

CHAPTER XLII. COOKING.

The day after the political meeting was a day of departures, at the pleasant country house.

Miss Darnaway was recalled to the nursery at home. The old squire who did justice to Mr. Wyvil's port-wine went away next, having guests to entertain at his own house. A far more serious loss followed. The three dancing men had engagements which drew them to new spheres of activity in other drawing-rooms. They said, with the same dreary grace of manner, "Very sorry to go"; they drove to the railway, arrayed in the same perfect traveling suits of neutral tint; and they had but one difference of opinion among them--each firmly believed that he was smoking the best cigar to be got in London.

The morning after these departures would have been a dull morning indeed, but for the presence of Mirabel.

When breakfast was over, the invalid Miss Julia established herself on the sofa with a novel. Her father retired to the other end of the house, and profaned the art of music on music's most expressive instrument. Left with Emily, Cecilia, and Francine, Mirabel made one of his happy suggestions. "We are thrown on our own resources," he said. "Let us distinguish ourselves by inventing some entirely new amusement for the day. You young ladies shall sit in council--and I will be secretary." He turned to Cecilia. "The meeting waits to hear the mistress of the house."

Modest Cecilia appealed to her school friends for help; addressing herself in the first instance (by the secretary's advice) to Francine, as the eldest. They all noticed another change in this variable young person. She was silent and subdued; and she said wearily, "I don't care what we do--shall we go out riding?"

The unanswerable objection to riding as a form of amusement, was that it had been more than once tried already. Something clever and surprising was anticipated from Emily when it came to her turn. She, too, disappointed expectation. "Let us sit under the trees," was all that she could suggest, "and ask Mr. Mirabel to tell us a story."

Mirabel laid down his pen and took it on himself to reject this proposal. "Remember," he remonstrated, "that I have an interest in the diversions of

the day. You can't expect me to be amused by my own story. I appeal to Miss Wyvil to invent a pleasure which will include the secretary."

Cecilia blushed and looked uneasy. "I think I have got an idea," she announced, after some hesitation. "May I propose that we all go to the keeper's lodge?" There her courage failed her, and she hesitated again.

Mirabel gravely registered the proposal, as far as it went. "What are we to do when we get to the keeper's lodge?" he inquired.

"We are to ask the keeper's wife," Cecilia proceeded, "to lend us her kitchen."

"To lend us her kitchen," Mirabel repeated.

"And what are we to do in the kitchen?"

Cecilia looked down at her pretty hands crossed on her lap, and answered softly, "Cook our own luncheon."

Here was an entirely new amusement, in the most attractive sense of the words! Here was charming Cecilia's interest in the pleasures of the table so happily inspired, that the grateful meeting offered its tribute of applause--even including Francine. The members of the council were young; their daring digestions contemplated without fear the prospect of eating their own amateur cookery. The one question that troubled them now was what they were to cook.

"I can make an omelet," Cecilia ventured to say.

"If there is any cold chicken to be had," Emily added, "I undertake to follow the omelet with a mayonnaise."

"There are clergymen in the Church of England who are even clever enough to fry potatoes," Mirabel announced--"and I am one of them. What shall we have next? A pudding? Miss de Sor, can you make a pudding?"

Francine exhibited another new side to her character--a diffident and humble side. "I am ashamed to say I don't know how to cook anything," she confessed; "you had better leave me out of it."

But Cecilia was now in her element. Her plan of operations was wide enough even to include Francine. "You shall wash the lettuce, my dear, and stone the olives for Emily's mayonnaise. Don't be discouraged! You shall have a

companion; we will send to the rectory for Miss Plym--the very person to chop parsley and shallot for my omelet. Oh, Emily, what a morning we are going to have!" Her lovely blue eyes sparkled with joy; she gave Emily a kiss which Mirabel must have been more or less than man not to have coveted. "I declare," cried Cecilia, completely losing her head, "I'm so excited, I don't know what to do with myself!"

Emily's intimate knowledge of her friend applied the right remedy. "You don't know what to do with yourself?" she repeated. "Have you no sense of duty? Give the cook your orders."

Cecilia instantly recovered her presence of mind. She sat down at the writing-table, and made out a list of eatable productions in the animal and vegetable world, in which every other word was underlined two or three times over. Her serious face was a sight to see, when she rang for the cook, and the two held a privy council in a corner.

On the way to the keeper's lodge, the young mistress of the house headed a procession of servants carrying the raw materials. Francine followed, held in custody by Miss Plym--who took her responsibilities seriously, and clamored for instruction in the art of chopping parsley. Mirabel and Emily were together, far behind; they were the only two members of the company whose minds were not occupied in one way or another by the kitchen.

"This child's play of ours doesn't seem to interest you," Mirabel remarked.

"I am thinking," Emily answered, "of what you said to me about Francine."

"I can say something more," he rejoined. "When I noticed the change in her at dinner, I told you she meant mischief. There is another change to-day, which suggests to my mind that the mischief is done."

"And directed against me?" Emily asked.

Mirabel made no direct reply. It was impossible for him to remind her that she had, no matter how innocently, exposed herself to the jealous hatred of Francine. "Time will tell us, what we don't know now," he replied evasively.

"You seem to have faith in time, Mr. Mirabel."

"The greatest faith. Time is the inveterate enemy of deceit. Sooner or later, every hidden thing is a thing doomed to discovery."

"Without exception?"

"Yes," he answered positively, "without exception."

At that moment Francine stopped and looked back at them. Did she think that Emily and Mirabel had been talking together long enough? Miss Plym-- with the parsley still on her mind---advanced to consult Emily's experience. The two walked on together, leaving Mirabel to overtake Francine. He saw, in her first look at him, the effort that it cost her to suppress those emotions which the pride of women is most deeply interested in concealing. Before a word had passed, he regretted that Emily had left them together.

"I wish I had your cheerful disposition," she began, abruptly. "I am out of spirits or out of temper--I don't know which; and I don't know why. Do you ever trouble yourself with thinking of the future?"

"As seldom as possible, Miss de Sor. In such a situation as mine, most people have prospects--I have none."

He spoke gravely, conscious of not feeling at ease on his side. If he had been the most modest man that ever lived, he must have seen in Francine's face that she loved him.

When they had first been presented to each other, she was still under the influence of the meanest instincts in her scheming and selfish nature. She had thought to herself, "With my money to help him, that man's celebrity would do the rest; the best society in England would be glad to receive Mirabel's wife." As the days passed, strong feeling had taken the place of those contemptible aspirations: Mirabel had unconsciously inspired the one passion which was powerful enough to master Francine--sensual passion. Wild hopes rioted in her. Measureless desires which she had never felt before, united themselves with capacities for wickedness, which had been the horrid growth of a few nights--capacities which suggested even viler attempts to rid herself of a supposed rivalry than slandering Emily by means of an anonymous letter. Without waiting for it to be offered, she took Mirabel's arm, and pressed it to her breast as they slowly walked on. The fear of discovery which had troubled her after she had sent her base letter to the post, vanished at that inspiring moment. She bent her head near enough to him when he spoke to feel his breath on her face.

"There is a strange similarity," she said softly, "between your position and mine. Is there anything cheering in my prospects? I am far away from home--my father and mother wouldn't care if they never saw me again. People talk

about my money! What is the use of money to such a lonely wretch as I am? Suppose I write to London, and ask the lawyer if I may give it all away to some deserving person? Why not to you?"

"My dear Miss de Sor--!"

"Is there anything wrong, Mr. Mirabel, in wishing that I could make you a prosperous man?"

"You must not even talk of such a thing!"

"How proud you are!" she said submissively.

"Oh, I can't bear to think of you in that miserable village--a position so unworthy of your talents and your claims! And you tell me I must not talk about it. Would you have said that to Emily, if she was as anxious as I am to see you in your right place in the world?"

"I should have answered her exactly as I have answered you."

"She will never embarrass you, Mr. Mirabel, by being as sincere as I am. Emily can keep her own secrets."

"Is she to blame for doing that?"

"It depends on your feeling for her."

"What feeling do you mean?"

"Suppose you heard she was engaged to be married?" Francine suggested.

Mirabel's manner--studiously cold and formal thus far--altered on a sudden. He looked with unconcealed anxiety at Francine. "Do you say that seriously?" he asked.

"I said 'suppose.' I don't exactly know that she is engaged."

"What do you know?"

"Oh, how interested you are in Emily! She is admired by some people. Are you one of them?"

Mirabel's experience of women warned him to try silence as a means of

provoking her into speaking plainly. The experiment succeeded: Francine returned to the question that he had put to her, and abruptly answered it.

"You may believe me or not, as you like--I know of a man who is in love with her. He has had his opportunities; and he has made good use of them. Would you like to know who he is?"

"I should like to know anything which you may wish to tell me." He did his best to make the reply in a tone of commonplace politeness--and he might have succeeded in deceiving a man. The woman's quicker ear told her that he was angry. Francine took the full advantage of that change in her favor.

"I am afraid your good opinion of Emily will be shaken," she quietly resumed, "when I tell you that she has encouraged a man who is only drawing-master at a school. At the same time, a person in her circumstances--I mean she has no money--ought not to be very hard to please. Of course she has never spoken to you of Mr. Alban Morris?"

"Not that I remember."

Only four words--but they satisfied Francine.

The one thing wanting to complete the obstacle which she had now placed in Emily's way, was that Alban Morris should enter on the scene. He might hesitate; but, if he was really fond of Emily, the anonymous letter would sooner or later bring him to Monksmoor. In the meantime, her object was gained. She dropped Mirabel's arm.

"Here is the lodge," she said gayly--"I declare Cecilia has got an apron on already! Come, and cook."