

CHAPTER XVI. MISS JETHRO.

A fortnight after the disappearance of Mrs. Ellmother, and the dismissal of Mrs. Mosey, Doctor Allday entered his consulting-room, punctual to the hour at which he was accustomed to receive patients.

An occasional wrinkling of his eyebrows, accompanied by an intermittent restlessness in his movements, appeared to indicate some disturbance of this worthy man's professional composure. His mind was indeed not at ease. Even the inexcitable old doctor had felt the attraction which had already conquered three such dissimilar people as Alban Morris, Cecilia Wyvil, and Francine de Sor. He was thinking of Emily.

A ring at the door-bell announced the arrival of the first patient.

The servant introduced a tall lady, dressed simply and elegantly in dark apparel. Noticeable features, of a Jewish cast--worn and haggard, but still preserving their grandeur of form--were visible through her veil. She moved with grace and dignity; and she stated her object in consulting Doctor Allday with the ease of a well-bred woman.

"I come to ask your opinion, sir, on the state of my heart," she said; "and I am recommended by a patient, who has consulted you with advantage to herself." She placed a card on the doctor's writing-desk, and added: "I have become acquainted with the lady, by being one of the lodgers in her house."

The doctor recognized the name--and the usual proceedings ensued. After careful examination, he arrived at a favorable conclusion. "I may tell you at once," he said--"there is no reason to be alarmed about the state of your heart."

"I have never felt any alarm about myself," she answered quietly. "A sudden death is an easy death. If one's affairs are settled, it seems, on that account, to be the death to prefer. My object was to settle my affairs--such as they are--if you had considered my life to be in danger. Is there nothing the matter with me?"

"I don't say that," the doctor replied. "The action of your heart is very feeble. Take the medicine that I shall prescribe; pay a little more attention to eating and drinking than ladies usually do; don't run upstairs, and don't fatigue yourself by violent exercise--and I see no reason why you shouldn't live to be

an old woman."

"God forbid!" the lady said to herself. She turned away, and looked out of the window with a bitter smile.

Doctor Allday wrote his prescription. "Are you likely to make a long stay in London?" he asked.

"I am here for a little while only. Do you wish to see me again?"

"I should like to see you once more, before you go away--if you can make it convenient. What name shall I put on the prescription?"

"Miss Jethro."

"A remarkable name," the doctor said, in his matter-of-fact way.

Miss Jethro's bitter smile showed itself again.

Without otherwise noticing what Doctor Allday had said, she laid the consultation fee on the table. At the same moment, the footman appeared with a letter. "From Miss Emily Brown," he said. "No answer required."

He held the door open as he delivered the message, seeing that Miss Jethro was about to leave the room. She dismissed him by a gesture; and, returning to the table, pointed to the letter.

"Was your correspondent lately a pupil at Miss Ladd's school?" she inquired.

"My correspondent has just left Miss Ladd," the doctor answered. "Are you a friend of hers?"

"I am acquainted with her."

"You would be doing the poor child a kindness, if you would go and see her. She has no friends in London."

"Pardon me--she has an aunt."

"Her aunt died a week since."

"Are there no other relations?"

"None. A melancholy state of things, isn't it? She would have been absolutely alone in the house, if I had not sent one of my women servants to stay with her for the present. Did you know her father?"

Miss Jethro passed over the question, as if she had not heard it. "Has the young lady dismissed her aunt's servants?" she asked.

"Her aunt kept but one servant, ma'am. The woman has spared Miss Emily the trouble of dismissing her." He briefly alluded to Mrs. Ellmother's desertion of her mistress. "I can't explain it," he said when he had done. "Can you?"

"What makes you think, sir, that I can help you? I have never even heard of the servant--and the mistress was a stranger to me."

At Doctor Allday's age a man is not easily discouraged by reproof, even when it is administered by a handsome woman. "I thought you might have known Miss Emily's father," he persisted.

Miss Jethro rose, and wished him good-morning. "I must not occupy any more of your valuable time," she said.

"Suppose you wait a minute?" the doctor suggested.

Impenetrable as ever, he rang the bell. "Any patients in the waiting-room?" he inquired. "You see I have time to spare," he resumed, when the man had replied in the negative. "I take an interest in this poor girl; and I thought--"

"If you think that I take an interest in her, too," Miss Jethro interposed, "you are perfectly right--I knew her father," she added abruptly; the allusion to Emily having apparently reminded her of the question which she had hitherto declined to notice.

"In that case," Doctor Allday proceeded, "I want a word of advice. Won't you sit down?"

She took a chair in silence. An irregular movement in the lower part of her veil seemed to indicate that she was breathing with difficulty. The doctor observed her with close attention. "Let me see my prescription again," he said. Having added an ingredient, he handed it back with a word of explanation. "Your nerves are more out of order than I supposed. The hardest disease to cure that I know of is--worry."

The hint could hardly have been plainer; but it was lost on Miss Jethro. Whatever her troubles might be, her medical adviser was not made acquainted with them. Quietly folding up the prescription, she reminded him that he had proposed to ask her advice.

"In what way can I be of service to you?" she inquired.

"I am afraid I must try your patience," the doctor acknowledged, "if I am to answer that question plainly."

With these prefatory words, he described the events that had followed Mrs. Mosey's appearance at the cottage. "I am only doing justice to this foolish woman," he continued, "when I tell you that she came here, after she had left Miss Emily, and did her best to set matters right. I went to the poor girl directly--and I felt it my duty, after looking at her aunt, not to leave her alone for that night. When I got home the next morning, whom do you think I found waiting for me? Mrs. Ellmother!"

He stopped--in the expectation that Miss Jethro would express some surprise. Not a word passed her lips.

"Mrs. Ellmother's object was to ask how her mistress was going on," the doctor proceeded. "Every day while Miss Letitia still lived, she came here to make the same inquiry--without a word of explanation. On the day of the funeral, there she was at the church, dressed in deep mourning; and, as I can personally testify, crying bitterly. When the ceremony was over--can you believe it?--she slipped away before Miss Emily or I could speak to her. We have seen nothing more of her, and heard nothing more, from that time to this."

He stopped again, the silent lady still listening without making any remark.

"Have you no opinion to express?" the doctor asked bluntly.

"I am waiting," Miss Jethro answered.

"Waiting--for what?"

"I haven't heard yet, why you want my advice."

Doctor Allday's observation of humanity had hitherto reckoned want of caution among the deficient moral qualities in the natures of women. He set down Miss Jethro as a remarkable exception to a general rule.

"I want you to advise me as to the right course to take with Miss Emily," he said. "She has assured me she attaches no serious importance to her aunt's wanderings, when the poor old lady's fever was at its worst. I don't doubt that she speaks the truth--but I have my own reasons for being afraid that she is deceiving herself. Will you bear this in mind?"

"Yes--if it's necessary."

"In plain words, Miss Jethro, you think I am still wandering from the point. I have got to the point. Yesterday, Miss Emily told me that she hoped to be soon composed enough to examine the papers left by her aunt."

Miss Jethro suddenly turned in her chair, and looked at Doctor Allday.

"Are you beginning to feel interested?" the doctor asked mischievously.

She neither acknowledged nor denied it. "Go on"--was all she said.

"I don't know how you feel," he proceeded; "I am afraid of the discoveries which she may make; and I am strongly tempted to advise her to leave the proposed examination to her aunt's lawyer. Is there anything in your knowledge of Miss Emily's late father, which tells you that I am right?"

"Before I reply," said Miss Jethro, "it may not be amiss to let the young lady speak for herself."

"How is she to do that?" the doctor asked.

Miss Jethro pointed to the writing table. "Look there," she said. "You have not yet opened Miss Emily's letter."