

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH

Daylight View of the Man

WHEN I put out my candle that night, I made a mistake--I trusted entirely to myself to wake in good time in the morning. I ought to have told Zillah to call me.

Hours passed before I could close my eyes. It was broken rest when it came, until the day dawned. Then I fell asleep at last in good earnest. When I woke, and looked at my watch, I was amazed to find that it was ten o'clock.

I jumped out of bed, and rang for the old nurse. Was Lucilla at home? No: she had gone out for a little walk. By herself? Yes--by herself. In what direction? Up the valley, towards Browndown.

I instantly arrived at my own conclusion.

She had got the start of me--thanks to my laziness in sleeping away the precious hours of the morning in bed. The one thing to do, was to follow her as speedily as possible. In half an hour more, I was out for a little walk by myself--and (what do you think?) my direction also was up the valley, towards Browndown.

A pastoral solitude reigned round the lonely little house. I went on beyond it, into the next winding of the valley. Not a human creature was to be seen. I returned to Browndown to reconnoiter. Ascending the rising ground on which the house was built, I approached it from the back. The windows were all open. I listened. (Do you suppose I felt scruples in such an emergency as this? Oh, pooh! pooh! who but a fool would have felt anything of the sort!) I listened with both my ears. Through a window at the side of the house, I heard the sound of voices. Advancing noiselessly on the turf, I heard the voice of Dubourg. He was answered by a woman. Aha, I had caught her. Lucilla herself!

"Wonderful!" I heard him say. "I believe you have eyes in the ends of your fingers. Take this, now--and try if you can tell me what it is."

"A little vase," she answered--speaking, I give you my word of honor, as composedly as if she had known him for years. "Wait! what metal is it? Silver? No. Gold. Did you really make this yourself as well as the box?"

"Yes. It is an odd taste of mine--isn't it?--to be fond of chasing in gold and silver. Years ago I met with a man in Italy, who taught me. It amused me, then--and it amuses me now. When I was recovering from an illness last spring, I shaped that vase out of the plain metal, and made the ornaments on it."

"Another mystery revealed!" she exclaimed. "Now I know what you wanted with those gold and silver plates that came to you from London. Are you aware of what a character you have got here? There are some of us who suspect you of coining false money!"

They both burst out laughing as gaily as a couple of children. I declare I wished myself one of the party! But no. I had my duty to do as a respectable woman. My duty was to steal a little nearer, and see if any familiarities were passing between these two merry young people. One half of the open window was sheltered, on the outer side, by a Venetian blind. I stood behind the blind, and peeped in. (Duty! oh, dear me, painful, but necessary duty!) Dubourg was sitting with his back to the window. Lucilla faced me opposite to him. Her cheeks were flushed with pleasure. She held in her lap a pretty little golden vase. Her clever fingers were passing over it rapidly, exactly as they had passed, the previous evening, over my face.

"Shall I tell you what the pattern is on your vase?" she went on.

"Can you really do that?"

"You shall judge for yourself. The pattern is made of leaves, with birds placed among them, at intervals. Stop! I think I have felt leaves like these on the old side of the rectory, against the wall. Ivy?"

"Amazing! it is ivy."

"The birds," she resumed. "I shan't be satisfied till I have told you what the birds are. Haven't I got silver birds like them--only much larger--for holding pepper, and mustard, and sugar, and so on. Owls!" she exclaimed, with a cry of triumph. "Little owls, sitting in ivy-nests. What a delightful pattern! I never heard of anything like it before."

"Keep the vase!" he said. "You will honor me, you will delight me, if you will keep the vase."

She rose and shook her head--without giving him back the vase, however.

"I might take it, if you were not a stranger," she said. "Why don't you tell us who you are, and what your reason is for living all by yourself in this dull place?"

He stood before her, with his head down, and sighed bitterly.

"I know I ought to explain myself," he answered. "I can't be surprised if people are suspicious of me." He paused, and added very earnestly, "I can't tell it to you. Oh, no--not to you!"

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me!"

She felt for the table, with her ivory cane, and put the vase down on it--very unwillingly.

"Good morning, Mr. Dubourg," she said.

He opened the door of the room for her in silence. Waiting close against the side of the house, I saw them appear under the porch, and cross the little walled enclosure in front. As she stepped out on the open turf beyond, she turned, and spoke to him again.

"If you won't tell me your secret," she said, "will you tell it to some one else? Will you tell it to a friend of mine?"

"To what friend?" he asked.

"To the lady whom you met with me last night."

He hesitated. "I am afraid I offended the lady," he said.

"So much the more reason for your explaining yourself," she rejoined. "If you will only satisfy her, I might ask you to come and see us--I might even take the vase." With that strong hint, she actually gave him her hand at parting. Her perfect self-possession, her easy familiarity with this stranger--so bold, and yet so innocent--petrified me. "I shall send my friend to you this morning," she said imperiously, striking her cane on the turf. "I insist on your telling her the whole truth."

With that, she signed to him that he was to follow her no farther, and went

her way back to the village.

Does it not surprise you, as it surprised me? Instead of her blindness making her nervous in the presence of a man unknown to her, it appeared to have exactly the contrary effect. It made her fearless.

He stood on the spot where she had left him, watching her as she receded in the distance. His manner towards her, in the house and out of the house, had exhibited, it is only fair to say, the utmost consideration and respect. Whatever shyness there had been between them, was shyness entirely on his side. I had a short stuff dress on, which made no noise over the grass. I skirted the wall of the enclosure, and approached him unsuspected, from behind. "The charming creature!" he said to himself, still following her with his eyes. As the words passed his lips, I struck him smartly on the shoulder with my parasol.

"Mr. Dubourg," I said, "I am waiting to hear the truth."

He started violently--and confronted me in speechless dismay; his color coming and going like the color of a young girl. Anybody who understands women will understand that this behavior on his part, far from softening me towards him, only encouraged me to bully him.

"In your present position in this place, sir," I went on, "do you think it honorable conduct on your part to decoy a young lady, to whom you are a perfect stranger, into your house--a young lady who claims, in right of her sad affliction, even more than the usual forbearance and respect which a gentleman owes to her sex?"

His shifting color settled, for the time, into an angry red.

"You are doing me a great injustice, ma'am," he answered. "It is a shame to say that I have failed in respect to the young lady! I feel the sincerest admiration and compassion for her. Circumstances justify me in what I have done; I could not have acted otherwise. I refer you to the young lady herself."

His voice rose higher and higher--he was thoroughly offended with me. Need I add (seeing the prospect not far off of his bullying me), that I unblushingly shifted my ground, and tried a little civility next?

"If I have done you an injustice, sir, I ask your pardon," I answered. "Having said so much, I have only to add that I shall be satisfied if I hear what the circumstances are, from yourself."

This soothed his offended dignity. His gentler manner began to show itself again.

"The truth is," he said, "that I owe my introduction to the young lady to an ill-tempered little dog belonging to the people at the inn. The dog had followed the person here who attends on me: and it startled the lady by flying out and barking at her as she passed this house. After I had driven away the dog, I begged her to come in and sit down until she had recovered herself. Am I to blame for doing that? I don't deny that I felt the deepest interest in her and that I did my best to amuse her, while she honored me by remaining in my house. May I ask if I have satisfied you?"

With the best will in the world to maintain my unfavorable opinion of him, I was, by this time, fairly forced to acknowledge to myself that the opinion was wrong. His explanation was, in tone and manner as well as in language, the explanation of a gentleman.

And, besides--though he was a little too effeminate for my taste--he really was such a handsome young man! His hair was of a fine bright chestnut color, with a natural curl in it. His eyes were of the lightest brown I had ever seen--with a singularly winning gentle modest expression in them. As for his complexion--so creamy and spotless and fair--he had no right to it: it ought to have been a woman's complexion, or at least a boy's. He looked indeed more like a boy than a man: his smooth face was quite uncovered, either by beard, whisker, or mustache. If he had asked me, I should have guessed him (though he was really three years older) to have been younger than Lucilla.

"Our acquaintance has begun rather oddly, sir," I said. "You spoke strangely to me last night; and I have spoken hastily to you this morning. Accept my excuses--and let us try if we can't do each other justice in the end. I have something more to say to you before we part. Will you think me a very extraordinary woman, if I suggest that you may as well invite me next, to take a chair in your house?"

He laughed with the pleasantest good temper, and led the way in.

We entered the room in which he had received Lucilla; and sat down together on the two chairs near the window--with this difference--that I contrived to possess myself of the seat which he had occupied, and so to place him with his face to the light.

"Mr. Dubourg," I began, "you will already have guessed that I overheard what Miss Finch said to you at parting?"

He bowed, in silent acknowledgment that it was so--and began to toy nervously with the gold vase which Lucilla had left on the table.

"What do you propose to do?" I went on. "You have spoken of the interest you feel in my young friend. If it is a true interest, it will lead you to merit her good opinion by complying with her request. Tell me plainly, if you please. Will you come and see us, in the character of a gentleman who has satisfied two ladies that they can receive him as a neighbor and a friend? Or will you oblige me to warn the rector of Dimchurch that his daughter is in danger of permitting a doubtful character to force his acquaintance on her?"

He put the vase back on the table, and turned deadly pale.

"If you knew what I have suffered," he said; "if you had gone through what I have been compelled to endure--" His voice failed him; his soft brown eyes moistened; his head drooped. He said no more.

In common with all women, I like a man to be a man. There was, to my mind, something weak and womanish in the manner in which this Dubourg met the advance which I had made to him. He not only failed to move my pity--he was in danger of stirring up my contempt.

"I too have suffered," I answered. "I too have been compelled to endure. But there is this difference between us. My courage is not worn out. In your place, if I knew myself to be an honorable man, I would not allow the breath of suspicion to rest on me for an instant. Cost what it might, I would vindicate myself. I should be ashamed to cry--I should speak."

That stung him. He started up on his feet.

"Have you been stared at by hundreds of cruel eyes?" he burst out passionately. "Have you been pointed at, without mercy, wherever you go? Have you been put in the pillory of the newspapers? Has the photograph proclaimed your infamous notoriety in all the shop-windows?" He dropped back into his chair, and wrung his hands in a frenzy. "Oh, the public!" he exclaimed; "the horrible public! I can't get away from them--I can't hide myself, even here. You have had your stare at me, like the rest," he cried, turning on me fiercely. "I knew it when you passed me last night."

"I never saw you out of this place," I answered. "As for the portraits of you,

whoever you may be, I know nothing about them. I was far too anxious and too wretched, to amuse myself by looking into shop-windows before I came here. You, and your name, are equally strange to me. If you have any respect for yourself, tell me who you are. Out with the truth, sir! You know as well as I do that you have gone too far to stop."

I seized him by the hand. I was wrought up by the extraordinary outburst that had escaped him to the highest pitch of excitement: I was hardly conscious of what I said or did. At that supreme moment, we enraged, we maddened each other. His hand closed convulsively on my hand. His eyes looked wildly into mine.

"Do you read the newspapers?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have you seen----?"

"I have not seen the name of 'Dubourg'----"

"My name is not 'Dubourg.'"

"What is it?"

He suddenly stooped over me; and whispered his name in my ear.

In my turn I started, thunderstruck, to my feet.

"Good God!" I cried. "You are the man who was tried for murder last month, and who was all but hanged, on the false testimony of a clock!"