

CHAPTER XXXI. MOIRA.

When Alban presented himself the next morning, the hours of the night had exercised their tranquilizing influence over Emily. She remembered sorrowfully how Doctor Allday had disturbed her belief in the man who loved her; no feeling of irritation remained. Alban noticed that her manner was unusually subdued; she received him with her customary grace, but not with her customary smile.

"Are you not well?" he asked.

"I am a little out of spirits," she replied. "A disappointment--that is all."

He waited a moment, apparently in the expectation that she might tell him what the disappointment was. She remained silent, and she looked away from him. Was he in any way answerable for the depression of spirits to which she alluded? The doubt occurred to him--but he said nothing.

"I suppose you have received my letter?" she resumed.

"I have come here to thank you for your letter."

"It was my duty to tell you of Sir Jervis's illness; I deserve no thanks."

"You have written to me so kindly," Alban reminded her; "you have referred to our difference of opinion, the last time I was here, so gently and so forgivingly--"

"If I had written a little later," she interposed, "the tone of my letter might have been less agreeable to you. I happened to send it to the post, before I received a visit from a friend of yours--a friend who had something to say to me after consulting with you."

"Do you mean Doctor Allday?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"What you wished him to say. He did his best; he was as obstinate and unfeeling as you could possibly wish him to be; but he was too late. I have

written to Mrs. Rook, and I have received a reply." She spoke sadly, not angrily--and pointed to the letter lying on her desk.

Alban understood: he looked at her in despair. "Is that wretched woman doomed to set us at variance every time we meet!" he exclaimed.

Emily silently held out the letter.

He refused to take it. "The wrong you have done me is not to be set right in that way," he said. "You believe the doctor's visit was arranged between us. I never knew that he intended to call on you; I had no interest in sending him here--and I must not interfere again between you and Mrs. Rook."

"I don't understand you."

"You will understand me when I tell you how my conversation with Doctor Allday ended. I have done with interference; I have done with advice. Whatever my doubts may be, all further effort on my part to justify them--all further inquiries, no matter in what direction--are at an end: I made the sacrifice, for your sake. No! I must repeat what you said to me just now; I deserve no thanks. What I have done, has been done in deference to Doctor Allday--against my own convictions; in spite of my own fears. Ridiculous convictions! ridiculous fears! Men with morbid minds are their own tormentors. It doesn't matter how I suffer, so long as you are at ease. I shall never thwart you or vex you again. Have you a better opinion of me now?"

She made the best of all answers--she gave him her hand.

"May I kiss it?" he asked, as timidly as if he had been a boy addressing his first sweetheart.

She was half inclined to laugh, and half inclined to cry. "Yes, if you like," she said softly.

"Will you let me come and see you again?"

"Gladly--when I return to London."

"You are going away?"

"I am going to Brighton this afternoon, to stay with Miss Ladd."

It was hard to lose her, on the happy day when they understood each other

at last. An expression of disappointment passed over his face. He rose, and walked restlessly to the window. "Miss Ladd?" he repeated, turning to Emily as if an idea had struck him. "Did I hear, at the school, that Miss de Sor was to spend the holidays under the care of Miss Ladd?"

"Yes."

"The same young lady," he went on, "who paid you a visit yesterday morning?"

"The same."

That haunting distrust of the future, which he had first betrayed and then affected to ridicule, exercised its depressing influence over his better sense. He was unreasonable enough to feel doubtful of Francine, simply because she was a stranger.

"Miss de Sor is a new friend of yours," he said. "Do you like her?"

It was not an easy question to answer--without entering into particulars which Emily's delicacy of feeling warned her to avoid. "I must know a little more of Miss de Sor," she said, "before I can decide."

Alban's misgivings were naturally encouraged by this evasive reply. He began to regret having left the cottage, on the previous day, when he had heard that Emily was engaged. He might have sent in his card, and might have been admitted. It was an opportunity lost of observing Francine. On the morning of her first day at school, when they had accidentally met at the summer house, she had left a disagreeable impression on his mind. Ought he to allow his opinion to be influenced by this circumstance? or ought he to follow Emily's prudent example, and suspend judgment until he knew a little more of Francine?

"Is any day fixed for your return to London?" he asked.

"Not yet," she said; "I hardly know how long my visit will be."

"In little more than a fortnight," he continued, "I shall return to my classes--they will be dreary classes, without you. Miss de Sor goes back to the school with Miss Ladd, I suppose?"

Emily was at a loss to account for the depression in his looks and tones, while he was making these unimportant inquiries. She tried to rouse him by

speaking lightly in reply.

"Miss de Sor returns in quite a new character; she is to be a guest instead of a pupil. Do you wish to be better acquainted with her?"

"Yes," he said gravely, "now I know that she is a friend of yours." He returned to his place near her. "A pleasant visit makes the days pass quickly," he resumed. "You may remain at Brighton longer than you anticipate; and we may not meet again for some time to come. If anything happens--"

"Do you mean anything serious?" she asked.

"No, no! I only mean--if I can be of any service. In that case, will you write to me?"

"You know I will!"

She looked at him anxiously. He had completely failed to hide from her the uneasy state of his mind: a man less capable of concealment of feeling never lived. "You are anxious, and out of spirits," she said gently. "Is it my fault?"

"Your fault? oh, don't think that! I have my dull days and my bright days--and just now my barometer is down at dull." His voice faltered, in spite of his efforts to control it; he gave up the struggle, and took his hat to go. "Do you remember, Emily, what I once said to you in the garden at the school? I still believe there is a time of fulfillment to come in our lives." He suddenly checked himself, as if there had been something more in his mind to which he hesitated to give expression--and held out his hand to bid her good-by.

"My memory of what you said in the garden is better than yours," she reminded him. "You said 'Happen what may in the interval, I trust the future.' Do you feel the same trust still?"

He sighed--drew her to him gently--and kissed her on the forehead. Was that his own reply? She was not calm enough to ask him the question: it remained in her thoughts for some time after he had gone.

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On the same day Emily was at Brighton.

Francine happened to be alone in the drawing-room. Her first proceeding,

when Emily was shown in, was to stop the servant.

"Have you taken my letter to the post?"

"Yes, miss."

"It doesn't matter." She dismissed the servant by a gesture, and burst into such effusive hospitality that she actually insisted on kissing Emily. "Do you know what I have been doing?" she said. "I have been writing to Cecilia--directing to the care of her father, at the House of Commons. I stupidly forgot that you would be able to give me the right address in Switzerland. You don't object, I hope, to my making myself agreeable to our dear, beautiful, greedy girl? It is of such importance to me to surround myself with influential friends--and, of course, I have given her your love. Don't look disgusted! Come, and see your room.--Oh, never mind Miss Ladd. You will see her when she wakes. Ill? Is that sort of old woman ever ill? She's only taking her nap after bathing. Bathing in the sea, at her age! How she must frighten the fishes!"

Having seen her own bed-chamber, Emily was next introduced to the room occupied by Francine.

One object that she noticed in it caused her some little surprise--not unmingled with disgust. She discovered on the toilet-table a coarsely caricatured portrait of Mrs. Ellmother. It was a sketch in pencil--wretchedly drawn; but spitefully successful as a likeness. "I didn't know you were an artist," Emily remarked, with an ironical emphasis on the last word. Francine laughed scornfully--crumpled the drawing up in her hand--and threw it into the waste-paper basket.

"You satirical creature!" she burst out gayly. "If you had lived a dull life at St. Domingo, you would have taken to spoiling paper too. I might really have turned out an artist, if I had been clever and industrious like you. As it was, I learned a little drawing--and got tired of it. I tried modeling in wax--and got tired of it. Who do you think was my teacher? One of our slaves."

"A slave!" Emily exclaimed.

"Yes--a mulatto, if you wish me to be particular; the daughter of an English father and a negro mother. In her young time (at least she said so herself) she was quite a beauty, in her particular style. Her master's favorite; he educated her himself. Besides drawing and painting, and modeling in wax, she could sing and play--all the accomplishments thrown away on a slave!"

When her owner died, my uncle bought her at the sale of the property."

A word of natural compassion escaped Emily--to Francine's surprise.

"Oh, my dear, you needn't pity her! Sappho (that was her name) fetched a high price, even when she was no longer young. She came to us, by inheritance, with the estates and the rest of it; and took a fancy to me, when she found out I didn't get on well with my father and mother. 'I owe it to my father and mother,' she used to say, 'that I am a slave. When I see affectionate daughters, it wrings my heart.' Sappho was a strange compound. A woman with a white side to her character, and a black side. For weeks together, she would be a civilized being. Then she used to relapse, and become as complete a negress as her mother. At the risk of her life she stole away, on those occasions, into the interior of the island, and looked on, in hiding, at the horrid witchcrafts and idolatries of the blacks; they would have murdered a half-blood, prying into their ceremonies, if they had discovered her. I followed her once, so far as I dared. The frightful yellings and drummings in the darkness of the forests frightened me. The blacks suspected her, and it came to my ears. I gave her the warning that saved her life (I don't know what I should have done without Sappho to amuse me!); and, from that time, I do believe the curious creature loved me. You see I can speak generously even of a slave!"

"I wonder you didn't bring her with you to England," Emily said.

"In the first place," Francine answered, "she was my father's property, not mine. In the second place, she's dead. Poisoned, as the other half-bloods supposed, by some enemy among the blacks. She said herself, she was under a spell!"

"What did she mean?"

Francine was not interested enough in the subject to explain. "Stupid superstition, my dear. The negro side of Sappho was uppermost when she was dying--there is the explanation. Be off with you! I hear the old woman on the stairs. Meet her before she can come in here. My bedroom is my only refuge from Miss Ladd."

On the morning of the last day in the week, Emily had a little talk in private with her old schoolmistress. Miss Ladd listened to what she had to say of Mrs. Ellmother, and did her best to relieve Emily's anxieties. "I think you are mistaken, my child, in supposing that Francine is in earnest. It is her great fault that she is hardly ever in earnest. You can trust to my discretion; leave

the rest to your aunt's old servant and to me."

Mrs. Ellmother arrived, punctual to the appointed time. She was shown into Miss Ladd's own room. Francine--ostentatiously resolved to take no personal part in the affair--went for a walk. Emily waited to hear the result.

After a long interval, Miss Ladd returned to the drawing-room, and announced that she had sanctioned the engagement of Mrs. Ellmother.

"I have considered your wishes, in this respect," she said. "It is arranged that a week's notice, on either side, shall end the term of service, after the first month. I cannot feel justified in doing more than that. Mrs. Ellmother is such a respectable woman; she is so well known to you, and she was so long in your aunt's service, that I am bound to consider the importance of securing a person who is exactly fitted to attend on such a girl as Francine. In one word, I can trust Mrs. Ellmother."

"When does she enter on her service?" Emily inquired.

"On the day after we return to the school," Miss Ladd replied. "You will be glad to see her, I am sure. I will send her here."

"One word more before you go," Emily said.

"Did you ask her why she left my aunt?"

"My dear child, a woman who has been five-and-twenty years in one place is entitled to keep her own secrets. I understand that she had her reasons, and that she doesn't think it necessary to mention them to anybody. Never trust people by halves--especially when they are people like Mrs. Ellmother."

It was too late now to raise any objections. Emily felt relieved, rather than disappointed, on discovering that Mrs. Ellmother was in a hurry to get back to London by the next train. She had found an opportunity of letting her lodgings; and she was eager to conclude the bargain. "You see I couldn't say Yes," she explained, "till I knew whether I was to get this new place or not--and the person wants to go in tonight."

Emily stopped her at the door. "Promise to write and tell me how you get on with Miss de Sor."

"You say that, miss, as if you didn't feel hopeful about me."

"I say it, because I feel interested about you. Promise to write."

Mrs. Ellmother promised, and hastened away. Emily looked after her from the window, as long as she was in view. "I wish I could feel sure of Francine!" she said to herself.

"In what way?" asked the hard voice of Francine, speaking at the door.

It was not in Emily's nature to shrink from a plain reply. She completed her half-formed thought without a moment's hesitation.

"I wish I could feel sure," she answered, "that you will be kind to Mrs. Ellmother."

"Are you afraid I shall make her life one scene of torment?" Francine inquired. "How can I answer for myself? I can't look into the future."

"For once in your life, can you be in earnest?" Emily said.

"For once in your life, can you take a joke?" Francine replied.

Emily said no more. She privately resolved to shorten her visit to Brighton.