

CHAPTER V. THE NEWS FROM NARRABEE.

ARRIVED at the garden, a thought struck me. The cheerful speech and easy manner of Ambrose plainly indicated that he was ignorant thus far of the quarrel which had taken place under my window. Silas might confess to having taken his brother's stick, and might mention whose head he had threatened with it. It was not only useless, but undesirable, that Ambrose should know of the quarrel. I retraced my steps to the stable-yard. Nobody was at the gate. I called alternately to Silas and to Ambrose. Nobody answered. The brothers had gone away to their work.

Returning to the garden, I heard a pleasant voice wishing me "Good-morning." I looked round. Naomi Colebrook was standing at one of the lower windows of the farm. She had her working apron on, and she was industriously brightening the knives for the breakfast-table on an old-fashioned board. A sleek black cat balanced himself on her shoulder, watching the flashing motion of the knife as she passed it rapidly to and fro on the leather-covered surface of the board.

"Come here," she said; "I want to speak to you."

I noticed, as I approached, that her pretty face was clouded and anxious. She pushed the cat irritably off her shoulder; she welcomed me with only the faint reflection of her bright customary smile.

"I have seen John Jago," she said. "He has been hinting at something which he says happened under your bedroom window this morning. When I begged him to explain himself, he only answered, 'Ask Mr. Lefrank; I must be off to Narrabee.' What does it mean? Tell me right away, sir! I'm out of temper, and I can't wait!"

Except that I made the best instead of the worst of it, I told her what had happened under my window as plainly as I have told it here. She put down the knife that she was cleaning, and folded her hands before her, thinking.

"I wish I had never given John Jago that meeting," she said. "When a man asks anything of a woman, the woman, I find, mostly repents it if she says 'Yes.'"

She made that quaint reflection with a very troubled brow. The moonlight meeting had left some unwelcome remembrances in her mind. I saw that as

plainly as I saw Naomi herself.

What had John Jago said to her? I put the question with all needful delicacy, making my apologies beforehand.

"I should like to tell you," she began, with a strong emphasis on the last word.

There she stopped. She turned pale; then suddenly flushed again to the deepest red. She took up the knife once more, and went on cleaning it as industriously as ever.

"I mustn't tell you," she resumed, with her head down over the knife. "I have promised not to tell anybody. That's the truth. Forget all about it, sir, as soon as you can. Hush! here's the spy who saw us last night on the walk and who told Silas!"

Dreary Miss Meadowcroft opened the kitchen door. She carried an ostentatiously large Prayer-book; and she looked at Naomi as only a jealous woman of middle age can look at a younger and prettier woman than herself.

"Prayers, Miss Colebrook," she said in her sourest manner. She paused, and noticed me standing under the window. "Prayers, Mr. Lefrank," she added, with a look of devout pity, directed exclusively to my address.

"We will follow you directly, Miss Meadowcroft," said Naomi.

"I have no desire to intrude on your secrets Miss Colebrook."

With that acrid answer, our priestess took herself and her Prayer-book out of the kitchen. I joined Naomi, entering the room by the garden door. She met me eagerly. "I am not quite easy about something," she said. "Did you tell me that you left Ambrose and Silas together?"

"Yes."

"Suppose Silas tells Ambrose of what happened this morning?"

The same idea, as I have already mentioned, had occurred to my mind. I did my best to reassure Naomi.

"Mr. Jago is out of the way," I replied. "You and I can easily put things right

in his absence."

She took my arm.

"Come in to prayers," she said. "Ambrose will be there, and I shall find an opportunity of speaking to him."

Neither Ambrose nor Silas was in the breakfast-room when we entered it. After waiting vainly for ten minutes, Mr. Meadowcroft told his daughter to read the prayers. Miss Meadowcroft read, thereupon, in the tone of an injured woman taking the throne of mercy by storm, and insisting on her rights. Breakfast followed; and still the brothers were absent. Miss Meadowcroft looked at her father, and said, "From bad to worse, sir. What did I tell you?" Naomi instantly applied the antidote: "The boys are no doubt detained over their work, uncle." She turned to me. "You want to see the farm, Mr. Lefrank. Come and help me to find the boys."

For more than an hour we visited one part of the farm after another, without discovering the missing men. We found them at last near the outskirts of a small wood, sitting, talking together, on the trunk of a felled tree.

Silas rose as we approached, and walked away, without a word of greeting or apology, into the wood. As he got on his feet, I noticed that his brother whispered something in his ear; and I heard him answer, "All right."

"Ambrose, does that mean you have something to keep a secret from us?" asked Naomi, approaching her lover with a smile. "Is Silas ordered to hold his tongue?"

Ambrose kicked sulkily at the loose stones lying about him. I noticed, with a certain surprise that his favorite stick was not in his hand, and was not lying near him.

"Business," he said in answer to Naomi, not very graciously--"business between Silas and me. That's what it means, if you must know."

Naomi went on, woman-like, with her questioning, heedless of the reception which they might meet with from an irritated man.

"Why were you both away at prayers and breakfast-time?" she asked next.

"We had too much to do," Ambrose gruffly replied, "and we were too far from the house."

"Very odd," said Naomi. "This has never happened before since I have been at the farm."

"Well, live and learn. It has happened now."

The tone in which he spoke would have warned any man to let him alone. But warnings which speak by implication only are thrown away on women. The woman, having still something in her mind to say, said it.

"Have you seen anything of John Jago this morning?"

The smoldering ill-temper of Ambrose burst suddenly--why, it was impossible to guess--into a flame. "How many more questions am I to answer?" he broke out violently. "Are you the parson putting me through my catechism? I have seen nothing of John Jago, and I have got my work to go on with. Will that do for you?"

He turned with an oath, and followed his brother into the wood. Naomi's bright eyes looked up at me, flashing with indignation.

"What does he mean, Mr. Lefrank, by speaking to me in that way? Rude brute! How dare he do it?" She paused; her voice, look and manner suddenly changed. "This has never happened before, sir. Has anything gone wrong? I declare, I shouldn't know Ambrose again, he is so changed. Say, how does it strike you?"

I still made the best of a bad case.

"Something has upset his temper," I said. "The merest trifle, Miss Colebrook, upsets a man's temper sometimes. I speak as a man, and I know it. Give him time, and he will make his excuses, and all will be well again."

My presentation of the case entirely failed to re-assure my pretty companion. We went back to the house. Dinner-time came, and the brothers appeared. Their father spoke to them of their absence from morning prayers with needless severity, as I thought. They resented the reproof with needless indignation on their side, and left the room. A sour smile of satisfaction showed itself on Miss Meadowcroft's thin lips. She looked at her father; then raised her eyes sadly to the ceiling, and said, "We can only pray for them, sir."

Naomi disappeared after dinner. When I saw her again, she had some news

for me.

"I have been with Ambrose," she said, "and he has begged my pardon. We have made it up, Mr. Lefrank. Still--still--"

"Still--what, Miss Naomi?"

"He is not like himself, sir. He denies it; but I can't help thinking he is hiding something from me."

The day wore on; the evening came. I returned to my French novel. But not even Dumas himself could keep my attention to the story. What else I was thinking of I cannot say. Why I was out of spirits I am unable to explain. I wished myself back in England: I took a blind, unreasoning hatred to Morwick Farm.

Nine o'clock struck; and we all assembled again at supper, with the exception of John Jago. He was expected back to supper; and we waited for him a quarter of an hour, by Mr. Meadowcroft's own directions. John Jago never appeared.

The night wore on, and still the absent man failed to return. Miss Meadowcroft volunteered to sit up for him. Naomi eyed her, a little maliciously I must own, as the two women parted for the night. I withdrew to my room; and again I was unable to sleep. When sunrise came, I went out, as before, to breathe the morning air.

On the staircase I met Miss Meadowcroft ascending to her own room. Not a curl of her stiff gray hair was disarranged; nothing about the impenetrable woman betrayed that she had been watching through the night.

"Has Mr. Jago not returned?" I asked.

Miss Meadowcroft slowly shook her head, and frowned at me.

"We are in the hands of Providence, Mr. Lefrank. Mr. Jago must have been detained for the night at Narrabee."

The daily routine of the meals resumed its unalterable course. Breakfast-time came, and dinner-time came, and no John Jago darkened the doors of Morwick Farm. Mr. Meadowcroft and his daughter consulted together, and determined to send in search of the missing man. One of the more intelligent of the laborers was dispatched to Narrabee to make inquiries.

The man returned late in the evening, bringing startling news to the farm. He had visited all the inns, and all the places of business resort in Narrabee; he had made endless inquiries in every direction, with this result--no one had set eyes on John Jago. Everybody declared that John Jago had not entered the town.

We all looked at each other, excepting the two brothers, who were seated together in a dark corner of the room. The conclusion appeared to be inevitable. John Jago was a lost man.