

CHAPTER XXXV. THE TREACHERY OF THE PIPE.

Alban took Mrs. Ellmother at her word. "I am going to venture on a guess," he said. "You have been with Miss de Sor to-night."

"Quite true, Mr. Morris."

"I am going to guess again. Did Miss de Sor ask you to stay with her, when you went into her room?"

"That's it! She rang for me, to see how I was getting on with my needlework--and she was what I call hearty, for the first time since I have been in her service. I didn't think badly of her when she first talked of engaging me; and I've had reason to repent of my opinion ever since. Oh, she showed the cloven foot to-night! 'Sit down,' she says; 'I've nothing to read, and I hate work; let's have a little chat.' She's got a glib tongue of her own. All I could do was to say a word now and then to keep her going. She talked and talked till it was time to light the lamp. She was particular in telling me to put the shade over it. We were half in the dark, and half in the light. She trapped me (Lord knows how!) into talking about foreign parts; I mean the place she lived in before they sent her to England. Have you heard that she comes from the West Indies?"

"Yes; I have heard that. Go on."

"Wait a bit, sir. There's something, by your leave, that I want to know. Do you believe in Witchcraft?"

"I know nothing about it. Did Miss de Sor put that question to you?"

"She did."

"And how did you answer?"

"Neither in one way nor the other. I'm in two minds about that matter of Witchcraft. When I was a girl, there was an old woman in our village, who was a sort of show. People came to see her from all the country round--gentlefolks among them. It was her great age that made her famous. More than a hundred years old, sir! One of our neighbors didn't believe in her age, and she heard of it. She cast a spell on his flock. I tell you, she sent a plague on his sheep, the plague of the Bots. The whole flock died; I remember it

well. Some said the sheep would have had the Bots anyhow. Some said it was the spell. Which of them was right? How am I to settle it?"

"Did you mention this to Miss de Sor?"

"I was obliged to mention it. Didn't I tell you, just now, that I can't make up my mind about Witchcraft? 'You don't seem to know whether you believe or disbelieve,' she says. It made me look like a fool. I told her I had my reasons, and then I was obliged to give them."

"And what did she do then?"

"She said, 'I've got a better story of Witchcraft than yours.' And she opened a little book, with a lot of writing in it, and began to read. Her story made my flesh creep. It turns me cold, sir, when I think of it now."

He heard her moaning and shuddering. Strongly as his interest was excited, there was a compassionate reluctance in him to ask her to go on. His merciful scruples proved to be needless. The fascination of beauty it is possible to resist. The fascination of horror fastens its fearful hold on us, struggle against it as we may. Mrs. Ellmother repeated what she had heard, in spite of herself.

"It happened in the West Indies," she said; "and the writing of a woman slave was the writing in the little book. The slave wrote about her mother. Her mother was a black--a Witch in her own country. There was a forest in her own country. The devil taught her Witchcraft in the forest. The serpents and the wild beasts were afraid to touch her. She lived without eating. She was sold for a slave, and sent to the island--an island in the West Indies. An old man lived there; the wickedest man of them all. He filled the black Witch with devilish knowledge. She learned to make the image of wax. The image of wax casts spells. You put pins in the image of wax. At every pin you put, the person under the spell gets nearer and nearer to death. There was a poor black in the island. He offended the Witch. She made his image in wax; she cast spells on him. He couldn't sleep; he couldn't eat; he was such a coward that common noises frightened him. Like Me! Oh, God, like me!"

"Wait a little," Alban interposed. "You are exciting yourself again--wait."

"You're wrong, sir! You think it ended when she finished her story, and shut up her book; there's worse to come than anything you've heard yet. I don't know what I did to offend her. She looked at me and spoke to me, as if I was the dirt under her feet. 'If you're too stupid to understand what I have been

reading,' she says, 'get up and go to the glass. Look at yourself, and remember what happened to the slave who was under the spell. You're getting paler and paler, and thinner and thinner; you're pining away just as he did. Shall I tell you why?' She snatched off the shade from the lamp, and put her hand under the table, and brought out an image of wax. My image! She pointed to three pins in it. 'One,' she says, 'for no sleep. One for no appetite. One for broken nerves.' I asked her what I had done to make such a bitter enemy of her. She says, 'Remember what I asked of you when we talked of your being my servant. Choose which you will do? Die by inches' (I swear she said it as I hope to be saved); 'die by inches, or tell me--'"

There--in the full frenzy of the agitation that possessed her--there, Mrs. Ellmother suddenly stopped.

Alban's first impression was that she might have fainted. He looked closer, and could just see her shadowy figure still seated in the chair. He asked if she was ill. No.

"Then why don't you go on?"

"I have done," she answered.

"Do you think you can put me off," he rejoined sternly, "with such an excuse as that? What did Miss de Sor ask you to tell her? You promised to trust me. Be as good as your word."

In the days of her health and strength, she would have set him at defiance. All she could do now was to appeal to his mercy.

"Make some allowance for me," she said. "I have been terribly upset. What has become of my courage? What has broken me down in this way? Spare me, sir."

He refused to listen. "This vile attempt to practice on your fears may be repeated," he reminded her. "More cruel advantage may be taken of the nervous derangement from which you are suffering in the climate of this place. You little know me, if you think I will allow that to go on."

She made a last effort to plead with him. "Oh sir, is this behaving like the good kind man I thought you were? You say you are Miss Emily's friend? Don't press me--for Miss Emily's sake!"

"Emily!" Alban exclaimed. "Is she concerned in this?"

There was a change to tenderness in his voice, which persuaded Mrs. Ellmother that she had found her way to the weak side of him. Her one effort now was to strengthen the impression which she believed herself to have produced. "Miss Emily is concerned in it," she confessed.

"In what way?"

"Never mind in what way."

"But I do mind."

"I tell you, sir, Miss Emily must never know it to her dying day!"

The first suspicion of the truth crossed Alban's mind.

"I understand you at last," he said. "What Miss Emily must never know--is what Miss de Sor wanted you to tell her. Oh, it's useless to contradict me! Her motive in trying to frighten you is as plain to me now as if she had confessed it. Are you sure you didn't betray yourself, when she showed the image of wax?"

"I should have died first!" The reply had hardly escaped her before she regretted it. "What makes you want to be so sure about it?" she said. "It looks as if you knew--"

"I do know."

"What!"

The kindest thing that he could do now was to speak out. "Your secret is no secret to me," he said.

Rage and fear shook her together. For the moment she was like the Mrs. Ellmother of former days. "You lie!" she cried.

"I speak the truth."

"I won't believe you! I daren't believe you!"

"Listen to me. In Emily's interests, listen to me. I have read of the murder at Zeeland--"

"That's nothing! The man was a namesake of her father."

"The man was her father himself. Keep your seat! There is nothing to be alarmed about. I know that Emily is ignorant of the horrid death that her father died. I know that you and your late mistress have kept the discovery from her to this day. I know the love and pity which plead your excuse for deceiving her, and the circumstances that favored the deception. My good creature, Emily's peace of mind is as sacred to me as it is to you! I love her as I love my own life--and better. Are you calmer, now?"

He heard her crying: it was the best relief that could come to her. After waiting a while to let the tears have their way, he helped her to rise. There was no more to be said now. The one thing to do was to take her back to the house.

"I can give you a word of advice," he said, "before we part for the night. You must leave Miss de Sor's service at once. Your health will be a sufficient excuse. Give her warning immediately."

Mrs. Ellmother hung back, when he offered her his arm. The bare prospect of seeing Francine again was revolting to her. On Alban's assurance that the notice to leave could be given in writing, she made no further resistance. The village clock struck eleven as they ascended the terrace steps.

A minute later, another person left the grounds by the path which led to the house. Alban's precaution had been taken too late. The smell of tobacco-smoke had guided Francine, when she was at a loss which way to turn next in search of Mrs. Ellmother. For the last quarter of an hour she had been listening, hidden among the trees.