

CHAPTER VII. "COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE."

Miss De Sor and Miss Wyvil were still sitting together under the trees, talking of the murder at the inn.

"And is that really all you can tell me?" said Francine.

"That is all," Cecilia answered.

"Is there no love in it?"

"None that I know of."

"It's the most uninteresting murder that ever was committed. What shall we do with ourselves? I'm tired of being here in the garden. When do the performances in the schoolroom begin?"

"Not for two hours yet."

Francine yawned. "And what part do you take in it?" she asked.

"No part, my dear. I tried once--only to sing a simple little song. When I found myself standing before all the company and saw rows of ladies and gentlemen waiting for me to begin, I was so frightened that Miss Ladd had to make an apology for me. I didn't get over it for the rest of the day. For the first time in my life, I had no appetite for my dinner. Horrible!" said Cecilia, shuddering over the remembrance of it. "I do assure you, I thought I was going to die."

Perfectly unimpressed by this harrowing narrative, Francine turned her head lazily toward the house. The door was thrown open at the same moment. A lithe little person rapidly descended the steps that led to the lawn.

"It's Emily come back again," said Francine.

"And she seems to be rather in a hurry," Cecilia remarked.

Francine's satirical smile showed itself for a moment. Did this appearance of hurry in Emily's movements denote impatience to resume the recital of "the dagger-scene"? She had no book in her hand; she never even looked toward

Francine. Sorrow became plainly visible in her face as she approached the two girls.

Cecilia rose in alarm. She had been the first person to whom Emily had confided her domestic anxieties. "Bad news from your aunt?" she asked.

"No, my dear; no news at all." Emily put her arms tenderly round her friend's neck. "The time has come, Cecilia," she said. "We must wish each other good-by."

"Is Mrs. Rook here already?"

"It's you, dear, who are going," Emily answered sadly. "They have sent the governess to fetch you. Miss Ladd is too busy in the schoolroom to see her--and she has told me all about it. Don't be alarmed. There is no bad news from home. Your plans are altered; that's all."

"Altered?" Cecilia repeated. "In what way?"

"In a very agreeable way--you are going to travel. Your father wishes you to be in London, in time for the evening mail to France."

Cecilia guessed what had happened. "My sister is not getting well," she said, "and the doctors are sending her to the Continent."

"To the baths at St. Moritz," Emily added. "There is only one difficulty in the way; and you can remove it. Your sister has the good old governess to take care of her, and the courier to relieve her of all trouble on the journey. They were to have started yesterday. You know how fond Julia is of you. At the last moment, she won't hear of going away, unless you go too. The rooms are waiting at St. Moritz; and your father is annoyed (the governess says) by the delay that has taken place already."

She paused. Cecilia was silent. "Surely you don't hesitate?" Emily said.

"I am too happy to go wherever Julia goes," Cecilia answered warmly; "I was thinking of you, dear." Her tender nature, shrinking from the hard necessities of life, shrank from the cruelly-close prospect of parting. "I thought we were to have had some hours together yet," she said. "Why are we hurried in this way? There is no second train to London, from our station, till late in the afternoon."

"There is the express," Emily reminded her; "and there is time to catch it, if

you drive at once to the town." She took Cecilia's hand and pressed it to her bosom. "Thank you again and again, dear, for all you have done for me. Whether we meet again or not, as long as I live I shall love you. Don't cry!" She made a faint attempt to resume her customary gayety, for Cecilia's sake. "Try to be as hard-hearted as I am. Think of your sister--don't think of me. Only kiss me."

Cecilia's tears fell fast. "Oh, my love, I am so anxious about you! I am so afraid that you will not be happy with that selfish old man--in that dreary house. Give it up, Emily! I have got plenty of money for both of us; come abroad with me. Why not? You always got on well with Julia, when you came to see us in the holidays. Oh, my darling! my darling! What shall I do without you?"

All that longed for love in Emily's nature had clung round her school-friend since her father's death. Turning deadly pale under the struggle to control herself, she made the effort--and bore the pain of it without letting a cry or a tear escape her. "Our ways in life lie far apart," she said gently. "There is the hope of meeting again, dear--if there is nothing more."

The clasp of Cecilia's arm tightened round her. She tried to release herself; but her resolution had reached its limits. Her hands dropped, trembling. She could still try to speak cheerfully, and that was all.

"There is not the least reason, Cecilia, to be anxious about my prospects. I mean to be Sir Jervis Redwood's favorite before I have been a week in his service."

She stopped, and pointed to the house. The governess was approaching them. "One more kiss, darling. We shall not forget the happy hours we have spent together; we shall constantly write to each other." She broke down at last. "Oh, Cecilia! Cecilia! leave me for God's sake--I can't bear it any longer!"

The governess parted them. Emily dropped into the chair that her friend had left. Even her hopeful nature sank under the burden of life at that moment.

A hard voice, speaking close at her side, startled her.

"Would you rather be Me," the voice asked, "without a creature to care for you?"

Emily raised her head. Francine, the unnoticed witness of the parting interview, was standing by her, idly picking the leaves from a rose which

had dropped out of Cecilia's nosegay.

Had she felt her own isolated position? She had felt it resentfully.

Emily looked at her, with a heart softened by sorrow. There was no answering kindness in the eyes of Miss de Sor--there was only a dogged endurance, sad to see in a creature so young.

"You and Cecilia are going to write to each other," she said. "I suppose there is some comfort in that. When I left the island they were glad to get rid of me. They said, 'Telegraph when you are safe at Miss Ladd's school.' You see, we are so rich, the expense of telegraphing to the West Indies is nothing to us. Besides, a telegram has an advantage over a letter--it doesn't take long to read. I daresay I shall write home. But they are in no hurry; and I am in no hurry. The school's breaking up; you are going your way, and I am going mine--and who cares what becomes of me? Only an ugly old schoolmistress, who is paid for caring. I wonder why I am saying all this? Because I like you? I don't know that I like you any better than you like me. When I wanted to be friends with you, you treated me coolly; I don't want to force myself on you. I don't particularly care about you. May I write to you from Brighton?"

Under all this bitterness--the first exhibition of Francine's temper, at its worst, which had taken place since she joined the school--Emily saw, or thought she saw, distress that was too proud, or too shy, to show itself. "How can you ask the question?" she answered cordially.

Francine was incapable of meeting the sympathy offered to her, even half way. "Never mind how," she said. "Yes or no is all I want from you."

"Oh, Francine! Francine! what are you made of! Flesh and blood? or stone and iron? Write to me of course--and I will write back again."

"Thank you. Are you going to stay here under the trees?"

"Yes."

"All by yourself?"

"All by myself."

"With nothing to do?"

"I can think of Cecilia."

Francine eyed her with steady attention for a moment.

"Didn't you tell me last night that you were very poor?" she asked.

"I did."

"So poor that you are obliged to earn your own living?"

"Yes."

Francine looked at her again.

"I daresay you won't believe me," she said. "I wish I was you."

She turned away irritably, and walked back to the house.

Were there really longings for kindness and love under the surface of this girl's perverse nature? Or was there nothing to be hoped from a better knowledge of her?--In place of tender remembrances of Cecilia, these were the perplexing and unwelcome thoughts which the more potent personality of Francine forced upon Emily's mind.

She rose impatiently, and looked at her watch. When would it be her turn to leave the school, and begin the new life?

Still undecided what to do next, her interest was excited by the appearance of one of the servants on the lawn. The woman approached her, and presented a visiting-card; bearing on it the name of Sir Jervis Redwood. Beneath the name, there was a line written in pencil: "Mrs. Rook, to wait on Miss Emily Brown." The way to the new life was open before her at last!

Looking again at the commonplace announcement contained in the line of writing, she was not quite satisfied. Was it claiming a deference toward herself, to which she was not entitled, to expect a letter either from Sir Jervis, or from Miss Redwood; giving her some information as to the journey which she was about to undertake, and expressing with some little politeness the wish to make her comfortable in her future home? At any rate, her employer had done her one service: he had reminded her that her station in life was not what it had been in the days when her father was living, and when her aunt was in affluent circumstances.

She looked up from the card. The servant had gone. Alban Morris was

waiting at a little distance--waiting silently until she noticed him.