

CHAPTER XLIV. COMPETING.

Time at Monksmoor had advanced to the half hour before dinner, on Saturday evening.

Cecilia and Francine, Mr. Wyvil and Mirabel, were loitering in the conservatory. In the drawing-room, Emily had been considerably left alone with Alban. He had missed the early train from Netherwoods; but he had arrived in time to dress for dinner, and to offer the necessary explanations.

If it had been possible for Alban to allude to the anonymous letter, he might have owned that his first impulse had led him to destroy it, and to assert his confidence in Emily by refusing Mr. Wyvil's invitation. But try as he might to forget them, the base words that he had read remained in his memory. Irritating him at the outset, they had ended in rousing his jealousy. Under that delusive influence, he persuaded himself that he had acted, in the first instance, without due consideration. It was surely his interest--it might even be his duty--to go to Mr. Wyvil's house, and judge for himself. After some last wretched moments of hesitation, he had decided on effecting a compromise with his own better sense, by consulting Miss Ladd. That excellent lady did exactly what he had expected her to do. She made arrangements which granted him leave of absence, from the Saturday to the Tuesday following. The excuse which had served him, in telegraphing to Mr. Wyvil, must now be repeated, in accounting for his unexpected appearance to Emily. "I found a person to take charge of my class," he said; "and I gladly availed myself of the opportunity of seeing you again."

After observing him attentively, while he was speaking to her, Emily owned, with her customary frankness, that she had noticed something in his manner which left her not quite at her ease.

"I wonder," she said, "if there is any foundation for a doubt that has troubled me?" To his unutterable relief, she at once explained what the doubt was. "I am afraid I offended you, in replying to your letter about Miss Jethro."

In this case, Alban could enjoy the luxury of speaking unreservedly. He confessed that Emily's letter had disappointed him.

"I expected you to answer me with less reserve," he replied; "and I began to think I had acted rashly in writing to you at all. When there is a better opportunity, I may have a word to say--" He was apparently interrupted by

something that he saw in the conservatory. Looking that way, Emily perceived that Mirabel was the object which had attracted Alban's attention. The vile anonymous letter was in his mind again. Without a preliminary word to prepare Emily, he suddenly changed the subject. "How do you like the clergyman?" he asked.

"Very much indeed," she replied, without the slightest embarrassment. "Mr. Mirabel is clever and agreeable--and not at all spoiled by his success. I am sure," she said innocently, "you will like him too."

Alban's face answered her unmistakably in the negative sense--but Emily's attention was drawn the other way by Francine. She joined them at the moment, on the lookout for any signs of an encouraging result which her treachery might already have produced. Alban had been inclined to suspect her when he had received the letter. He rose and bowed as she approached. Something--he was unable to realize what it was--told him, in the moment when they looked at each other, that his suspicion had hit the mark.

In the conservatory the ever-amiable Mirabel had left his friends for a while in search of flowers for Cecilia. She turned to her father when they were alone, and asked him which of the gentlemen was to take her in to dinner--Mr. Mirabel or Mr. Morris?

"Mr. Morris, of course," he answered. "He is the new guest--and he turns out to be more than the equal, socially-speaking, of our other friend. When I showed him his room, I asked if he was related to a man who bore the same name--a fellow student of mine, years and years ago, at college. He is my friend's younger son; one of a ruined family--but persons of high distinction in their day."

Mirabel returned with the flowers, just as dinner was announced.

"You are to take Emily to-day," Cecilia said to him, leading the way out of the conservatory. As they entered the drawing-room, Alban was just offering his arm to Emily. "Papa gives you to me, Mr. Morris," Cecilia explained pleasantly. Alban hesitated, apparently not understanding the allusion. Mirabel interfered with his best grace: "Mr. Wyvil offers you the honor of taking his daughter to the dining-room." Alban's face darkened ominously, as the elegant little clergyman gave his arm to Emily, and followed Mr. Wyvil and Francine out of the room. Cecilia looked at her silent and surly companion, and almost envied her lazy sister, dining--under cover of a convenient headache--in her own room.

Having already made up his mind that Alban Morris required careful handling, Mirabel waited a little before he led the conversation as usual. Between the soup and the fish, he made an interesting confession, addressed to Emily in the strictest confidence.

"I have taken a fancy to your friend Mr. Morris," he said. "First impressions, in my case, decide everything; I like people or dislike them on impulse. That man appeals to my sympathies. Is he a good talker?"

"I should say Yes," Emily answered prettily, "if you were not present."

Mirabel was not to be beaten, even by a woman, in the art of paying compliments. He looked admiringly at Alban (sitting opposite to him), and said: "Let us listen."

This flattering suggestion not only pleased Emily--it artfully served Mirabel's purpose. That is to say, it secured him an opportunity for observation of what was going on at the other side of the table.

Alban's instincts as a gentleman had led him to control his irritation and to regret that he had suffered it to appear. Anxious to please, he presented himself at his best. Gentle Cecilia forgave and forgot the angry look which had startled her. Mr. Wyvil was delighted with the son of his old friend. Emily felt secretly proud of the good opinions which her admirer was gathering; and Francine saw with pleasure that he was asserting his claim to Emily's preference, in the way of all others which would be most likely to discourage his rival. These various impressions--produced while Alban's enemy was ominously silent--began to suffer an imperceptible change, from the moment when Mirabel decided that his time had come to take the lead. A remark made by Alban offered him the chance for which he had been on the watch. He agreed with the remark; he enlarged on the remark; he was brilliant and familiar, and instructive and amusing--and still it was all due to the remark. Alban's temper was once more severely tried. Mirabel's mischievous object had not escaped his penetration. He did his best to put obstacles in the adversary's way--and was baffled, time after time, with the readiest ingenuity. If he interrupted--the sweet-tempered clergyman submitted, and went on. If he differed--modest Mr. Mirabel said, in the most amiable manner, "I daresay I am wrong," and handled the topic from his opponent's point of view. Never had such a perfect Christian sat before at Mr. Wyvil's table: not a hard word, not an impatient look, escaped him. The longer Alban resisted, the more surely he lost ground in the general estimation. Cecilia was disappointed; Emily was grieved; Mr. Wyvil's favorable opinion began to waver; Francine was disgusted. When dinner was

over, and the carriage was waiting to take the shepherd back to his flock by moonlight, Mirabel's triumph was complete. He had made Alban the innocent means of publicly exhibiting his perfect temper and perfect politeness, under their best and brightest aspect.

So that day ended. Sunday promised to pass quietly, in the absence of Mirabel. The morning came--and it seemed doubtful whether the promise would be fulfilled.

Francine had passed an uneasy night. No such encouraging result as she had anticipated had hitherto followed the appearance of Alban Morris at Monksmoor. He had clumsily allowed Mirabel to improve his position--while he had himself lost ground--in Emily's estimation. If this first disastrous consequence of the meeting between the two men was permitted to repeat itself on future occasions, Emily and Mirabel would be brought more closely together, and Alban himself would be the unhappy cause of it. Francine rose, on the Sunday morning, before the table was laid for breakfast--resolved to try the effect of a timely word of advice.

Her bedroom was situated in the front of the house. The man she was looking for presently passed within her range of view from the window, on his way to take a morning walk in the park. She followed him immediately.

"Good-morning, Mr. Morris."

He raised his hat and bowed--without speaking, and without looking at her.

"We resemble each other in one particular," she proceeded, graciously; "we both like to breathe the fresh air before breakfast."

He said exactly what common politeness obliged him to say, and no more--he said, "Yes."

Some girls might have been discouraged. Francine went on.

"It is no fault of mine, Mr. Morris, that we have not been better friends. For some reason, into which I don't presume to inquire, you seem to distrust me. I really don't know what I have done to deserve it."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked--eying her suddenly and searchingly as he spoke.

Her hard face settled into a rigid look; her eyes met his eyes with a stony

defiant stare. Now, for the first time, she knew that he suspected her of having written the anonymous letter. Every evil quality in her nature steadily defied him. A hardened old woman could not have sustained the shock of discovery with a more devilish composure than this girl displayed. "Perhaps you will explain yourself," she said.

"I have explained myself," he answered.

"Then I must be content," she rejoined, "to remain in the dark. I had intended, out of my regard for Emily, to suggest that you might--with advantage to yourself, and to interests that are very dear to you--be more careful in your behavior to Mr. Mirabel. Are you disposed to listen to me?"

"Do you wish me to answer that question plainly, Miss de Sor?"

"I insist on your answering it plainly."

"Then I am not disposed to listen to you."

"May I know why? or am I to be left in the dark again?"

"You are to be left, if you please, to your own ingenuity."

Francine looked at him, with a malignant smile. "One of these days, Mr. Morris--I will deserve your confidence in my ingenuity." She said it, and went back to the house.

This was the only element of disturbance that troubled the perfect tranquillity of the day. What Francine had proposed to do, with the one idea of making Alban serve her purpose, was accomplished a few hours later by Emily's influence for good over the man who loved her.

They passed the afternoon together uninterruptedly in the distant solitudes of the park. In the course of conversation Emily found an opportunity of discreetly alluding to Mirabel. "You mustn't be jealous of our clever little friend," she said; "I like him, and admire him; but--"

"But you don't love him?"

She smiled at the eager way in which Alban put the question.

"There is no fear of that," she answered brightly.

"Not even if you discovered that he loves you?"

"Not even then. Are you content at last? Promise me not to be rude to Mr. Mirabel again."

"For his sake?"

"No--for my sake. I don't like to see you place yourself at a disadvantage toward another man; I don't like you to disappoint me."

The happiness of hearing her say those words transfigured him--the manly beauty of his earlier and happier years seemed to have returned to Alban. He took her hand--he was too agitated to speak.

"You are forgetting Mr. Mirabel," she reminded him gently.

"I will be all that is civil and kind to Mr. Mirabel; I will like him and admire him as you do. Oh, Emily, are you a little, only a very little, fond of me?"

"I don't quite know."

"May I try to find out?"

"How?" she asked.

Her fair cheek was very near to him. The softly-rising color on it said, Answer me here--and he answered.