

CHAPTER V. DISCOVERIES IN THE GARDEN.

Left by herself, Miss de Sor turned back again by way of the trees.

So far, her interview with the drawing-master had helped to pass the time. Some girls might have found it no easy task to arrive at a true view of the character of Alban Morris. Francine's essentially superficial observation set him down as "a little mad," and left him there, judged and dismissed to her own entire satisfaction.

Arriving at the lawn, she discovered Emily pacing backward and forward, with her head down and her hands behind her, deep in thought. Francine's high opinion of herself would have carried her past any of the other girls, unless they had made special advances to her. She stopped and looked at Emily.

It is the sad fate of little women in general to grow too fat and to be born with short legs. Emily's slim finely-strung figure spoke for itself as to the first of these misfortunes, and asserted its happy freedom from the second, if she only walked across a room. Nature had built her, from head to foot, on a skeleton-scaffolding in perfect proportion. Tall or short matters little to the result, in women who possess the first and foremost advantage of beginning well in their bones. When they live to old age, they often astonish thoughtless men, who walk behind them in the street. "I give you my honor, she was as easy and upright as a young girl; and when you got in front of her and looked--white hair, and seventy years of age."

Francine approached Emily, moved by a rare impulse in her nature--the impulse to be sociable. "You look out of spirits," she began. "Surely you don't regret leaving school?"

In her present mood, Emily took the opportunity (in the popular phrase) of snubbing Francine. "You have guessed wrong; I do regret," she answered. "I have found in Cecilia my dearest friend at school. And school brought with it the change in my life which has helped me to bear the loss of my father. If you must know what I was thinking of just now, I was thinking of my aunt. She has not answered my last letter--and I'm beginning to be afraid she is ill."

"I'm very sorry," said Francine.

"Why? You don't know my aunt; and you have only known me since yesterday afternoon. Why are you sorry?"

Francine remained silent. Without realizing it, she was beginning to feel the dominant influence that Emily exercised over the weaker natures that came in contact with her. To find herself irresistibly attracted by a stranger at a new school--an unfortunate little creature, whose destiny was to earn her own living--filled the narrow mind of Miss de Sor with perplexity. Having waited in vain for a reply, Emily turned away, and resumed the train of thought which her schoolfellow had interrupted.

By an association of ideas, of which she was not herself aware, she now passed from thinking of her aunt to thinking of Miss Jethro. The interview of the previous night had dwelt on her mind at intervals, in the hours of the new day.

Acting on instinct rather than on reason, she had kept that remarkable incident in her school life a secret from every one. No discoveries had been made by other persons. In speaking to her staff of teachers, Miss Ladd had alluded to the affair in the most cautious terms. "Circumstances of a private nature have obliged the lady to retire from my school. When we meet after the holidays, another teacher will be in her place." There, Miss Ladd's explanation had begun and ended. Inquiries addressed to the servants had led to no result. Miss Jethro's luggage was to be forwarded to the London terminus of the railway--and Miss Jethro herself had baffled investigation by leaving the school on foot. Emily's interest in the lost teacher was not the transitory interest of curiosity; her father's mysterious friend was a person whom she honestly desired to see again. Perplexed by the difficulty of finding a means of tracing Miss Jethro, she reached the shady limit of the trees, and turned to walk back again. Approaching the place at which she and Francine had met, an idea occurred to her. It was just possible that Miss Jethro might not be unknown to her aunt.

Still meditating on the cold reception that she had encountered, and still feeling the influence which mastered her in spite of herself, Francine interpreted Emily's return as an implied expression of regret. She advanced with a constrained smile, and spoke first.

"How are the young ladies getting on in the schoolroom?" she asked, by way of renewing the conversation.

Emily's face assumed a look of surprise which said plainly, Can't you take a hint and leave me to myself?

Francine was constitutionally impenetrable to reproof of this sort; her thick skin was not even tickled. "Why are you not helping them," she went on; "you who have the clearest head among us and take the lead in everything?"

It may be a humiliating confession to make, yet it is surely true that we are all accessible to flattery. Different tastes appreciate different methods of burning incense--but the perfume is more or less agreeable to all varieties of noses. Francine's method had its tranquilizing effect on Emily. She answered indulgently, "Miss de Sor, I have nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do with it? No prizes to win before you leave school?"

"I won all the prizes years ago."

"But there are recitations. Surely you recite?"

Harmless words in themselves, pursuing the same smooth course of flattery as before--but with what a different result! Emily's face reddened with anger the moment they were spoken. Having already irritated Alban Morris, unlucky Francine, by a second mischievous interposition of accident, had succeeded in making Emily smart next. "Who has told you," she burst out; "I insist on knowing!"

"Nobody has told me anything!" Francine declared piteously.

"Nobody has told you how I have been insulted?"

"No, indeed! Oh, Miss Brown, who could insult you?"

In a man, the sense of injury does sometimes submit to the discipline of silence. In a woman--never. Suddenly reminded of her past wrongs (by the pardonable error of a polite schoolfellow), Emily committed the startling inconsistency of appealing to the sympathies of Francine!

"Would you believe it? I have been forbidden to recite--I, the head girl of the school. Oh, not to-day! It happened a month ago--when we were all in consultation, making our arrangements. Miss Ladd asked me if I had decided on a piece to recite. I said, 'I have not only decided, I have learned the piece.' 'And what may it be?' 'The dagger-scene in Macbeth.' There was a howl--I can call it by no other name--a howl of indignation. A man's

soliloquy, and, worse still, a murdering man's soliloquy, recited by one of Miss Ladd's young ladies, before an audience of parents and guardians! That was the tone they took with me. I was as firm as a rock. The dagger-scene or nothing. The result is--nothing! An insult to Shakespeare, and an insult to Me. I felt it--I feel it still. I was prepared for any sacrifice in the cause of the drama. If Miss Ladd had met me in a proper spirit, do you know what I would have done? I would have played Macbeth in costume. Just hear me, and judge for yourself. I begin with a dreadful vacancy in my eyes, and a hollow moaning in my voice: 'Is this a dagger that I see before me--?'"

Reciting with her face toward the trees, Emily started, dropped the character of Macbeth, and instantly became herself again: herself, with a rising color and an angry brightening of the eyes. "Excuse me, I can't trust my memory: I must get the play." With that abrupt apology, she walked away rapidly in the direction of the house.

In some surprise, Francine turned, and looked at the trees. She discovered--in full retreat, on his side--the eccentric drawing-master, Alban Morris.

Did he, too, admire the dagger-scene? And was he modestly desirous of hearing it recited, without showing himself? In that case, why should Emily (whose besetting weakness was certainly not want of confidence in her own resources) leave the garden the moment she caught sight of him? Francine consulted her instincts. She had just arrived at a conclusion which expressed itself outwardly by a malicious smile, when gentle Cecilia appeared on the lawn--a lovable object in a broad straw hat and a white dress, with a nosegay in her bosom--smiling, and fanning herself.

"It's so hot in the schoolroom," she said, "and some of the girls, poor things, are so ill-tempered at rehearsal--I have made my escape. I hope you got your breakfast, Miss de Sor. What have you been doing here, all by yourself?"

"I have been making an interesting discovery," Francine replied.

"An interesting discovery in our garden? What can it be?"

"The drawing-master, my dear, is in love with Emily. Perhaps she doesn't care about him. Or, perhaps, I have been an innocent obstacle in the way of an appointment between them."

Cecilia had breakfasted to her heart's content on her favorite dish--battered eggs. She was in such good spirits that she was inclined to be coquettish, even when there was no man present to fascinate. "We are not allowed to

talk about love in this school," she said--and hid her face behind her fan. "Besides, if it came to Miss Ladd's ears, poor Mr. Morris might lose his situation."

"But isn't it true?" asked Francine.

"It may be true, my dear; but nobody knows. Emily hasn't breathed a word about it to any of us. And Mr. Morris keeps his own secret. Now and then we catch him looking at her--and we draw our own conclusions."

"Did you meet Emily on your way here?"

"Yes, and she passed without speaking to me."

"Thinking perhaps of Mr. Morris."

Cecilia shook her head. "Thinking, Francine, of the new life before her--and regretting, I am afraid, that she ever confided her hopes and wishes to me. Did she tell you last night what her prospects are when she leaves school?"

"She told me you had been very kind in helping her. I daresay I should have heard more, if I had not fallen asleep. What is she going to do?"

"To live in a dull house, far away in the north," Cecilia answered; "with only old people in it. She will have to write and translate for a great scholar, who is studying mysterious inscriptions--hieroglyphics, I think they are called--found among the ruins of Central America. It's really no laughing matter, Francine! Emily made a joke of it, too. 'I'll take anything but a situation as a governess,' she said; 'the children who have Me to teach them would be to be pitied indeed!' She begged and prayed me to help her to get an honest living. What could I do? I could only write home to papa. He is a member of Parliament: and everybody who wants a place seems to think he is bound to find it for them. As it happened, he had heard from an old friend of his (a certain Sir Jervis Redwood), who was in search of a secretary. Being in favor of letting the women compete for employment with the men, Sir Jervis was willing to try, what he calls, 'a female.' Isn't that a horrid way of speaking of us? and Miss Ladd says it's ungrammatical, besides. Papa had written back to say he knew of no lady whom he could recommend. When he got my letter speaking of Emily, he kindly wrote again. In the interval, Sir Jervis had received two applications for the vacant place. They were both from old ladies--and he declined to employ them."

"Because they were old," Francine suggested maliciously.

"You shall hear him give his own reasons, my dear. Papa sent me an extract from his letter. It made me rather angry; and (perhaps for that reason) I think I can repeat it word for word:--'We are four old people in this house, and we don't want a fifth. Let us have a young one to cheer us. If your daughter's friend likes the terms, and is not encumbered with a sweetheart, I will send for her when the school breaks up at midsummer.' Coarse and selfish--isn't it? However, Emily didn't agree with me, when I showed her the extract. She accepted the place, very much to her aunt's surprise and regret, when that excellent person heard of it. Now that the time has come (though Emily won't acknowledge it), I believe she secretly shrinks, poor dear, from the prospect."

"Very likely," Francine agreed--without even a pretense of sympathy. "But tell me, who are the four old people?"

"First, Sir Jervis himself--seventy, last birthday. Next, his unmarried sister--nearly eighty. Next, his man-servant, Mr. Rook--well past sixty. And last, his man-servant's wife, who considers herself young, being only a little over forty. That is the household. Mrs. Rook is coming to-day to attend Emily on the journey to the North; and I am not at all sure that Emily will like her."

"A disagreeable woman, I suppose?"

"No--not exactly that. Rather odd and flighty. The fact is, Mrs. Rook has had her troubles; and perhaps they have a little unsettled her. She and her husband used to keep the village inn, close to our park: we know all about them at home. I am sure I pity these poor people. What are you looking at, Francine?"

Feeling no sort of interest in Mr. and Mrs. Rook, Francine was studying her schoolfellow's lovely face in search of defects. She had already discovered that Cecilia's eyes were placed too widely apart, and that her chin wanted size and character.

"I was admiring your complexion, dear," she answered coolly. "Well, and why do you pity the Rooks?"

Simple Cecilia smiled, and went on with her story.

"They are obliged to go out to service in their old age, through a misfortune for which they are in no way to blame. Their customers deserted the inn, and Mr. Rook became bankrupt. The inn got what they call a bad name--in

a very dreadful way. There was a murder committed in the house."

"A murder?" cried Francine. "Oh, this is exciting! You provoking girl, why didn't you tell me about it before?"

"I didn't think of it," said Cecilia placidly.

"Do go on! Were you at home when it happened?"

"I was here, at school."

"You saw the newspapers, I suppose?"

"Miss Ladd doesn't allow us to read newspapers. I did hear of it, however, in letters from home. Not that there was much in the letters. They said it was too horrible to be described. The poor murdered gentleman--"

Francine was unaffectedly shocked. "A gentleman!" she exclaimed. "How dreadful!"

"The poor man was a stranger in our part of the country," Cecilia resumed; "and the police were puzzled about the motive for a murder. His pocketbook was missing; but his watch and his rings were found on the body. I remember the initials on his linen because they were the same as my mother's initial before she was married--'J. B.' Really, Francine, that's all I know about it."

"Surely you know whether the murderer was discovered?"

"Oh, yes--of course I know that! The government offered a reward; and clever people were sent from London to help the county police. Nothing came of it. The murderer has never been discovered, from that time to this."

"When did it happen?"

"It happened in the autumn."

"The autumn of last year?"

"No! no! Nearly four years since."