

### **CHAPTER XLIII. SOUNDING.**

Mirabel left Francine to enter the lodge by herself. His mind was disturbed: he felt the importance of gaining time for reflection before he and Emily met again.

The keeper's garden was at the back of the lodge. Passing through the wicket-gate, he found a little summer-house at a turn in the path. Nobody was there: he went in and sat down.

At intervals, he had even yet encouraged himself to underrate the true importance of the feeling which Emily had awakened in him. There was an end to all self-deception now. After what Francine had said to him, this shallow and frivolous man no longer resisted the all-absorbing influence of love. He shrank under the one terrible question that forced itself on his mind:--Had that jealous girl spoken the truth?

In what process of investigation could he trust, to set this anxiety at rest? To apply openly to Emily would be to take a liberty, which Emily was the last person in the world to permit. In his recent intercourse with her he had felt more strongly than ever the importance of speaking with reserve. He had been scrupulously careful to take no unfair advantage of his opportunity, when he had removed her from the meeting, and when they had walked together, with hardly a creature to observe them, in the lonely outskirts of the town. Emily's gaiety and good humor had not led him astray: he knew that these were bad signs, viewed in the interests of love. His one hope of touching her deeper sympathies was to wait for the help that might yet come from time and chance. With a bitter sigh, he resigned himself to the necessity of being as agreeable and amusing as ever: it was just possible that he might lure her into alluding to Alban Morris, if he began innocently by making her laugh.

As he rose to return to the lodge, the keeper's little terrier, prowling about the garden, looked into the summer-house. Seeing a stranger, the dog showed his teeth and growled.

Mirabel shrank back against the wall behind him, trembling in every limb. His eyes stared in terror as the dog came nearer: barking in high triumph over the discovery of a frightened man whom he could bully. Mirabel called out for help. A laborer at work in the garden ran to the place--and stopped with a broad grin of amusement at seeing a grown man terrified by a

barking dog. "Well," he said to himself, after Mirabel had passed out under protection, "there goes a coward if ever there was one yet!"

Mirabel waited a minute behind the lodge to recover himself. He had been so completely unnerved that his hair was wet with perspiration. While he used his handkerchief, he shuddered at other recollections than the recollection of the dog. "After that night at the inn," he thought, "the least thing frightens me!"

He was received by the young ladies with cries of derisive welcome. "Oh, for shame! for shame! here are the potatoes already cut, and nobody to fry them!"

Mirabel assumed the mask of cheerfulness--with the desperate resolution of an actor, amusing his audience at a time of domestic distress. He astonished the keeper's wife by showing that he really knew how to use her frying-pan. Cecilia's omelet was tough--but the young ladies ate it. Emily's mayonnaise sauce was almost as liquid as water--they swallowed it nevertheless by the help of spoons. The potatoes followed, crisp and dry and delicious--and Mirabel became more popular than ever. "He is the only one of us," Cecilia sadly acknowledged, "who knows how to cook."

When they all left the lodge for a stroll in the park, Francine attached herself to Cecilia and Miss Plym. She resigned Mirabel to Emily--in the happy belief that she had paved the way for a misunderstanding between them.

The merriment at the luncheon table had revived Emily's good spirits. She had a light-hearted remembrance of the failure of her sauce. Mirabel saw her smiling to herself. "May I ask what amuses you?" he said.

"I was thinking of the debt of gratitude that we owe to Mr. Wyvil," she replied. "If he had not persuaded you to return to Monksmoor, we should never have seen the famous Mr. Mirabel with a frying pan in his hand, and never have tasted the only good dish at our luncheon."

Mirabel tried vainly to adopt his companion's easy tone. Now that he was alone with her, the doubts that Francine had aroused shook the prudent resolution at which he had arrived in the garden. He ran the risk, and told Emily plainly why he had returned to Mr. Wyvil's house.

"Although I am sensible of our host's kindness," he answered, "I should have gone back to my parsonage--but for You."

She declined to understand him seriously. "Then the affairs of your parish are neglected--and I am to blame!" she said.

"Am I the first man who has neglected his duties for your sake?" he asked. "I wonder whether the masters at school had the heart to report you when you neglected your lessons?"

She thought of Alban--and betrayed herself by a heightened color. The moment after, she changed the subject. Mirabel could no longer resist the conclusion that Francine had told him the truth.

"When do you leave us," she inquired.

"To-morrow is Saturday--I must go back as usual."

"And how will your deserted parish receive you?"

He made a desperate effort to be as amusing as usual.

"I am sure of preserving my popularity," he said, "while I have a cask in the cellar, and a few spare sixpences in my pocket. The public spirit of my parishioners asks for nothing but money and beer. Before I went to that wearisome meeting, I told my housekeeper that I was going to make a speech about reform. She didn't know what I meant. I explained that reform might increase the number of British citizens who had the right of voting at elections for parliament. She brightened up directly. 'Ah,' she said, 'I've heard my husband talk about elections. The more there are of them (he says) the more money he'll get for his vote. I'm all for reform.' On my way out of the house, I tried the man who works in my garden on the same subject. He didn't look at the matter from the housekeeper's sanguine point of view. 'I don't deny that parliament once gave me a good dinner for nothing at the public-house,' he admitted. 'But that was years ago--and (you'll excuse me, sir) I hear nothing of another dinner to come. It's a matter of opinion, of course. I don't myself believe in reform.' There are specimens of the state of public spirit in our village!" He paused. Emily was listening--but he had not succeeded in choosing a subject that amused her. He tried a topic more nearly connected with his own interests; the topic of the future. "Our good friend has asked me to prolong my visit, after Sunday's duties are over," he said. "I hope I shall find you here, next week?"

"Will the affairs of your parish allow you to come back?" Emily asked mischievously.

"The affairs of my parish--if you force me to confess it--were only an excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

"An excuse for keeping away from Monksmoor--in the interests of my own tranquillity. The experiment has failed. While you are here, I can't keep away."

She still declined to understand him seriously. "Must I tell you in plain words that flattery is thrown away on me?" she said.

"Flattery is not offered to you," he answered gravely. "I beg your pardon for having led to the mistake by talking of myself." Having appealed to her indulgence by that act of submission, he ventured on another distant allusion to the man whom he hated and feared. "Shall I meet any friends of yours," he resumed, "when I return on Monday?"

"What do you mean?"

"I only meant to ask if Mr. Wyvil expects any new guests?"

As he put the question, Cecilia's voice was heard behind them, calling to Emily. They both turned round. Mr. Wyvil had joined his daughter and her two friends. He advanced to meet Emily.

"I have some news for you that you little expect," he said. "A telegram has just arrived from Netherwoods. Mr. Alban Morris has got leave of absence, and is coming here to-morrow."