

CHAPTER XI. THE DRAWING-MASTER'S CONFESSION.

"Is there nothing else you can suggest?" Emily asked.

"Nothing--at present."

"If my aunt fails us, have we no other hope?"

"I have hope in Mrs. Rook," Alban answered. "I see I surprise you; but I really mean what I say. Sir Jervis's housekeeper is an excitable woman, and she is fond of wine. There is always a weak side in the character of such a person as that. If we wait for our chance, and turn it to the right use when it comes, we may yet succeed in making her betray herself."

Emily listened to him in bewilderment.

"You talk as if I was sure of your help in the future," she said. "Have you forgotten that I leave school to-day, never to return? In half an hour more, I shall be condemned to a long journey in the company of that horrible creature--with a life to look forward to, in the same house with her, among strangers! A miserable prospect, and a hard trial of a girl's courage--is it not, Mr. Morris?"

"You will at least have one person, Miss Emily, who will try with all his heart and soul to encourage you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Alban, quietly, "that the Midsummer vacation begins to-day; and that the drawing-master is going to spend his holidays in the North."

Emily jumped up from her chair. "You!" she exclaimed. "You are going to Northumberland? With me?"

"Why not?" Alban asked. "The railway is open to all travelers alike, if they have money enough to buy a ticket."

"Mr. Morris! what can you be thinking of? Indeed, indeed, I am not ungrateful. I know you mean kindly--you are a good, generous man. But do remember how completely a girl, in my position, is at the mercy of appearances. You, traveling in the same carriage with me! and that woman

putting her own vile interpretation on it, and degrading me in Sir Jervis Redwood's estimation, on the day when I enter his house! Oh, it's worse than thoughtless--it's madness, downright madness."

"You are quite right," Alban gravely agreed, "it is madness. I lost whatever little reason I once possessed, Miss Emily, on the day when I first met you out walking with the young ladies of the school."

Emily turned away in significant silence. Alban followed her.

"You promised just now," he said, "never to think unjustly of me again. I respect and admire you far too sincerely to take a base advantage of this occasion--the only occasion on which I have been permitted to speak with you alone. Wait a little before you condemn a man whom you don't understand. I will say nothing to annoy you--I only ask leave to explain myself. Will you take your chair again?"

She returned unwillingly to her seat. "It can only end," she thought, sadly, "in my disappointing him!"

"I have had the worst possible opinion of women for years past," Alban resumed; "and the only reason I can give for it condemns me out of my own mouth. I have been infamously treated by one woman; and my wounded self-esteem has meanly revenged itself by reviling the whole sex. Wait a little, Miss Emily. My fault has received its fit punishment. I have been thoroughly humiliated--and you have done it."

"Mr. Morris!"

"Take no offense, pray, where no offense is meant. Some few years since it was the great misfortune of my life to meet with a Jilt. You know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"She was my equal by birth (I am a younger son of a country squire), and my superior in rank. I can honestly tell you that I was fool enough to love her with all my heart and soul. She never allowed me to doubt--I may say this without conceit, remembering the miserable end of it--that my feeling for her was returned. Her father and mother (excellent people) approved of the contemplated marriage. She accepted my presents; she allowed all the customary preparations for a wedding to proceed to completion; she had not even mercy enough, or shame enough, to prevent me from publicly

degrading myself by waiting for her at the altar, in the presence of a large congregation. The minutes passed--and no bride appeared. The clergyman, waiting like me, was requested to return to the vestry. I was invited to follow him. You foresee the end of the story, of course? She had run away with another man. But can you guess who the man was? Her groom!"

Emily's face reddened with indignation. "She suffered for it? Oh, Mr. Morris, surely she suffered for it?"

"Not at all. She had money enough to reward the groom for marrying her; and she let herself down easily to her husband's level. It was a suitable marriage in every respect. When I last heard of them, they were regularly in the habit of getting drunk together. I am afraid I have disgusted you? We will drop the subject, and resume my precious autobiography at a later date. One showery day in the autumn of last year, you young ladies went out with Miss Ladd for a walk. When you were all trotting back again, under your umbrellas, did you (in particular) notice an ill-tempered fellow standing in the road, and getting a good look at you, on the high footpath above him?"

Emily smiled, in spite of herself. "I don't remember it," she said.

"You wore a brown jacket which fitted you as if you had been born in it--and you had the smartest little straw hat I ever saw on a woman's head. It was the first time I ever noticed such things. I think I could paint a portrait of the boots you wore (mud included), from memory alone. That was the impression you produced on me. After believing, honestly believing, that love was one of the lost illusions of my life--after feeling, honestly feeling, that I would as soon look at the devil as look at a woman--there was the state of mind to which retribution had reduced me; using for his instrument Miss Emily Brown. Oh, don't be afraid of what I may say next! In your presence, and out of your presence, I am man enough to be ashamed of my own folly. I am resisting your influence over me at this moment, with the strongest of all resolutions--the resolution of despair. Let's look at the humorous side of the story again. What do you think I did when the regiment of young ladies had passed by me?"

Emily declined to guess.

"I followed you back to the school; and, on pretense of having a daughter to educate, I got one of Miss Ladd's prospectuses from the porter at the lodge gate. I was in your neighborhood, you must know, on a sketching tour. I went back to my inn, and seriously considered what had happened to me. The result of my cogitations was that I went abroad. Only for a change--not

at all because I was trying to weaken the impression you had produced on me! After a while I returned to England. Only because I was tired of traveling--not at all because your influence drew me back! Another interval passed; and luck turned my way, for a wonder. The drawing-master's place became vacant here. Miss Ladd advertised; I produced my testimonials; and took the situation. Only because the salary was a welcome certainty to a poor man--not at all because the new position brought me into personal association with Miss Emily Brown! Do you begin to see why I have troubled you with all this talk about myself? Apply the contemptible system of self-delusion which my confession has revealed, to that holiday arrangement for a tour in the north which has astonished and annoyed you. I am going to travel this afternoon by your train. Only because I feel an intelligent longing to see the northernmost county of England--not at all because I won't let you trust yourself alone with Mrs. Rook! Not at all because I won't leave you to enter Sir Jervis Redwood's service without a friend within reach in case you want him! Mad? Oh, yes--perfectly mad. But, tell me this: What do all sensible people do when they find themselves in the company of a lunatic? They humor him. Let me take your ticket and see your luggage labeled: I only ask leave to be your traveling servant. If you are proud--I shall like you all the better, if you are--pay me wages, and keep me in my proper place in that way."

Some girls, addressed with this reckless intermingling of jest and earnest, would have felt confused, and some would have felt flattered. With a good-tempered resolution, which never passed the limits of modesty and refinement, Emily met Alban Morris on his own ground.

"You have said you respect me," she began; "I am going to prove that I believe you. The least I can do is not to misinterpret you, on my side. Am I to understand, Mr. Morris--you won't think the worse of me, I hope, if I speak plainly--am I to understand that you are in love with me?"

"Yes, Miss Emily--if you please."

He had answered with the quaint gravity which was peculiar to him; but he was already conscious of a sense of discouragement. Her composure was a bad sign--from his point of view.

"My time will come, I daresay," she proceeded. "At present I know nothing of love, by experience; I only know what some of my schoolfellows talk about in secret. Judging by what they tell me, a girl blushes when her lover pleads with her to favor his addresses. Am I blushing?"

"Must I speak plainly, too?" Alban asked.

"If you have no objection," she answered, as composedly as if she had been addressing her grandfather.

"Then, Miss Emily, I must say--you are not blushing."

She went on. "Another token of love--as I am informed--is to tremble. Am I trembling?"

"No."

"Am I too confused to look at you?"

"No."

"Do I walk away with dignity--and then stop, and steal a timid glance at my lover, over my shoulder?"

"I wish you did!"

"A plain answer, Mr. Morris! Yes or No."

"No--of course."

"In one last word, do I give you any sort of encouragement to try again?"

"In one last word, I have made a fool of myself--and you have taken the kindest possible way of telling me so."

This time, she made no attempt to reply in his own tone. The good-humored gayety of her manner disappeared. She was in earnest--truly, sadly in earnest--when she said her next words.

"Is it not best, in your own interests, that we should bid each other good-bye?" she asked. "In the time to come--when you only remember how kind you once were to me--we may look forward to meeting again. After all that you have suffered, so bitterly and so undeservedly, don't, pray don't, make me feel that another woman has behaved cruelly to you, and that I--so grieved to distress you--am that heartless creature!"

Never in her life had she been so irresistibly charming as she was at that moment. Her sweet nature showed all its innocent pity for him in her face.

He saw it--he felt it--he was not unworthy of it. In silence, he lifted her hand to his lips. He turned pale as he kissed it.

"Say that you agree with me?" she pleaded.

"I obey you."

As he answered, he pointed to the lawn at their feet. "Look," he said, "at that dead leaf which the air is wafting over the grass. Is it possible that such sympathy as you feel for Me, such love as I feel for You, can waste, wither, and fall to the ground like that leaf? I leave you, Emily--with the firm conviction that there is a time of fulfillment to come in our two lives. Happen what may in the interval--I trust the future."

The words had barely passed his lips when the voice of one of the servants reached them from the house. "Miss Emily, are you in the garden?"

Emily stepped out into the sunshine. The servant hurried to meet her, and placed a telegram in her hand. She looked at it with a sudden misgiving. In her small experience, a telegram was associated with the communication of bad news. She conquered her hesitation--opened it--read it. The color left her face: she shuddered. The telegram dropped on the grass.

"Read it," she said, faintly, as Alban picked it up.

He read these words: "Come to London directly. Miss Letitia is dangerously ill."

"Your aunt?" he asked.

"Yes--my aunt."