

CHAPTER XLVII. DEBATING.

In the meanwhile Emily had been true to her promise to relieve Mirabel's anxieties, on the subject of Miss Jethro. Entering the drawing-room in search of Alban, she found him talking with Cecilia, and heard her own name mentioned as she opened the door.

"Here she is at last!" Cecilia exclaimed. "What in the world has kept you all this time in the rose garden?"

"Has Mr. Mirabel been more interesting than usual?" Alban asked gayly. Whatever sense of annoyance he might have felt in Emily's absence, was forgotten the moment she appeared; all traces of trouble in his face vanished when they looked at each other.

"You shall judge for yourself," Emily replied with a smile. "Mr. Mirabel has been speaking to me of a relative who is very dear to him--his sister."

Cecilia was surprised. "Why has he never spoken to us of his sister?" she asked.

"It's a sad subject to speak of, my dear. His sister lives a life of suffering--she has been for years a prisoner in her room. He writes to her constantly. His letters from Monksmoor have interested her, poor soul. It seems he said something about me--and she has sent a kind message, inviting me to visit her one of these days. Do you understand it now, Cecilia?"

"Of course I do! Tell me--is Mr. Mirabel's sister older or younger than he is?"

"Older."

"Is she married?"

"She is a widow."

"Does she live with her brother?" Alban asked.

"Oh, no! She has her own house--far away in Northumberland."

"Is she near Sir Jervis Redwood?"

"I fancy not. Her house is on the coast."

"Any children?" Cecilia inquired.

"No; she is quite alone. Now, Cecilia, I have told you all I know--and I have something to say to Mr. Morris. No, you needn't leave us; it's a subject in which you are interested. A subject," she repeated, turning to Alban, "which you may have noticed is not very agreeable to me."

"Miss Jethro?" Alban guessed.

"Yes; Miss Jethro."

Cecilia's curiosity instantly asserted itself.

"We have tried to get Mr. Mirabel to enlighten us, and tried in vain," she said. "You are a favorite. Have you succeeded?"

"I have made no attempt to succeed," Emily replied. "My only object is to relieve Mr. Mirabel's anxiety, if I can--with your help, Mr. Morris."

"In what way can I help you?"

"You mustn't be angry."

"Do I look angry?"

"You look serious. It is a very simple thing. Mr. Mirabel is afraid that Miss Jethro may have said something disagreeable about him, which you might hesitate to repeat. Is he making himself uneasy without any reason?"

"Without the slightest reason. I have concealed nothing from Mr. Mirabel."

"Thank you for the explanation." She turned to Cecilia. "May I send one of the servants with a message? I may as well put an end to Mr. Mirabel's suspense."

The man was summoned, and was dispatched with the message. Emily would have done well, after this, if she had abstained from speaking further of Miss Jethro. But Mirabel's doubts had, unhappily, inspired a similar feeling of uncertainty in her own mind. She was now disposed to attribute the tone of mystery in Alban's unlucky letter to some possible concealment suggested by regard for herself. "I wonder whether I have any reason to feel

uneasy?" she said--half in jest, half in earnest.

"Uneasy about what?" Alban inquired.

"About Miss Jethro, of course! Has she said anything of me which your kindness has concealed?"

Alban seemed to be a little hurt by the doubt which her question implied. "Was that your motive," he asked, "for answering my letter as cautiously as if you had been writing to a stranger?"

"Indeed you are quite wrong!" Emily earnestly assured him. "I was perplexed and startled--and I took Mr. Wyvil's advice, before I wrote to you. Shall we drop the subject?"

Alban would have willingly dropped the subject--but for that unfortunate allusion to Mr. Wyvil. Emily had unconsciously touched him on a sore place. He had already heard from Cecilia of the consultation over his letter, and had disapproved of it. "I think you were wrong to trouble Mr. Wyvil," he said.

The altered tone of his voice suggested to Emily that he would have spoken more severely, if Cecilia had not been in the room. She thought him needlessly ready to complain of a harmless proceeding--and she too returned to the subject, after having proposed to drop it not a minute since!

"You didn't tell me I was to keep your letter a secret," she replied.

Cecilia made matters worse--with the best intentions. "I'm sure, Mr. Morris, my father was only too glad to give Emily his advice."

Alban remained silent--ungraciously silent as Emily thought, after Mr. Wyvil's kindness to him.

"The thing to regret," she remarked, "is that Mr. Morris allowed Miss Jethro to leave him without explaining herself. In his place, I should have insisted on knowing why she wanted to prevent me from meeting Mr. Mirabel in this house."

Cecilia made another unlucky attempt at judicious interference. This time, she tried a gentle remonstrance.

"Remember, Emily, how Mr. Morris was situated. He could hardly be rude to a lady. And I daresay Miss Jethro had good reasons for not wishing to

explain herself."

Francine opened the drawing-room door and heard Cecilia's last words.

"Miss Jethro again!" she exclaimed.

"Where is Mr. Mirabel?" Emily asked. "I sent him a message."

"He regrets to say he is otherwise engaged for the present," Francine replied with spiteful politeness. "Don't let me interrupt the conversation. Who is this Miss Jethro, whose name is on everybody's lips?"

Alban could keep silent no longer. "We have done with the subject," he said sharply.

"Because I am here?"

"Because we have said more than enough about Miss Jethro already."

"Speak for yourself, Mr. Morris," Emily answered, resenting the masterful tone which Alban's interference had assumed. "I have not done with Miss Jethro yet, I can assure you."

"My dear, you don't know where she lives," Cecilia reminded her.

"Leave me to discover it!" Emily answered hotly. "Perhaps Mr. Mirabel knows. I shall ask Mr. Mirabel."

"I thought you would find a reason for returning to Mr. Mirabel," Francine remarked.

Before Emily could reply, one of the maids entered the room with a wreath of roses in her hand.

"Mr. Mirabel sends you these flowers, miss," the woman said, addressing Emily. "The boy told me they were to be taken to your room. I thought it was a mistake, and I have brought them to you here."

Francine, who happened to be nearest to the door, took the roses from the girl on pretense of handing them to Emily. Her jealous vigilance detected the one visible morsel of Mirabel's letter, twisted up with the flowers. Had Emily entrapped him into a secret correspondence with her? "A scrap of waste paper among your roses," she said, crumpling it up in her hand as if she

meant to throw it away.

But Emily was too quick for her. She caught Francine by the wrist. "Waste paper or not," she said; "it was among my flowers and it belongs to me."

Francine gave up the letter, with a look which might have startled Emily if she had noticed it. She handed the roses to Cecilia. "I was making a wreath for you to wear this evening, my dear--and I left it in the garden. It's not quite finished yet."

Cecilia was delighted. "How lovely it is!" she exclaimed. "And how very kind of you! I'll finish it myself." She turned away to the conservatory.

"I had no idea I was interfering with a letter," said Francine; watching Emily with fiercely-attentive eyes, while she smoothed out the crumpled paper.

Having read what Mirabel had written to her, Emily looked up, and saw that Alban was on the point of following Cecilia into the conservatory. He had noticed something in Francine's face which he was at a loss to understand, but which made her presence in the room absolutely hateful to him. Emily followed and spoke to him.

"I am going back to the rose garden," she said.

"For any particular purpose?" Alban inquired

"For a purpose which, I am afraid, you won't approve of. I mean to ask Mr. Mirabel if he knows Miss Jethro's address."

"I hope he is as ignorant of it as I am," Alban answered gravely.

"Are we going to quarrel over Miss Jethro, as we once quarreled over Mrs. Rook?" Emily asked--with the readiest recovery of her good humor. "Come! come! I am sure you are as anxious, in your own private mind, to have this matter cleared up as I am."

"With one difference--that I think of consequences, and you don't." He said it, in his gentlest and kindest manner, and stepped into the conservatory.

"Never mind the consequences," she called after him, "if we can only get at the truth. I hate being deceived!"

"There is no person living who has better reason than you have to say that."

Emily looked round with a start. Alban was out of hearing. It was Francine who had answered her.

"What do you mean?" she said.

Francine hesitated. A ghastly paleness overspread her face.

"Are you ill?" Emily asked.

"No--I am thinking."

After waiting for a moment in silence, Emily moved away toward the door of the drawing-room. Francine suddenly held up her hand.

"Stop!" she cried.

Emily stood still.

"My mind is made up," Francine said.

"Made up--to what?"

"You asked what I meant, just now."

"I did."

"Well, my mind is made up to answer you. Miss Emily Brown, you are leading a sadly frivolous life in this house. I am going to give you something more serious to think about than your flirtation with Mr. Mirabel. Oh, don't be impatient! I am coming to the point. Without knowing it yourself, you have been the victim of deception for years past--cruel deception--wicked deception that puts on the mask of mercy."

"Are you alluding to Miss Jethro?" Emily asked, in astonishment. "I thought you were strangers to each other. Just now, you wanted to know who she was."

"I know nothing about her. I care nothing about her. I am not thinking of Miss Jethro."

"Who are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking," Francine answered, "of your dead father."