

CHAPTER LIII.

A SURPRISE FOR MR. CHATTAWAY.

GEORGE RYLE by no means admired the uncertainty in which he was kept as to the Upland Farm. Had Mr. Chattaway been any other than Mr. Chattaway, had he been a straightforward man, George would have said, "Give me an answer. Yes or No." In point of fact, he did say so to Mr. Chattaway; but he could not get a decisive reply from him, one way or the other. Mr. Chattaway was pretty liberal in his covert sneers as to one with no means of his own taking so extensive a farm as the Upland; but he did not positively say, "I will not lease it to you." George bore the shafts with equanimity. He possessed that very desirable gift, a sweet temper; and he was, and could not help feeling that he was, so really superior to Mr. Chattaway, that he could afford to allow some latitude to that gentleman's evil tongue.

But the time was going on; it was necessary that some decision should be arrived at; and one morning George went up again to the Hold, determined to receive a final answer. As he was entering the steward's room, he met Ford, the clerk at Blackstone, coming out of it.

"Is Mr. Chattaway in there?" asked George.

"He's there, as far as that goes," replied Ford. "But if you want to get any business out of him this morning, you won't, that's all. I have tramped all the way up here, about a matter that's in a hurry, and I have had my walk for my pains. Chattaway won't do anything, or say anything; doesn't seem capable; says he shall be at Blackstone by-and-by. And that's all I've got to go back with."

"Why won't he?"

"Goodness knows. He seems to have had some shock or fright. He was staring at a letter when I went in, and I left him staring at it still when I came out, his wits evidently gone wool-gathering. Good morning, Mr. Ryle."

The young man went his way, and George entered the room. Mr. Chattaway was seated at his desk; an open letter before him, as Ford had said. It was one that had been delivered by that morning's post, and it had brought the

sweat of dismay out upon his brow. He looked at George angrily.

"Who's this again? Am I never to be at peace? What do you want?"

"Mr. Chattaway, I want an answer. If you will not let me the Upland Farm——"

"I will give you no answer this morning, George Ryle. I am otherwise occupied, and I cannot be bothered with home business."

"Will you give me an answer—at all?"

"Yes, to-morrow. Come then."

George saw that something had indeed put Mr. Chattaway out; he appeared incapable of business, as Ford had intimated, and it would be policy, perhaps, to suffer the matter to rest until to-morrow. But a resolution came into George's mind to do at once what he had sometimes thought of doing—to make a friend, if possible, of Miss Diana Trevlyn. He went about the house until he found her: he was almost as much at home in it as poor Rupert had been. Miss Diana happened to be alone in the breakfast-room. She was looking over what appeared to be bills, but she laid them aside at his entrance, and she—it was a most unusual thing—condescended to ask after the health of her sister, Mrs. Ryle.

"Miss Diana, I want you to be my good friend," he said, in the winning manner that made George Ryle liked by every one, as he drew a chair near to her. "Will you whisper a word for me into Mr. Chattaway's ear?"

"About that Upland Farm?"

"Yes. I cannot get an answer from him. He has promised me one to-morrow morning, but I do not rely upon getting it. I must be at some certainty. There's another farm that I have my eye upon if I cannot get Mr. Chattaway's; but it is at a distance from here, and I shall not like it half so well. While he keeps me shilly-shallying over this one, I may lose them both. There's an old proverb, you know, about two stools."

"Was that a joke the other day, the hint you gave about marrying?" inquired Miss Diana.

"It was sober earnest. If I can get the Upland Farm, I shall, I hope, take my wife home to it almost as soon as I am installed there myself."

"Is she a good manager, a practical woman?"

George smiled. "No. She is a lady."

"I thought so," was the remark of Miss Diana, delivered in a very knowing tone. "I can tell you and your wife, George, that it will be uphill work for both of you."

"For a time; I know that. But, Miss Diana, ease, when it comes, will be all the more enjoyable for having been worked for. I often think that the prosperity of those who have honestly worked for it and earned it, must be far sweeter than the monotonous abundance of those who are born prosperous."

"That's true. The worst is, that sometimes the best years of life are over before prosperity comes."

"But those years have had their pleasure, in working on for it. I question whether actual prosperity ever brings the pleasure that we enjoy when anticipating and working for it. If we have no end to look to and scheme for, we should not be happy. Will you say a word for me to him, Miss Diana?"

"First of all, tell me the name of the lady. I suppose you have no objection—you may trust me."

George's lips parted with a smile, and a faint flush stole over his features. "I shall have to tell you before I win her, Miss Diana, if only to obtain your consent to my taking her from the Hold."

"My consent! I have nothing to do with it. You must get that from Mr. and Madam Chattaway."

"If I have yours, I am not sure that I should care to ask—his."

"Of whom do you speak?" she rejoined, looking puzzled.

"Of Maude Trevlyn."

Miss Diana rose from her chair, and stared at him in very astonishment. "Maude Trevlyn!" she repeated. "Since when have you thought of Maude Trevlyn?"

"Since I thought of any one—thought at all, I was going to say. I loved Maude—yes, *loved* her, Miss Diana—when she was only a child."

"And you have not thought of any one else?"

"Never. I have loved Maude, and I have been content to wait for her. But that I was so trammelled with the farm at home, keeping it for Mrs. Ryle and Treve, I might have spoken before."

Maude Trevlyn was evidently not the lady upon whom Miss Diana's suspicions had fallen. It seemed that she could not recover from her surprise—could scarcely yet admit the facts to her mind, so far as to realize them. "Have you never given

cause to another to—to—suspect any admiration on your part?" she resumed, breaking the silence.

"Believe me, I never have. On the contrary," he added, glancing at Miss Diana with peculiar significance for a moment, and his tone was most impressive, "I have cautiously abstained from doing so."

"Ah, I see." And Miss Trevlyn's tone was not less significant than his.

"Will you give her to me, Miss Diana?" he pleaded, in his softest and most persuasive voice.

"I don't know," she answered. "George Ryle, there may be trouble over this."

"Do you mean with Mr. Chattaway?"

"I mean— No matter what I mean. I think there will be trouble over it."

"There need be none if you will only sanction it. But that you might misconstrue me, Miss Diana, I would urge you to give her to me for Maude's own sake. This escapade of poor Rupert's has rendered Mr. Chattaway's roof an undesirable one for her."

"Maude is a Trevlyn, and must marry a gentleman," spoke Miss Diana.

"I am one," said George, quietly. "Pardon me, Miss Diana, if I remind you that my descent is equal to that of the Trevlyns. In the days gone by—"

"You need not enter upon it," was the interruption. "I do not forget it. But gentle descent is not all that is necessary to render a marriage eligible. Maude will have money, and it is only right that she should marry one who possesses it in an equal degree."

"Maude will not have a shilling," cried George, impulsively.

"Indeed! Who told you so?"

George laughed. "It is what I have always supposed. Where is she to have money from?"

"She will have a great deal of money," persisted Miss Diana. "The half of my fortune, at least, will be Maude's. The other half I intended for Rupert. Did you suppose the last of the Trevlyns, Maude and Rupert, would be turned out on the world penniless?"

So! It had been Miss Diana's purpose to bequeath her money to them! Yes; loving power though she did; acquiescing in the act of usurping Trevlyn Hold by Mr. Chattaway, she intended to make it up in some degree to the

children. "Has Maude learnt to care for you," she suddenly asked of George. "You hesitate!"

"If I hesitate, Miss Diana, it is not because I have no answer to give, but whether it would be quite fair to Maude to give it. The truth may be best, however; she *has* learnt to care for me. Perhaps you will answer me a question—have you any objection to me personally?"

"George Ryle, had I had objection to you personally, I should have ordered you out of the room the instant you mentioned Maude's name. Were your position a better one, I would give you Maude to-morrow—so far as my giving could avail. But to enter the Upland Farm upon borrowed money?—no; I do not think that will do for Miss Maude Trevlyn."

"It would be a better position for her than the one she now holds, as governess to Mr. Chattaway's children," replied George, boldly. "A better, and a far happier."

"Nonsense," said Miss Diana. "Maude Trevlyn's position at Trevlyn Hold is not to be looked upon as that of governess, but as a daughter of the house. It was well that both she and Rupert should have some occupation."

"And on the other score?" resumed George. "May I dare to say the truth to you, Miss Diana, that in quitting the Hold for the home I shall make for her, she will be leaving misery for happiness?"

Miss Diana rose. "That is enough for the present," said she. "It has come upon me with surprise, and I must give it some hours' consideration before I can even realize it. With regard to the Upland Farm, I will ask Mr. Chattaway to accord you preference if he can do so: the two matters are quite distinct and apart one from the other. I think you might prosper at the Upland Farm, and be a good tenant; but I decline—and this you must distinctly understand—to give you any hope now with regard to Maude."

George held out his hand with his sunny smile. "I will wait until you have considered it, Miss Diana."

She took her way at once to Mrs. Chattaway's room. Happening, as she passed the corridor window, to cast her eyes to the front of the house, she saw George Ryle cross the lawn on his way from it. At the same moment, Octave Chattaway ran after him, evidently calling to him.

He stopped and turned. He could do no less. And Octave stood with him, laughing and talking rather more freely than she might have done, had she been aware of what had just

taken place. Miss Diana drew in her severe lips, changed her course, and sailed back to the hall-door. Octave was coming in then.

"Manners have changed since I was a girl," remarked Miss Diana to her. "It would scarcely have been deemed seemly then for a young lady to run after a gentleman as he was leaving the house. I do not like it, Octave."

"Manners do change," returned Miss Chattaway, in a tone that she made as slighting as she dared. "It was only George Ryle, Aunt Diana."

"Do you know where Maude is?"

"No: I know nothing about her. I think if you gave Maude a word of reprimand on another score, instead of giving one to me, it might not be amiss, Aunt Diana. Since Rupert turned runagate—or renegade might be a better word—Maude has neglected her duties shamefully with Emily and Edith. She passes her time moithering, and lets them run wild."

"Had Rupert been your brother you might have done the same," curtly rejoined Miss Diana. "A shock like that cannot be lived down in a day. Allow me to give you a hint, Octave: should you lose Maude for the children, you will not so efficiently replace her."

"We are not likely to lose her," said Octave, opening her eyes.

"I don't know that. It strikes me as being likely that we shall. George Ryle wants her."

"Wants her for what?" asked Octave, staring very much.

"He can want her but for one thing—to be his wife. He has loved her, it seems, for years."

She had turned her back on Octave as she said this, on her way up again to Mrs. Chattaway's room; never halting, never looking back at the still, white face, that seemed to be turning into stone as it was strained after her.

In Mrs. Chattaway's sitting-room she found that lady and Maude. She entered suddenly and hastily, and had Miss Diana been of a nature given to suspicion, it might have been excited in her breast then. In their close contact, their start of surprise when interrupted, the frightened expression of their haggard countenances, there was too surely evidence of some unhappy secret. Miss Diana was closely followed into the room by Mr. Chattaway.

"Did you not hear me call?" he inquired of his sister-in-law.

"No," she replied. "I heard you on the stairs behind me, but I did not hear you speak. What is it?"

"Read that," said Mr. Chattaway.

He tossed an open letter to her. It was the one which had so put him out; which had rendered him incapable of attending to business. After digesting it alone in the best manner he could, he had now come to submit it to the keen and calm inspection of Miss Trevlyn.

"Oh," said she carelessly, as she looked at the writing, "it is another from Connell and Connell."

"Read it, will you?" repeated Mr. Chattaway, in low tones. He was too completely shaken to be anything but subdued.

Miss Diana proceeded to do so. It was a letter shorter, if anything, than the one previously received, but more peremptory, even more decided. It simply said that Mr. Rupert Trevlyn had written to inform them of his intention of taking immediate possession of Trevlyn Hold, and had requested them to acquaint Mr. Chattaway with the same. Miss Diana read it to herself, and then read it aloud for the general benefit.

"It is the most infamous thing that has ever come under my notice," said Mr. Chattaway. "What *right* have those men, those Connells, to write to me in this strain? If Rupert Trevlyn passes his time penning folly to them, is it the work of a respectable firm to perpetuate—as may be said—the jokes on me?"

Mrs. Chattaway and Maude gazed at each other, perfectly confounded. It was next to an impossibility that Rupert could have thus written as stated, to Connell and Connell. If they had only dared to defend him! "Why suffer it to put you out, James?" Mrs. Chattaway ventured to say. "Rupert *cannot* be writing such letters; he *cannot* be thinking of attempting to take possession here; the bare idea is absurd: treat it as such."

"But these communications to me from Connell and Connell are not the less disgraceful," was the reply of Mr. Chattaway. "I'd as soon be annoyed with anonymous letters."

Miss Diana Trevlyn had not spoken. The affair, to her keen mind, began to wear a strange appearance. She looked off from the letter—she seemed to have been examining its every word—at Mr. Chattaway. "Were Connell and Connell not so respectable, I should say that they have lent themselves to playing a sorry joke upon you for the purpose of the worst

sort of annoyance: being what they are, that view falls to the ground. There is only one possible solution to it: but——"

"And what's that?" eagerly interrupted Mr. Chattaway.

"That Rupert is amusing himself, and has contrived to impose upon Connell and Connell some notion of the plausibility of his claim——"

"He has not; he never has," broke in Mrs. Chattaway. "I mean," she more calmly added, as she recollected herself, "that Connell and Connell could not be imposed upon by any foolish claim that might be put forth by Rupert."

"I wish you would hear me out," was the composed rejoinder of Miss Diana. "It is what I was about to say. Had Connell and Connell been different men, they might be so imposed upon; but I do not think they, or any firm of similar standing, would presume to write such letters as these to the master of Trevlyn Hold, unless they had substantial grounds for doing it."

"Then what can the letters mean?" cried Mr. Chattaway, wiping his hot face.

Ay, what could they mean? It was indeed a puzzle, and the matter began to assume a serious form. What had been the vain boastings of Mr. Daw, compared with this? Cris Chattaway, when he came home, and this second letter was shown to him, was loudly indignant, but all the indignation that Mr. Chattaway had been prone to indulge in seemed to have gone out of *him*. Mr. Flood wrote to Connell and Connell to request an explanation, and received a courteous and immediate reply. But there was no further information in it than the letters themselves had contained—or than even Mr. Peterby had elicited when he wrote up, on his own part, a private letter to Mr. Ray: nothing but that Mr. Rupert Trevlyn was about to take possession of his own again, Trevlyn Hold.