

## **CHAPTER VI. ON THE WAY TO THE VILLAGE.**

Alban Morris--discovered by Emily in concealment among the trees--was not content with retiring to another part of the grounds. He pursued his retreat, careless in what direction it might take him, to a footpath across the fields, which led to the highroad and the railway station.

Miss Ladd's drawing-master was in that state of nervous irritability which seeks relief in rapidity of motion. Public opinion in the neighborhood (especially public opinion among the women) had long since decided that his manners were offensive, and his temper incurably bad. The men who happened to pass him on the footpath said "Good-morning" grudgingly. The women took no notice of him--with one exception. She was young and saucy, and seeing him walking at the top of his speed on the way to the railway station, she called after him, "Don't be in a hurry, sir! You're in plenty of time for the London train."

To her astonishment he suddenly stopped. His reputation for rudeness was so well established that she moved away to a safe distance, before she ventured to look at him again. He took no notice of her--he seemed to be considering with himself. The frolicsome young woman had done him a service: she had suggested an idea.

"Suppose I go to London?" he thought. "Why not?--the school is breaking up for the holidays--and she is going away like the rest of them." He looked round in the direction of the schoolhouse. "If I go back to wish her good-by, she will keep out of my way, and part with me at the last moment like a stranger. After my experience of women, to be in love again--in love with a girl who is young enough to be my daughter--what a fool, what a driveling, degraded fool I must be!"

Hot tears rose in his eyes. He dashed them away savagely, and went on again faster than ever--resolved to pack up at once at his lodgings in the village, and to take his departure by the next train.

At the point where the footpath led into the road, he came to a standstill for the second time.

The cause was once more a person of the sex associated in his mind with a bitter sense of injury. On this occasion the person was only a miserable little child, crying over the fragments of a broken jug.

Alban Morris looked at her with his grimly humorous smile. "So you've broken a jug?" he remarked.

"And spilt father's beer," the child answered. Her frail little body shook with terror. "Mother'll beat me when I go home," she said.

"What does mother do when you bring the jug back safe and sound?" Alban asked.

"Gives me bren-butter."

"Very well. Now listen to me. Mother shall give you bread and butter again this time."

The child stared at him with the tears suspended in her eyes. He went on talking to her as seriously as ever.

"You understand what I have just said to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you got a pocket-handkerchief?"

"No, sir."

"Then dry your eyes with mine."

He tossed his handkerchief to her with one hand, and picked up a fragment of the broken jug with the other. "This will do for a pattern," he said to himself. The child stared at the handkerchief--stared at Alban--took courage--and rubbed vigorously at her eyes. The instinct, which is worth all the reason that ever pretended to enlighten mankind--the instinct that never deceives--told this little ignorant creature that she had found a friend. She returned the handkerchief in grave silence. Alban took her up in his arms.

"Your eyes are dry, and your face is fit to be seen," he said. "Will you give me a kiss?" The child gave him a resolute kiss, with a smack in it. "Now come and get another jug," he said, as he put her down. Her red round eyes opened wide in alarm. "Have you got money enough?" she asked. Alban slapped his pocket. "Yes, I have," he answered. "That's a good thing," said the child; "come along."

They went together hand in hand to the village, and bought the new jug, and had it filled at the beer-shop. The thirsty father was at the upper end of the fields, where they were making a drain. Alban carried the jug until they were within sight of the laborer. "You haven't far to go," he said. "Mind you don't drop it again--What's the matter now?"

"I'm frightened."

"Why?"

"Oh, give me the jug."

She almost snatched it out of his hand. If she let the precious minutes slip away, there might be another beating in store for her at the drain: her father was not of an indulgent disposition when his children were late in bringing his beer. On the point of hurrying away, without a word of farewell, she remembered the laws of politeness as taught at the infant school--and dropped her little curtsey--and said, "Thank you, sir." That bitter sense of injury was still in Alban's mind as he looked after her. "What a pity she should grow up to be a woman!" he said to himself.

The adventure of the broken jug had delayed his return to his lodgings by more than half an hour. When he reached the road once more, the cheap up-train from the North had stopped at the station. He heard the ringing of the bell as it resumed the journey to London.

One of the passengers (judging by the handbag that she carried) had not stopped at the village.

As she advanced toward him along the road, he remarked that she was a small wiry active woman--dressed in bright colors, combined with a deplorable want of taste. Her aquiline nose seemed to be her most striking feature as she came nearer. It might have been fairly proportioned to the rest of her face, in her younger days, before her cheeks had lost flesh and roundness. Being probably near-sighted, she kept her eyes half-closed; there were cunning little wrinkles at the corners of them. In spite of appearances, she was unwilling to present any outward acknowledgment of the march of time. Her hair was palpably dyed--her hat was jauntily set on her head, and ornamented with a gay feather. She walked with a light tripping step, swinging her bag, and holding her head up smartly. Her manner, like her dress, said as plainly as words could speak, "No matter how long I may have lived, I mean to be young and charming to the end of my days." To Alban's surprise she stopped and addressed him.

"Oh, I beg your pardon. Could you tell me if I am in the right road to Miss Ladd's school?"

She spoke with nervous rapidity of articulation, and with a singularly unpleasant smile. It parted her thin lips just widely enough to show her suspiciously beautiful teeth; and it opened her keen gray eyes in the strangest manner. The higher lid rose so as to disclose, for a moment, the upper part of the eyeball, and to give her the appearance--not of a woman bent on making herself agreeable, but of a woman staring in a panic of terror. Careless to conceal the unfavorable impression that she had produced on him, Alban answered roughly, "Straight on," and tried to pass her.

She stopped him with a peremptory gesture. "I have treated you politely," she said, "and how do you treat me in return? Well! I am not surprised. Men are all brutes by nature--and you are a man. 'Straight on?'" she repeated contemptuously; "I should like to know how far that helps a person in a strange place. Perhaps you know no more where Miss Ladd's school is than I do? or, perhaps, you don't care to take the trouble of addressing me? Just what I should have expected from a person of your sex! Good-morning."

Alban felt the reproof; she had appealed to his most readily-impressible sense--his sense of humor. He rather enjoyed seeing his own prejudice against women grotesquely reflected in this flighty stranger's prejudice against men. As the best excuse for himself that he could make, he gave her all the information that she could possibly want--then tried again to pass on--and again in vain. He had recovered his place in her estimation: she had not done with him yet.

"You know all about the way there," she said "I wonder whether you know anything about the school?"

No change in her voice, no change in her manner, betrayed any special motive for putting this question. Alban was on the point of suggesting that she should go on to the school, and make her inquiries there--when he happened to notice her eyes. She had hitherto looked him straight in the face. She now looked down on the road. It was a trifling change; in all probability it meant nothing--and yet, merely because it was a change, it roused his curiosity. "I ought to know something about the school," he answered. "I am one of the masters."

"Then you're just the man I want. May I ask your name?"

"Alban Morris."

"Thank you. I am Mrs. Rook. I presume you have heard of Sir Jervis Redwood?"

"No."

"Bless my soul! You are a scholar, of course--and you have never heard of one of your own trade. Very extraordinary. You see, I am Sir Jervis's housekeeper; and I am sent here to take one of your young ladies back with me to our place. Don't interrupt me! Don't be a brute again! Sir Jervis is not of a communicative disposition. At least, not to me. A man--that explains it--a man! He is always poring over his books and writings; and Miss Redwood, at her great age, is in bed half the day. Not a thing do I know about this new inmate of ours, except that I am to take her back with me. You would feel some curiosity yourself in my place, wouldn't you? Now do tell me. What sort of girl is Miss Emily Brown?"

The name that he was perpetually thinking of--on this woman's lips! Alban looked at her.

"Well," said Mrs. Rook, "am I to have no answer? Ah, you want leading. So like a man again! Is she pretty?"

Still examining the housekeeper with mingled feelings of interest and distrust, Alban answered ungraciously:

"Yes."

"Good-tempered?"

Alban again said "Yes."

"So much about herself," Mrs. Rook remarked. "About her family now?" She shifted her bag restlessly from one hand to another. "Perhaps you can tell me if Miss Emily's father--" she suddenly corrected herself--"if Miss Emily's parents are living?"

"I don't know."

"You mean you won't tell me."

"I mean exactly what I have said."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Mrs. Rook rejoined; "I shall find out at the school. The first turning to the left, I think you said--across the fields?"

He was too deeply interested in Emily to let the housekeeper go without putting a question on his side:

"Is Sir Jervis Redwood one of Miss Emily's old friends?" he asked.

"He? What put that into your head? He has never even seen Miss Emily. She's going to our house--ah, the women are getting the upper hand now, and serve the men right, I say!--she's going to our house to be Sir Jervis's secretary. You would like to have the place yourself, wouldn't you? You would like to keep a poor girl from getting her own living? Oh, you may look as fierce as you please--the time's gone by when a man could frighten me. I like her Christian name. I call Emily a nice name enough. But 'Brown'! Good-morning, Mr. Morris; you and I are not cursed with such a contemptibly common name as that! 'Brown'? Oh, Lord!"

She tossed her head scornfully, and walked away, humming a tune.

Alban stood rooted to the spot. The effort of his later life had been to conceal the hopeless passion which had mastered him in spite of himself. Knowing nothing from Emily--who at once pitied and avoided him--of her family circumstances or of her future plans, he had shrunk from making inquiries of others, in the fear that they, too, might find out his secret, and that their contempt might be added to the contempt which he felt for himself. In this position, and with these obstacles in his way, the announcement of Emily's proposed journey--under the care of a stranger, to fill an employment in the house of a stranger--not only took him by surprise, but inspired him with a strong feeling of distrust. He looked after Sir Jervis Redwood's flighty housekeeper, completely forgetting the purpose which had brought him thus far on the way to his lodgings. Before Mrs. Rook was out of sight, Alban Morris was following her back to the school.