

CHAPTER XLV. MISCHIEF--MAKING.

On Monday, Mirabel made his appearance--and the demon of discord returned with him.

Alban had employed the earlier part of the day in making a sketch in the park--intended as a little present for Emily. Presenting himself in the drawing-room, when his work was completed, he found Cecilia and Francine alone. He asked where Emily was.

The question had been addressed to Cecilia. Francine answered it.

"Emily mustn't be disturbed," she said.

"Why not?"

"She is with Mr. Mirabel in the rose garden. I saw them talking together--evidently feeling the deepest interest in what they were saying to each other. Don't interrupt them--you will only be in the way."

Cecilia at once protested against this last assertion. "She is trying to make mischief, Mr. Morris--don't believe her. I am sure they will be glad to see you, if you join them in the garden."

Francine rose, and left the room. She turned, and looked at Alban as she opened the door. "Try it," she said--"and you will find I am right."

"Francine sometimes talks in a very ill-natured way," Cecilia gently remarked. "Do you think she means it, Mr. Morris?"

"I had better not offer an opinion," Alban replied.

"Why?"

"I can't speak impartially; I dislike Miss de Sor."

There was a pause. Alban's sense of self-respect forbade him to try the experiment which Francine had maliciously suggested. His thoughts--less easy to restrain--wandered in the direction of the garden. The attempt to make him jealous had failed; but he was conscious, at the same time, that Emily had disappointed him. After what they had said to each other in the

park, she ought to have remembered that women are at the mercy of appearances. If Mirabel had something of importance to say to her, she might have avoided exposing herself to Francine's spiteful misconstruction: it would have been easy to arrange with Cecilia that a third person should be present at the interview.

While he was absorbed in these reflections, Cecilia--embarrassed by the silence--was trying to find a topic of conversation. Alban roughly pushed his sketch-book away from him, on the table. Was he displeased with Emily? The same question had occurred to Cecilia at the time of the correspondence, on the subject of Miss Jethro. To recall those letters led her, by natural sequence, to another effort of memory. She was reminded of the person who had been the cause of the correspondence: her interest was revived in the mystery of Miss Jethro.

"Has Emily told you that I have seen your letter?" she asked.

He roused himself with a start. "I beg your pardon. What letter are you thinking of?"

"I was thinking of the letter which mentions Miss Jethro's strange visit. Emily was so puzzled and so surprised that she showed it to me--and we both consulted my father. Have you spoken to Emily about Miss Jethro?"

"I have tried--but she seemed to be unwilling to pursue the subject."

"Have you made any discoveries since you wrote to Emily?"

"No. The mystery is as impenetrable as ever."

As he replied in those terms, Mirabel entered the conservatory from the garden, evidently on his way to the drawing-room.

To see the man, whose introduction to Emily it had been Miss Jethro's mysterious object to prevent--at the very moment when he had been speaking of Miss Jethro herself--was, not only a temptation of curiosity, but a direct incentive (in Emily's own interests) to make an effort at discovery. Alban pursued the conversation with Cecilia, in a tone which was loud enough to be heard in the conservatory.

"The one chance of getting any information that I can see," he proceeded, "is to speak to Mr. Mirabel."

"I shall be only too glad, if I can be of any service to Miss Wyvil and Mr. Morris."

With those obliging words, Mirabel made a dramatic entry, and looked at Cecilia with his irresistible smile. Startled by his sudden appearance, she unconsciously assisted Alban's design. Her silence gave him the opportunity of speaking in her place.

"We were talking," he said quietly to Mirabel, "of a lady with whom you are acquainted."

"Indeed! May I ask the lady's name?"

"Miss Jethro."

Mirabel sustained the shock with extraordinary self-possession--so far as any betrayal by sudden movement was concerned. But his color told the truth: it faded to paleness--it revealed, even to Cecilia's eyes, a man overpowered by fright.

Alban offered him a chair. He refused to take it by a gesture. Alban tried an apology next. "I am afraid I have ignorantly revived some painful associations. Pray excuse me."

The apology roused Mirabel: he felt the necessity of offering some explanation. In timid animals, the one defensive capacity which is always ready for action is cunning. Mirabel was too wily to dispute the inference--the inevitable inference--which any one must have drawn, after seeing the effect on him that the name of Miss Jethro had produced. He admitted that "painful associations" had been revived, and deplored the "nervous sensibility" which had permitted it to be seen.

"No blame can possibly attach to you, my dear sir," he continued, in his most amiable manner. "Will it be indiscreet, on my part, if I ask how you first became acquainted with Miss Jethro?"

"I first became acquainted with her at Miss Ladd's school," Alban answered. "She was, for a short time only, one of the teachers; and she left her situation rather suddenly." He paused--but Mirabel made no remark. "After an interval of a few months," he resumed, "I saw Miss Jethro again. She called on me at my lodgings, near Netherwoods."

"Merely to renew your former acquaintance?"

Mirabel made that inquiry with an eager anxiety for the reply which he was quite unable to conceal. Had he any reason to dread what Miss Jethro might have it in her power to say of him to another person? Alban was in no way pledged to secrecy, and he was determined to leave no means untried of throwing light on Miss Jethro's mysterious warning. He repeated the plain narrative of the interview, which he had communicated by letter to Emily. Mirabel listened without making any remark.

"After what I have told you, can you give me no explanation?" Alban asked.

"I am quite unable, Mr. Morris, to help you."

Was he lying? or speaking, the truth? The impression produced on Alban was that he had spoken the truth.

Women are never so ready as men to resign themselves to the disappointment of their hopes. Cecilia, silently listening up to this time, now ventured to speak--animated by her sisterly interest in Emily.

"Can you not tell us," she said to Mirabel, "why Miss Jethro tried to prevent Emily Brown from meeting you here?"

"I know no more of her motive than you do," Mirabel replied.

Alban interposed. "Miss Jethro left me," he said, "with the intention--quite openly expressed--of trying to prevent you from accepting Mr. Wyvil's invitation. Did she make the attempt?"

Mirabel admitted that she had made the attempt. "But," he added, "without mentioning Miss Emily's name. I was asked to postpone my visit, as a favor to herself, because she had her own reasons for wishing it. I had my reasons" (he bowed with gallantry to Cecilia) "for being eager to have the honor of knowing Mr. Wyvil and his daughter; and I refused."

Once more, the doubt arose: was he lying? or speaking the truth? And, once more, Alban could not resist the conclusion that he was speaking the truth.

"There is one thing I should like to know," Mirabel continued, after some hesitation. "Has Miss Emily been informed of this strange affair?"

"Certainly!"

Mirabel seemed to be disposed to continue his inquiries--and suddenly changed his mind. Was he beginning to doubt if Alban had spoken without concealment, in describing Miss Jethro's visit? Was he still afraid of what Miss Jethro might have said of him? In any case, he changed the subject, and made an excuse for leaving the room.

"I am forgetting my errand," he said to Alban. "Miss Emily was anxious to know if you had finished your sketch. I must tell her that you have returned."

He bowed and withdrew.

Alban rose to follow him--and checked himself.

"No," he thought, "I trust Emily!" He sat down again by Cecilia's side.

Mirabel had indeed returned to the rose garden. He found Emily employed as he had left her, in making a crown of roses, to be worn by Cecilia in the evening. But, in one other respect, there was a change. Francine was present.

"Excuse me for sending you on a needless errand," Emily said to Mirabel; "Miss de Sor tells me Mr. Morris has finished his sketch. She left him in the drawing-room--why didn't you bring him here?"

"He was talking with Miss Wyvil."

Mirabel answered absently--with his eyes on Francine. He gave her one of those significant looks, which says to a third person, "Why are you here?" Francine's jealousy declined to understand him. He tried a broader hint, in words.

"Are you going to walk in the garden?" he said.

Francine was impenetrable. "No," she answered, "I am going to stay here with Emily."

Mirabel had no choice but to yield. Imperative anxieties forced him to say, in Francine's presence, what he had hoped to say to Emily privately.

"When I joined Miss Wyvil and Mr. Morris," he began, "what do you think

they were doing? They were talking of--Miss Jethro."

Emily dropped the rose-crown on her lap. It was easy to see that she had been disagreeably surprised.

"Mr. Morris has told me the curious story of Miss Jethro's visit," Mirabel continued; "but I am in some doubt whether he has spoken to me without reserve. Perhaps he expressed himself more freely when he spoke to you. Miss Jethro may have said something to him which tended to lower me in your estimation?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Mirabel--so far as I know. If I had heard anything of the kind, I should have thought it my duty to tell you. Will it relieve your anxiety, if I go at once to Mr. Morris, and ask him plainly whether he has concealed anything from you or from me?"

Mirabel gratefully kissed her hand. "Your kindness overpowers me," he said--speaking, for once, with true emotion.

Emily immediately returned to the house. As soon as she was out of sight, Francine approached Mirabel, trembling with suppressed rage.