

CHAPTER LIII. THE FRIEND IS FOUND.

Mrs. Ellmother looked into the parlor. "I told you Mr. Mirabel would call again," she announced. "Here he is."

"Has he asked to see me?"

"He leaves it entirely to you."

For a moment, and a moment only, Emily was undecided. "Show him in," she said.

Mirabel's embarrassment was visible the moment he entered the room. For the first time in his life--in the presence of a woman--the popular preacher was shy. He who had taken hundreds of fair hands with sympathetic pressure--he who had offered fluent consolation, abroad and at home, to beauty in distress--was conscious of a rising color, and was absolutely at a loss for words when Emily received him. And yet, though he appeared at disadvantage--and, worse still, though he was aware of it himself--there was nothing contemptible in his look and manner. His silence and confusion revealed a change in him which inspired respect. Love had developed this spoiled darling of foolish congregations, this effeminate pet of drawing-rooms and boudoirs, into the likeness of a Man--and no woman, in Emily's position, could have failed to see that it was love which she herself had inspired.

Equally ill at ease, they both took refuge in the commonplace phrases suggested by the occasion. These exhausted there was a pause. Mirabel alluded to Cecilia, as a means of continuing the conversation.

"Have you seen Miss Wyvil?" he inquired.

"She was here last night; and I expect to see her again to-day before she returns to Monksmoor with her father. Do you go back with them?"

"Yes--if you do."

"I remain in London."

"Then I remain in London, too."

The strong feeling that was in him had forced its way to expression at last. In happier days--when she had persistently refused to let him speak to her seriously--she would have been ready with a light-hearted reply. She was silent now. Mirabel pleaded with her not to misunderstand him, by an honest confession of his motives which presented him under a new aspect. The easy plausible man, who had hardly ever seemed to be in earnest before--meant, seriously meant, what he said now.

"May I try to explain myself?" he asked.

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"Pray, don't suppose me capable," Mirabel said earnestly, "of presuming to pay you an idle compliment. I cannot think of you, alone and in trouble, without feeling anxiety which can only be relieved in one way--I must be near enough to hear of you, day by day. Not by repeating this visit! Unless you wish it, I will not again cross the threshold of your door. Mrs. Ellmother will tell me if your mind is more at ease; Mrs. Ellmother will tell me if there is any new trial of your fortitude. She needn't even mention that I have been speaking to her at the door; and she may be sure, and you may be sure, that I shall ask no inquisitive questions. I can feel for you in your misfortune, without wishing to know what that misfortune is. If I can ever be of the smallest use, think of me as your other servant. Say to Mrs. Ellmother, 'I want him'--and say no more."

Where is the woman who could have resisted such devotion as this--inspired, truly inspired, by herself? Emily's eyes softened as she answered him.

"You little know how your kindness touches me," she said.

"Don't speak of my kindness until you have put me to the proof," he interposed. "Can a friend (such a friend as I am, I mean) be of any use?"

"Of the greatest use if I could feel justified in trying you."

"I entreat you to try me!"

"But, Mr. Mirabel, you don't know what I am thinking of."

"I don't want to know."

"I may be wrong. My friends all say I am wrong."

"I don't care what your friends say; I don't care about any earthly thing but your tranquillity. Does your dog ask whether you are right or wrong? I am your dog. I think of You, and I think of nothing else."

She looked back through the experience of the last few days. Miss Ladd--Mrs. Ellmother--Doctor Allday: not one of them had felt for her, not one of them had spoken to her, as this man had felt and had spoken. She remembered the dreadful sense of solitude and helplessness which had wrung her heart, in the interval before Mirabel came in. Her father himself could hardly have been kinder to her than this friend of a few weeks only. She looked at him through her tears; she could say nothing that was eloquent, nothing even that was adequate. "You are very good to me," was her only acknowledgment of all that he had offered. How poor it seemed to be! and yet how much it meant!

He rose--saying considerately that he would leave her to recover herself, and would wait to hear if he was wanted.

"No," she said; "I must not let you go. In common gratitude I ought to decide before you leave me, and I do decide to take you into my confidence." She hesitated; her color rose a little. "I know how unselfishly you offer me your help," she resumed; "I know you speak to me as a brother might speak to a sister--"

He gently interrupted her. "No," he said; "I can't honestly claim to do that. And--may I venture to remind you?--you know why."

She started. Her eyes rested on him with a momentary expression of reproach.

"Is it quite fair," she asked, "in my situation, to say that?"

"Would it have been quite fair," he rejoined, "to allow you to deceive yourself? Should I deserve to be taken into your confidence, if I encouraged you to trust me, under false pretenses? Not a word more of those hopes on which the happiness of my life depends shall pass my lips, unless you permit it. In my devotion to your interests, I promise to forget myself. My motives may be misinterpreted; my position may be misunderstood. Ignorant people may take me for that other happier man, who is an object of interest to you--"

"Stop, Mr. Mirabel! The person to whom you refer has no such claim on me

as you suppose."

"Dare I say how happy I am to hear it? Will you forgive me?"

"I will forgive you if you say no more."

Their eyes met. Completely overcome by the new hope that she had inspired, Mirabel was unable to answer her. His sensitive nerves trembled under emotion, like the nerves of a woman; his delicate complexion faded away slowly into whiteness. Emily was alarmed--he seemed to be on the point of fainting. She ran to the window to open it more widely.

"Pray don't trouble yourself," he said, "I am easily agitated by any sudden sensation--and I am a little overcome at this moment by my own happiness."

"Let me give you a glass of wine."

"Thank you--I don't need it indeed."

"You really feel better?"

"I feel quite well again--and eager to hear how I can serve you."

"It's a long story, Mr. Mirabel--and a dreadful story."

"Dreadful?"

"Yes! Let me tell you first how you can serve me. I am in search of a man who has done me the cruelest wrong that one human creature can inflict on another. But the chances are all against me--I am only a woman; and I don't know how to take even the first step toward discovery."

"You will know, when I guide you."

He reminded her tenderly of what she might expect from him, and was rewarded by a grateful look. Seeing nothing, suspecting nothing, they advanced together nearer and nearer to the end.

"Once or twice," Emily continued, "I spoke to you of my poor father, when we were at Monksmoor--and I must speak of him again. You could have no interest in inquiring about a stranger--and you cannot have heard how he died."

"Pardon me, I heard from Mr. Wyvil how he died."

"You heard what I had told Mr. Wyvil," Emily said: "I was wrong."

"Wrong!" Mirabel exclaimed, in a tone of courteous surprise. "Was it not a sudden death?"

"It was a sudden death."

"Caused by disease of the heart?"

"Caused by no disease. I have been deceived about my father's death--and I have only discovered it a few days since."

At the impending moment of the frightful shock which she was innocently about to inflict on him, she stopped--doubtful whether it would be best to relate how the discovery had been made, or to pass at once to the result. Mirabel supposed that she had paused to control her agitation. He was so immeasurably far away from the faintest suspicion of what was coming that he exerted his ingenuity, in the hope of sparing her.

"I can anticipate the rest," he said. "Your sad loss has been caused by some fatal accident. Let us change the subject; tell me more of that man whom I must help you to find. It will only distress you to dwell on your father's death."

"Distress me?" she repeated. "His death maddens me!"

"Oh, don't say that!"

"Hear me! hear me! My father died murdered, at Zeeland--and the man you must help me to find is the wretch who killed him."

She started to her feet with a cry of terror. Mirabel dropped from his chair senseless to the floor.