, please. Good-night."

I left her, pale and sad, with my letter in her hand. I left her, with my mind in a tumult of contending emotions, which gradually resolved themselves into two master-feelings as I walked on: Love, that adored her more fervently than ever; and Hope, that set the prospect before me of seeing her again on the next day.