

CHAPTER X. GUESSES AT THE TRUTH.

"What are we to do next? Oh, Mr. Morris, you must have seen all sorts of people in your time--you know human nature, and I don't. Help me with a word of advice!"

Emily forgot that he was in love with her--forgot everything, but the effect produced by the locket on Mrs. Rook, and the vaguely alarming conclusion to which it pointed. In the fervor of her anxiety she took Alban's arm as familiarly as if he had been her brother. He was gentle, he was considerate; he tried earnestly to compose her. "We can do nothing to any good purpose," he said, "unless we begin by thinking quietly. Pardon me for saying so--you are needlessly exciting yourself."

There was a reason for her excitement, of which he was necessarily ignorant. Her memory of the night interview with Miss Jethro had inevitably intensified the suspicion inspired by the conduct of Mrs. Rook. In less than twenty-four hours, Emily had seen two women shrinking from secret remembrances of her father--which might well be guilty remembrances--innocently excited by herself! How had they injured him? Of what infamy, on their parts, did his beloved and stainless memory remind them? Who could fathom the mystery of it? "What does it mean?" she cried, looking wildly in Alban's compassionate face. "You must have formed some idea of your own. What does it mean?"

"Come, and sit down, Miss Emily. We will try if we can find out what it means, together."

They returned to the shady solitude under the trees. Away, in front of the house, the distant grating of carriage wheels told of the arrival of Miss Ladd's guests, and of the speedy beginning of the ceremonies of the day.

"We must help each other," Alban resumed.

"When we first spoke of Mrs. Rook, you mentioned Miss Cecilia Wyvil as a person who knew something about her. Have you any objection to tell me what you may have heard in that way?"

In complying with his request Emily necessarily repeated what Cecilia had told Francine, when the two girls had met that morning in the garden.

Alban now knew how Emily had obtained employment as Sir Jervis's secretary; how Mr. and Mrs. Rook had been previously known to Cecilia's father as respectable people keeping an inn in his own neighborhood; and, finally, how they had been obliged to begin life again in domestic service, because the terrible event of a murder had given the inn a bad name, and had driven away the customers on whose encouragement their business depended.

Listening in silence, Alban remained silent when Emily's narrative had come to an end.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" she asked.

"I am thinking over what I have just heard," he answered.

Emily noticed a certain formality in his tone and manner, which disagreeably surprised her. He seemed to have made his reply as a mere concession to politeness, while he was thinking of something else which really interested him.

"Have I disappointed you in any way?" she asked.

"On the contrary, you have interested me. I want to be quite sure that I remember exactly what you have said. You mentioned, I think, that your friendship with Miss Cecilia Wyvil began here, at the school?"

"Yes."

"And in speaking of the murder at the village inn, you told me that the crime was committed--I have forgotten how long ago?"

His manner still suggested that he was idly talking about what she had told him, while some more important subject for reflection was in possession of his mind.

"I don't know that I said anything about the time that had passed since the crime was committed," she answered, sharply. "What does the murder matter to us? I think Cecilia told me it happened about four years since. Excuse me for noticing it, Mr. Morris--you seem to have some interests of your own to occupy your attention. Why couldn't you say so plainly when we came out here? I should not have asked you to help me, in that case. Since my poor father's death, I have been used to fight through my troubles by myself."

She rose, and looked at him proudly. The next moment her eyes filled with tears.

In spite of her resistance, Alban took her hand. "Dear Miss Emily," he said, "you distress me: you have not done me justice. Your interests only are in my mind."

Answering her in those terms, he had not spoken as frankly as usual. He had only told her a part of the truth.

Hearing that the woman whom they had just left had been landlady of an inn, and that a murder had been committed under her roof, he was led to ask himself if any explanation might be found, in these circumstances, of the otherwise incomprehensible effect produced on Mrs. Rook by the inscription on the locket.

In the pursuit of this inquiry there had arisen in his mind a monstrous suspicion, which pointed to Mrs. Rook. It impelled him to ascertain the date at which the murder had been committed, and (if the discovery encouraged further investigation) to find out next the manner in which Mr. Brown had died.

Thus far, what progress had he made? He had discovered that the date of Mr. Brown's death, inscribed on the locket, and the date of the crime committed at the inn, approached each other nearly enough to justify further investigation.

In the meantime, had he succeeded in keeping his object concealed from Emily? He had perfectly succeeded. Hearing him declare that her interests only had occupied his mind, the poor girl innocently entreated him to forgive her little outbreak of temper. "If you have any more questions to ask me, Mr. Morris, pray go on. I promise never to think unjustly of you again."

He went on with an uneasy conscience--for it seemed cruel to deceive her, even in the interests of truth--but still he went on.

"Suppose we assume that this woman had injured your father in some way," he said. "Am I right in believing that it was in his character to forgive injuries?"

"Entirely right."

"In that case, his death may have left Mrs. Rook in a position to be called to account, by those who owe a duty to his memory--I mean the surviving members of his family."

"There are but two of us, Mr. Morris. My aunt and myself."

"There are his executors."

"My aunt is his only executor."

"Your father's sister--I presume?"

"Yes."

"He may have left instructions with her, which might be of the greatest use to us."

"I will write to-day, and find out," Emily replied. "I had already planned to consult my aunt," she added, thinking again of Miss Jethro.

"If your aunt has not received any positive instructions," Alban continued, "she may remember some allusion to Mrs. Rook, on your father's part, at the time of his last illness--"

Emily stopped him. "You don't know how my dear father died," she said. "He was struck down--apparently in perfect health--by disease of the heart."

"Struck down in his own house?"

"Yes--in his own house."

Those words closed Alban's lips. The investigation so carefully and so delicately conducted had failed to serve any useful purpose. He had now ascertained the manner of Mr. Brown's death and the place of Mr. Brown's death--and he was as far from confirming his suspicions of Mrs. Rook as ever.