

CHAPTER XLI. SPEECHIFYING.

On the Monday, a plowboy from Vale Regis arrived at Monksmoor.

In respect of himself, he was a person beneath notice. In respect of his errand, he was sufficiently important to cast a gloom over the household. The faithless Mirabel had broken his engagement, and the plowboy was the herald of misfortune who brought his apology. To his great disappointment (he wrote) he was detained by the affairs of his parish. He could only trust to Mr. Wyvil's indulgence to excuse him, and to communicate his sincere sense of regret (on scented note paper) to the ladies.

Everybody believed in the affairs of the parish--with the exception of Francine. "Mr. Mirabel has made the best excuse he could think of for shortening his visit; and I don't wonder at it," she said, looking significantly at Emily.

Emily was playing with one of the dogs; exercising him in the tricks which he had learned. She balanced a morsel of sugar on his nose--and had no attention to spare for Francine.

Cecilia, as the mistress of the house, felt it her duty to interfere. "That is a strange remark to make," she answered. "Do you mean to say that we have driven Mr. Mirabel away from us?"

"I accuse nobody," Francine began with spiteful candor.

"Now she's going to accuse everybody!" Emily interposed, addressing herself facetiously to the dog.

"But when girls are bent on fascinating men, whether they like it or not," Francine proceeded, "men have only one alternative--they must keep out of the way." She looked again at Emily, more pointedly than ever.

Even gentle Cecilia resented this. "Whom do you refer to?" she said sharply.

"My dear!" Emily remonstrated, "need you ask?" She glanced at Francine as she spoke, and then gave the dog his signal. He tossed up the sugar, and caught it in his mouth. His audience applauded him--and so, for that time, the skirmish ended.

Among the letters of the next morning's delivery, arrived Alban's reply. Emily's anticipations proved to be correct. The drawing-master's duties would not permit him to leave Netherwoods; and he, like Mirabel, sent his apologies. His short letter to Emily contained no further allusion to Miss Jethro; it began and ended on the first page.

Had he been disappointed by the tone of reserve in which Emily had written to him, under Mr. Wyvil's advice? Or (as Cecilia suggested) had his detention at the school so bitterly disappointed him that he was too disheartened to write at any length? Emily made no attempt to arrive at a conclusion, either one way or the other. She seemed to be in depressed spirits; and she spoke superstitiously, for the first time in Cecilia's experience of her.

"I don't like this reappearance of Miss Jethro," she said. "If the mystery about that woman is ever cleared up, it will bring trouble and sorrow to me--and I believe, in his own secret heart, Alban Morris thinks so too."

"Write, and ask him," Cecilia suggested.

"He is so kind and so unwilling to distress me," Emily answered, "that he wouldn't acknowledge it, even if I am right."

In the middle of the week, the course of private life at Monksmoor suffered an interruption--due to the parliamentary position of the master of the house.

The insatiable appetite for making and hearing speeches, which represents one of the marked peculiarities of the English race (including their cousins in the United States), had seized on Mr. Wyvil's constituents. There was to be a political meeting at the market hall, in the neighboring town; and the member was expected to make an oration, passing in review contemporary events at home and abroad. "Pray don't think of accompanying me," the good man said to his guests. "The hall is badly ventilated, and the speeches, including my own, will not be worth hearing."

This humane warning was ungratefully disregarded. The gentlemen were all interested in "the objects of the meeting"; and the ladies were firm in the resolution not to be left at home by themselves. They dressed with a view to the large assembly of spectators before whom they were about to appear; and they outtalked the men on political subjects, all the way to the town.

The most delightful of surprises was in store for them, when they reached the market hall. Among the crowd of ordinary gentlemen, waiting under the

portico until the proceedings began, appeared one person of distinction, whose title was "Reverend," and whose name was Mirabel.

Francine was the first to discover him. She darted up the steps and held out her hand.

"This is a pleasure!" she cried. "Have you come here to see--" she was about to say Me, but, observing the strangers round her, altered the word to Us. "Please give me your arm," she whispered, before her young friends had arrived within hearing. "I am so frightened in a crowd!"

She held fast by Mirabel, and kept a jealous watch on him. Was it only her fancy? or did she detect a new charm in his smile when he spoke to Emily?

Before it was possible to decide, the time for the meeting had arrived. Mr. Wyvil's friends were of course accommodated with seats on the platform. Francine, still insisting on her claim to Mirabel's arm, got a chair next to him. As she seated herself, she left him free for a moment. In that moment, the infatuated man took an empty chair on the other side of him, and placed it for Emily. He communicated to that hated rival the information which he ought to have reserved for Francine. "The committee insist," he said, "on my proposing one of the Resolutions. I promise not to bore you; mine shall be the shortest speech delivered at the meeting."

The proceedings began.

Among the earlier speakers not one was inspired by a feeling of mercy for the audience. The chairman reveled in words. The mover and seconder of the first Resolution (not having so much as the ghost of an idea to trouble either of them), poured out language in flowing and overflowing streams, like water from a perpetual spring. The heat exhaled by the crowded audience was already becoming insufferable. Cries of "Sit down!" assailed the orator of the moment. The chairman was obliged to interfere. A man at the back of the hall roared out, "Ventilation!" and broke a window with his stick. He was rewarded with three rounds of cheers; and was ironically invited to mount the platform and take the chair.

Under these embarrassing circumstances, Mirabel rose to speak.

He secured silence, at the outset, by a humorous allusion to the prolix speaker who had preceded him. "Look at the clock, gentlemen," he said; "and limit my speech to an interval of ten minutes." The applause which followed was heard, through the broken window, in the street. The boys

among the mob outside intercepted the flow of air by climbing on each other's shoulders and looking in at the meeting, through the gaps left by the shattered glass. Having proposed his Resolution with discreet brevity of speech, Mirabel courted popularity on the plan adopted by the late Lord Palmerston in the House of Commons--he told stories, and made jokes, adapted to the intelligence of the dullest people who were listening to him. The charm of his voice and manner completed his success. Punctually at the tenth minute, he sat down amid cries of "Go on." Francine was the first to take his hand, and to express admiration mutely by pressing it. He returned the pressure--but he looked at the wrong lady--the lady on the other side.

Although she made no complaint, he instantly saw that Emily was overcome by the heat. Her lips were white, and her eyes were closing. "Let me take you out," he said, "or you will faint."

Francine started to her feet to follow them. The lower order of the audience, eager for amusement, put their own humorous construction on the young lady's action. They roared with laughter. "Let the parson and his sweetheart be," they called out; "two's company, miss, and three isn't." Mr. Wyvil interposed his authority and rebuked them. A lady seated behind Francine interfered to good purpose by giving her a chair, which placed her out of sight of the audience. Order was restored--and the proceedings were resumed.

On the conclusion of the meeting, Mirabel and Emily were found waiting for their friends at the door. Mr. Wyvil innocently added fuel to the fire that was burning in Francine. He insisted that Mirabel should return to Monksmoor, and offered her a seat in the carriage at Emily's side.

Later in the evening, when they all met at dinner, there appeared a change in Miss de Sor which surprised everybody but Mirabel. She was gay and good-humored, and especially amiable and attentive to Emily--who sat opposite to her at the table. "What did you and Mr. Mirabel talk about while you were away from us?" she asked innocently. "Politics?"

Emily readily adopted Francine's friendly tone. "Would you have talked politics, in my place?" she asked gayly.

"In your place, I should have had the most delightful of companions," Francine rejoined; "I wish I had been overcome by the heat too!"

Mirabel--attentively observing her--acknowledged the compliment by a bow, and left Emily to continue the conversation. In perfect good faith she owned

to having led Mirabel to talk of himself. She had heard from Cecilia that his early life had been devoted to various occupations, and she was interested in knowing how circumstances had led him into devoting himself to the Church. Francine listened with the outward appearance of implicit belief, and with the inward conviction that Emily was deliberately deceiving her. When the little narrative was at an end, she was more agreeable than ever. She admired Emily's dress, and she rivaled Cecilia in enjoyment of the good things on the table; she entertained Mirabel with humorous anecdotes of the priests at St. Domingo, and was so interested in the manufacture of violins, ancient and modern, that Mr. Wyvil promised to show her his famous collection of instruments, after dinner. Her overflowing amiability included even poor Miss Darnaway and the absent brothers and sisters. She heard with flattering sympathy, how they had been ill and had got well again; what amusing tricks they played, what alarming accidents happened to them, and how remarkably clever they were--"including, I do assure you, dear Miss de Sor, the baby only ten months old." When the ladies rose to retire, Francine was, socially speaking, the heroine of the evening.

While the violins were in course of exhibition, Mirabel found an opportunity of speaking to Emily, unobserved.

"Have you said, or done, anything to offend Miss de Sor?" he asked.

"Nothing whatever!" Emily declared, startled by the question. "What makes you think I have offended her?"

"I have been trying to find a reason for the change in her," Mirabel answered--"especially the change toward yourself."

"Well?"

"Well--she means mischief."

"Mischief of what sort?"

"Of a sort which may expose her to discovery--unless she disarms suspicion at the outset. That is (as I believe) exactly what she has been doing this evening. I needn't warn you to be on your guard."

All the next day Emily was on the watch for events--and nothing happened. Not the slightest appearance of jealousy betrayed itself in Francine. She made no attempt to attract to herself the attentions of Mirabel; and she showed no hostility to Emily, either by word, look, or manner.

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The day after, an event occurred at Netherwoods. Alban Morris received an anonymous letter, addressed to him in these terms:

"A certain young lady, in whom you are supposed to be interested, is forgetting you in your absence. If you are not mean enough to allow yourself to be supplanted by another man, join the party at Monksmoor before it is too late."