

CHAPTER VIII. MASTER AND PUPIL.

Emily's impulse was to avoid the drawing-master for the second time. The moment afterward, a kinder feeling prevailed. The farewell interview with Cecilia had left influences which pleaded for Alban Morris. It was the day of parting good wishes and general separations: he had only perhaps come to say good-by. She advanced to offer her hand, when he stopped her by pointing to Sir Jervis Redwood's card.

"May I say a word, Miss Emily, about that woman?" he asked

"Do you mean Mrs. Rook?"

"Yes. You know, of course, why she comes here?"

"She comes here by appointment, to take me to Sir Jervis Redwood's house. Are you acquainted with her?"

"She is a perfect stranger to me. I met her by accident on her way here. If Mrs. Rook had been content with asking me to direct her to the school, I should not be troubling you at this moment. But she forced her conversation on me. And she said something which I think you ought to know. Have you heard of Sir Jervis Redwood's housekeeper before to-day?"

"I have only heard what my friend--Miss Cecilia Wyvil--has told me."

"Did Miss Cecilia tell you that Mrs. Rook was acquainted with your father or with any members of your family?"

"Certainly not!"

Alban reflected. "It was natural enough," he resumed, "that Mrs. Rook should feel some curiosity about You. What reason had she for putting a question to me about your father--and putting it in a very strange manner?"

Emily's interest was instantly excited. She led the way back to the seats in the shade. "Tell me, Mr. Morris, exactly what the woman said." As she spoke, she signed to him to be seated.

Alban observed the natural grace of her action when she set him the example of taking a chair, and the little heightening of her color caused by

anxiety to hear what he had still to tell her. Forgetting the restraint that he had hitherto imposed on himself, he enjoyed the luxury of silently admiring her. Her manner betrayed none of the conscious confusion which would have shown itself, if her heart had been secretly inclined toward him. She saw the man looking at her. In simple perplexity she looked at the man.

"Are you hesitating on my account?" she asked. "Did Mrs. Rook say something of my father which I mustn't hear?"

"No, no! nothing of the sort!"

"You seem to be confused."

Her innocent indifference tried his patience sorely. His memory went back to the past time--recalled the ill-placed passion of his youth, and the cruel injury inflicted on him--his pride was roused. Was he making himself ridiculous? The vehement throbbing of his heart almost suffocated him. And there she sat, wondering at his odd behavior. "Even this girl is as cold-blooded as the rest of her sex!" That angry thought gave him back his self-control. He made his excuses with the easy politeness of a man of the world.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Emily; I was considering how to put what I have to say in the fewest and plainest words. Let me try if I can do it. If Mrs. Rook had merely asked me whether your father and mother were living, I should have attributed the question to the commonplace curiosity of a gossiping woman, and have thought no more of it. What she actually did say was this: 'Perhaps you can tell me if Miss Emily's father--' There she checked herself, and suddenly altered the question in this way: 'If Miss Emily's parents are living?' I may be making mountains out of molehills; but I thought at the time (and think still) that she had some special interest in inquiring after your father, and, not wishing me to notice it for reasons of her own, changed the form of the question so as to include your mother. Does this strike you as a far-fetched conclusion?"

"Whatever it may be," Emily said, "it is my conclusion, too. How did you answer her?"

"Quite easily. I could give her no information--and I said so."

"Let me offer you the information, Mr. Morris, before we say anything more. I have lost both my parents."

Alban's momentary outbreak of irritability was at an end. He was earnest

and yet gentle, again; he forgave her for not understanding how dear and how delightful to him she was. "Will it distress you," he said, "if I ask how long it is since your father died?"

"Nearly four years," she replied. "He was the most generous of men; Mrs. Rook's interest in him may surely have been a grateful interest. He may have been kind to her in past years--and she may remember him thankfully. Don't you think so?"

Alban was unable to agree with her. "If Mrs. Rook's interest in your father was the harmless interest that you have suggested," he said, "why should she have checked herself in that unaccountable manner, when she first asked me if he was living? The more I think of it now, the less sure I feel that she knows anything at all of your family history. It may help me to decide, if you will tell me at what time the death of your mother took place."

"So long ago," Emily replied, "that I can't even remember her death. I was an infant at the time."

"And yet Mrs. Rook asked me if your 'parents' were living! One of two things," Alban concluded. "Either there is some mystery in this matter, which we cannot hope to penetrate at present--or Mrs. Rook may have been speaking at random; on the chance of discovering whether you are related to some 'Mr. Brown' whom she once knew."

"Besides," Emily added, "it's only fair to remember what a common family name mine is, and how easily people may make mistakes. I should like to know if my dear lost father was really in her mind when she spoke to you. Do you think I could find it out?"

"If Mrs. Rook has any reasons for concealment, I believe you would have no chance of finding it out--unless, indeed, you could take her by surprise."

"In what way, Mr. Morris?"

"Only one way occurs to me just now," he said. "Do you happen to have a miniature or a photograph of your father?"

Emily held out a handsome locket, with a monogram in diamonds, attached to her watch chain. "I have his photograph here," she rejoined; "given to me by my dear old aunt, in the days of her prosperity. Shall I show it to Mrs. Rook?"

"Yes--if she happens, by good luck, to offer you an opportunity."

Impatient to try the experiment, Emily rose as he spoke. "I mustn't keep Mrs. Rook waiting," she said.

Alban stopped her, on the point of leaving him. The confusion and hesitation which she had already noticed began to show themselves in his manner once more.

"Miss Emily, may I ask you a favor before you go? I am only one of the masters employed in the school; but I don't think--let me say, I hope I am not guilty of presumption--if I offer to be of some small service to one of my pupils--"

There his embarrassment mastered him. He despised himself not only for yielding to his own weakness, but for faltering like a fool in the expression of a simple request. The next words died away on his lips.

This time, Emily understood him.

The subtle penetration which had long since led her to the discovery of his secret--overpowered, thus far, by the absorbing interest of the moment--now recovered its activity. In an instant, she remembered that Alban's motive for cautioning her, in her coming intercourse with Mrs. Rook, was not the merely friendly motive which might have actuated him, in the case of one of the other girls. At the same time, her quickness of apprehension warned her not to risk encouraging this persistent lover, by betraying any embarrassment on her side. He was evidently anxious to be present (in her interests) at the interview with Mrs. Rook. Why not? Could he reproach her with raising false hope, if she accepted his services, under circumstances of doubt and difficulty which he had himself been the first to point out? He could do nothing of the sort. Without waiting until he had recovered himself, she answered him (to all appearances) as composedly as if he had spoken to her in the plainest terms.

"After all that you have told me," she said, "I shall indeed feel obliged if you will be present when I see Mrs. Rook."

The eager brightening of his eyes, the flush of happiness that made him look young on a sudden, were signs not to be mistaken. The sooner they were in the presence of a third person (Emily privately concluded) the better it might be for both of them. She led the way rapidly to the house.