

CHAPTER V.--HER SITUATION IS A TRYING ONE

May 15.--The more I think of it day after day, the more convinced I am that my suspicions are true. He is too interested in me--well, in plain words, loves me; or, not to degrade that phrase, has a wild passion for me; and his affection for Caroline is that towards a sister only. That is the distressing truth; how it has come about I cannot tell, and it wears upon me.

A hundred little circumstances have revealed this to me, and the longer I dwell upon it the more agitating does the consideration become. Heaven only can help me out of the terrible difficulty in which this places me. I have done nothing to encourage him to be faithless to her. I have studiously kept out of his way; have persistently refused to be a third in their interviews. Yet all to no purpose. Some fatality has seemed to rule, ever since he came to the house, that this disastrous inversion of things should arise. If I had only foreseen the possibility of it before he arrived, how gladly would I have departed on some visit or other to the meanest friend to hinder such an apparent treachery. But I blindly welcomed him--indeed, made myself particularly agreeable to him for her sake.

There is no possibility of my suspicions being wrong; not until they have reached absolute certainty have I dared even to admit the truth to myself. His conduct to-day would have proved them true had I entertained

no previous apprehensions. Some photographs of myself came for me by post, and they were handed round at the breakfast table and criticised. I put them temporarily on a side table, and did not remember them until an hour afterwards when I was in my own room. On going to fetch them I discovered him standing at the table with his back towards the door bending over the photographs, one of which he raised to his lips.

The witnessing this act so frightened me that I crept away to escape observation. It was the climax to a series of slight and significant actions all tending to the same conclusion. The question for me now is, what am I to do? To go away is what first occurs to me, but what reason can I give Caroline and my father for such a step; besides, it might precipitate some sort of catastrophe by driving Charles to desperation. For the present, therefore, I have decided that I can only wait, though his contiguity is strangely disturbing to me now, and I hardly retain strength of mind to encounter him. How will the distressing complication end?

May 19.--And so it has come! My mere avoidance of him has precipitated the worst issue--a declaration. I had occasion to go into the kitchen garden to gather some of the double ragged-robins which grew in a corner there. Almost as soon as I had entered I heard footsteps without. The door opened and shut, and I turned to behold him just inside it. As the garden is closed by four walls and the gardener was absent, the spot ensured absolute privacy. He came along the path by the asparagus-bed, and overtook me.

'You know why I come, Alicia?' said he, in a tremulous voice.

I said nothing, and hung my head, for by his tone I did know.

'Yes,' he went on, 'it is you I love; my sentiment towards your sister is one of affection too, but protective, tutelary affection--no more. Say what you will I cannot help it. I mistook my feeling for her, and I know how much I am to blame for my want of self-knowledge. I have fought against this discovery night and day; but it cannot be concealed. Why did I ever see you, since I could not see you till I had committed myself? At the moment my eyes beheld you on that day of my arrival, I said, "This is the woman for whom my manhood has waited." Ever since an unaccountable fascination has riveted my heart to you. Answer one word!'

'O, M. de la Feste!' I burst out. What I said more I cannot remember, but I suppose that the misery I was in showed pretty plainly, for he said, 'Something must be done to let her know; perhaps I have mistaken her affection, too; but all depends upon what you feel.'

'I cannot tell what I feel,' said I, 'except that this seems terrible treachery; and every moment that I stay with you here makes it worse! . . . Try to keep faith with her--her young heart is tender; believe me there is no mistake in the quality of her love for you. Would there were! This would kill her if she knew it!'

He sighed heavily. 'She ought never to be my wife,' he said. 'Leaving my own happiness out of the question, it would be a cruelty to her to unite her to me.'

I said I could not hear such words from him, and begged him in tears to go away; he obeyed, and I heard the garden door shut behind him. What is to be the end of the announcement, and the fate of Caroline?

May 20.--I put a good deal on paper yesterday, and yet not all. I was, in truth, hoping against hope, against conviction, against too conscious self-judgment. I scarcely dare own the truth now, yet it relieves my aching heart to set it down. Yes, I love him--that is the dreadful fact, and I can no longer parry, evade, or deny it to myself though to the rest of the world it can never be owned. I love Caroline's betrothed, and he loves me. It is no yesterday's passion, cultivated by our converse; it came at first sight, independently of my will; and my talk with him yesterday made rather against it than for it, but, alas, did not quench it. God forgive us both for this terrible treachery.

May 25.--All is vague; our courses shapeless. He comes and goes, being occupied, ostensibly at least, with sketching in his tent in the wood. Whether he and she see each other privately I cannot tell, but I rather think they do not; that she sadly awaits him, and he does not appear. Not a sign from him that my repulse has done him any good, or that he will endeavour to keep faith with her. O, if I only had the compulsion of a god, and the self-sacrifice of a martyr!

May 31.--It has all ended--or rather this act of the sad drama has ended--in nothing. He has left us. No day for the fulfilment of the engagement with Caroline is named, my father not being the man to press any one on such a matter, or, indeed, to interfere in any way. We two girls are, in fact, quite defenceless in a case of this kind; lovers may come when they choose, and desert when they choose; poor father is too urbane to utter a word of remonstrance or inquiry. Moreover, as the approved of my dead mother, M. de la Feste has a sort of autocratic power with my father, who holds it unkind to her memory to have an opinion about him. I, feeling it my duty, asked M. de la Feste at the last moment about the engagement, in a voice I could not keep firm.

'Since the death of your mother all has been indefinite--all!' he said gloomily. That was the whole. Possibly, Wherryborne Rectory may see him no more.

June 7 .--M. de la Feste has written--one letter to her, one to me. Hers could not have been very warm, for she did not brighten on reading it. Mine was an ordinary note of friendship, filling an ordinary sheet of paper, which I handed over to Caroline when I had finished looking it through. But there was a scrap of paper in the bottom of the envelope, which I dared not show any one. This scrap is his real letter: I scanned it alone in my room, trembling, hot and cold by turns. He tells me he is very wretched; that he deplores what has happened, but was helpless. Why did I let him see me, if only to make him faithless. Alas, alas!

June 21 .--My dear Caroline has lost appetite, spirits, health. Hope deferred maketh the heart sick. His letters to her grow colder--if indeed he has written more than one. He has refrained from writing again to me--he knows it is no use. Altogether the situation that he and she and I are in is melancholy in the extreme. Why are human hearts so perverse?