

BOOK THE FOURTH--THE COUNTRY HOUSE.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. DANCING.

The windows of the long drawing-room at Monksmoor are all thrown open to the conservatory. Distant masses of plants and flowers, mingled in ever-varying forms of beauty, are touched by the melancholy luster of the rising moon. Nearer to the house, the restful shadows are disturbed at intervals, where streams of light fall over them aslant from the lamps in the room. The fountain is playing. In rivalry with its lighter music, the nightingales are singing their song of ecstasy. Sometimes, the laughter of girls is heard--and, sometimes, the melody of a waltz. The younger guests at Monksmoor are dancing.

Emily and Cecilia are dressed alike in white, with flowers in their hair. Francine rivals them by means of a gorgeous contrast of color, and declares that she is rich with the bright emphasis of diamonds and the soft persuasion of pearls.

Miss Plym (from the rectory) is fat and fair and prosperous: she overflows with good spirits; she has a waist which defies tight-lacing, and she dances joyously on large flat feet. Miss Darnaway (officer's daughter with small means) is the exact opposite of Miss Plym. She is thin and tall and faded--poor soul. Destiny has made it her hard lot in life to fill the place of head-nursemaid at home. In her pensive moments, she thinks of the little brothers and sisters, whose patient servant she is, and wonders who comforts them in their tumbles and tells them stories at bedtime, while she is holiday-making at the pleasant country house.

Tender-hearted Cecilia, remembering how few pleasures this young friend has, and knowing how well she dances, never allows her to be without a partner. There are three invaluable young gentlemen present, who are excellent dancers. Members of different families, they are nevertheless fearfully and wonderfully like each other. They present the same rosy complexions and straw-colored mustachios, the same plump cheeks, vacant eyes and low forehead; and they utter, with the same stolid gravity, the same imbecile small talk. On sofas facing each other sit the two remaining guests, who have not joined the elders at the card-table in another room.

They are both men. One of them is drowsy and middle-aged--happy in the possession of large landed property: happier still in a capacity for drinking Mr. Wyvil's famous port-wine without gouty results.

The other gentleman--ah, who is the other? He is the confidential adviser and bosom friend of every young lady in the house. Is it necessary to name the Reverend Miles Mirabel?

There he sits enthroned, with room for a fair admirer on either side of him--the clerical sultan of a platonic harem. His persuasive ministry is felt as well as heard: he has an innocent habit of fondling young persons. One of his arms is even long enough to embrace the circumference of Miss Plym--while the other clasps the rigid silken waist of Francine. "I do it everywhere else," he says innocently, "why not here?" Why not indeed--with that delicate complexion and those beautiful blue eyes; with the glorious golden hair that rests on his shoulders, and the glossy beard that flows over his breast? Familiarities, forbidden to mere men, become privileges and condescensions when an angel enters society--and more especially when that angel has enough of mortality in him to be amusing. Mr. Mirabel, on his social side, is an irresistible companion. He is cheerfulness itself; he takes a favorable view of everything; his sweet temper never differs with anybody. "In my humble way," he confesses, "I like to make the world about me brighter." Laughter (harmlessly produced, observe!) is the element in which he lives and breathes. Miss Darnaway's serious face puts him out; he has laid a bet with Emily--not in money, not even in gloves, only in flowers--that he will make Miss Darnaway laugh; and he has won the wager. Emily's flowers are in his button-hole, peeping through the curly interstices of his beard. "Must you leave me?" he asks tenderly, when there is a dancing man at liberty, and it is Francine's turn to claim him. She leaves her seat not very willingly. For a while, the place is vacant; Miss Plym seizes the opportunity of consulting the ladies' bosom friend.

"Dear Mr. Mirabel, do tell me what you think of Miss de Sor?"

Dear Mr. Mirabel bursts into enthusiasm and makes a charming reply. His large experience of young ladies warns him that they will tell each other what he thinks of them, when they retire for the night; and he is careful on these occasions to say something that will bear repetition.

"I see in Miss de Sor," he declares, "the resolution of a man, tempered by the sweetness of a woman. When that interesting creature marries, her husband will be--shall I use the vulgar word?--henpecked. Dear Miss Plym, he will enjoy it; and he will be quite right too; and, if I am asked to the wedding, I

shall say, with heartfelt sincerity, Enviably man!"

In the height of her admiration for Mr. Mirabel's wonderful eye for character, Miss Plym is called away to the piano. Cecilia succeeds to her friend's place--and has her waist taken in charge as a matter of course.

"How do you like Miss Plym?" she asks directly.

Mr. Mirabel smiles, and shows the prettiest little pearly teeth. "I was just thinking of her," he confesses pleasantly; "Miss Plym is so nice and plump, so comforting and domestic--such a perfect clergyman's daughter. You love her, don't you? Is she engaged to be married? In that case--between ourselves, dear Miss Wyvil, a clergyman is obliged to be cautious--I may own that I love her too."

Delicious titillations of flattered self-esteem betray themselves in Cecilia's lovely complexion. She is the chosen confidante of this irresistible man; and she would like to express her sense of obligation. But Mr. Mirabel is a master in the art of putting the right words in the right places; and simple Cecilia distrusts herself and her grammar.

At that moment of embarrassment, a friend leaves the dance, and helps Cecilia out of the difficulty.

Emily approaches the sofa-throne, breathless--followed by her partner, entreating her to give him "one turn more." She is not to be tempted; she means to rest. Cecilia sees an act of mercy, suggested by the presence of the disengaged young man. She seizes his arm, and hurries him off to poor Miss Darnaway; sitting forlorn in a corner, and thinking of the nursery at home. In the meanwhile a circumstance occurs. Mr. Mirabel's all-embracing arm shows itself in a new character, when Emily sits by his side.

It becomes, for the first time, an irresolute arm. It advances a little--and hesitates. Emily at once administers an unexpected check; she insists on preserving a free waist, in her own outspoken language. "No, Mr. Mirabel, keep that for the others. You can't imagine how ridiculous you and the young ladies look, and how absurdly unaware of it you all seem to be." For the first time in his life, the reverend and ready-witted man of the world is at a loss for an answer. Why?

For this simple reason. He too has felt the magnetic attraction of the irresistible little creature whom every one likes. Miss Jethro has been doubly defeated. She has failed to keep them apart; and her unexplained misgivings

have not been justified by events: Emily and Mr. Mirabel are good friends already. The brilliant clergyman is poor; his interests in life point to a marriage for money; he has fascinated the heiresses of two rich fathers, Mr. Tyvil and Mr. de Sor--and yet he is conscious of an influence (an alien influence, without a balance at its bankers), which has, in some mysterious way, got between him and his interests.

On Emily's side, the attraction felt is of another nature altogether. Among the merry young people at Monksmoor she is her old happy self again; and she finds in Mr. Mirabel the most agreeable and amusing man whom she has ever met. After those dismal night watches by the bed of her dying aunt, and the dreary weeks of solitude that followed, to live in this new world of luxury and gayety is like escaping from the darkness of night, and basking in the fall brightness of day. Cecilia declares that she looks, once more, like the joyous queen of the bedroom, in the bygone time at school; and Francine (profaning Shakespeare without knowing it), says, "Emily is herself again!"

"Now that your arm is in its right place, reverend sir," she gayly resumes, "I may admit that there are exceptions to all rules. My waist is at your disposal, in a case of necessity--that is to say, in a case of waltzing."

"The one case of all others," Mirabel answers, with the engaging frankness that has won him so many friends, "which can never happen in my unhappy experience. Waltzing, I blush to own it, means picking me up off the floor, and putting smelling salts to my nostrils. In other words, dear Miss Emily, it is the room that waltzes--not I. I can't look at those whirling couples there, with a steady head. Even the exquisite figure of our young hostess, when it describes flying circles, turns me giddy."

Hearing this allusion to Cecilia, Emily drops to the level of the other girls. She too pays her homage to the Pope of private life. "You promised me your unbiased opinion of Cecilia," she reminds him; "and you haven't given it yet."

The ladies' friend gently remonstrates. "Miss Wyvil's beauty dazzles me. How can I give an unbiased opinion? Besides, I am not thinking of her; I can only think of you."

Emily lifts her eyes, half merrily, half tenderly, and looks at him over the top of her fan. It is her first effort at flirtation. She is tempted to engage in the most interesting of all games to a girl--the game which plays at making love. What has Cecilia told her, in those bedroom gossipings, dear to the hearts of the two friends? Cecilia has whispered, "Mr. Mirabel admires your figure; he

calls you 'the Venus of Milo, in a state of perfect abridgment.'" Where is the daughter of Eve, who would not have been flattered by that pretty compliment--who would not have talked soft nonsense in return? "You can only think of Me," Emily repeats coquettishly. "Have you said that to the last young lady who occupied my place, and will you say it again to the next who follows me?"

"Not to one of them! Mere compliments are for the others--not for you."

"What is for me, Mr. Mirabel?"

"What I have just offered you--a confession of the truth."

Emily is startled by the tone in which he replies. He seems to be in earnest; not a vestige is left of the easy gayety of his manner. His face shows an expression of anxiety which she has never seen in it yet. "Do you believe me?" he asks in a whisper.

She tries to change the subject.

"When am I to hear you preach, Mr. Mirabel?"

He persists. "When you believe me," he says.

His eyes add an emphasis to that reply which is not to be mistaken. Emily turns away from him, and notices Francine. She has left the dance, and is looking with marked attention at Emily and Mirabel. "I want to speak to you," she says, and beckons impatiently to Emily.

Mirabel whispers, "Don't go!"

Emily rises nevertheless--ready to avail herself of the first excuse for leaving him. Francine meets her half way, and takes her roughly by the arm.

"What is it?" Emily asks.

"Suppose you leave off flirting with Mr. Mirabel, and make yourself of some use."

"In what way?"

"Use your ears--and look at that girl."

She points disdainfully to innocent Miss Plym. The rector's daughter possesses all the virtues, with one exception--the virtue of having an ear for music. When she sings, she is out of tune; and, when she plays, she murders time.

"Who can dance to such music as that?" says Francine. "Finish the waltz for her."

Emily naturally hesitates. "How can I take her place, unless she asks me?"

Francine laughs scornfully. "Say at once, you want to go back to Mr. Mirabel."

"Do you think I should have got up, when you beckoned to me," Emily rejoins, "if I had not wanted to get away from Mr. Mirabel?"

Instead of resenting this sharp retort, Francine suddenly breaks into good humor. "Come along, you little spit-fire; I'll manage it for you."

She leads Emily to the piano, and stops Miss Plym without a word of apology: "It's your turn to dance now. Here's Miss Brown waiting to relieve you."

Cecilia has not been unobservant, in her own quiet way, of what has been going on. Waiting until Francine and Miss Plym are out of hearing, she bends over Emily, and says, "My dear, I really do think Francine is in love with Mr. Mirabel."

"After having only been a week in the same house with him!" Emily exclaims.

"At any rate," said Cecilia, more smartly than usual, "she is jealous of you."