

BOOK THE FIFTH--THE COTTAGE.

CHAPTER XLIX. EMILY SUFFERS.

Mrs. Ellmother--left in charge of Emily's place of abode, and feeling sensible of her lonely position from time to time--had just thought of trying the cheering influence of a cup of tea, when she heard a cab draw up at the cottage gate. A violent ring at the bell followed. She opened the door--and found Emily on the steps. One look at that dear and familiar face was enough for the old servant.

"God help us," she cried, "what's wrong now?"

Without a word of reply, Emily led the way into the bedchamber which had been the scene of Miss Letitia's death. Mrs. Ellmother hesitated on the threshold.

"Why do you bring me in here?" she asked.

"Why did you try to keep me out?" Emily answered.

"When did I try to keep you out, miss?"

"When I came home from school, to nurse my aunt. Ah, you remember now! Is it true--I ask you here, where your old mistress died--is it true that my aunt deceived me about my father's death? And that you knew it?"

There was dead silence. Mrs. Ellmother trembled horribly--her lips dropped apart--her eyes wandered round the room with a stare of idiotic terror. "Is it her ghost tells you that?" she whispered. "Where is her ghost? The room whirls round and round, miss--and the air sings in my ears."

Emily sprang forward to support her. She staggered to a chair, and lifted her great bony hands in wild entreaty. "Don't frighten me," she said. "Stand back."

Emily obeyed her. She dashed the cold sweat off her forehead. "You were talking about your father's death just now," she burst out, in desperate

defiant tones. "Well! we know it and we are sorry for it--your father died suddenly."

"My father died murdered in the inn at Zeeland! All the long way to London, I have tried to doubt it. Oh, me, I know it now!"

Answering in those words, she looked toward the bed. Harrowing remembrances of her aunt's delirious self-betrayal made the room unendurable to her. She ran out. The parlor door was open. Entering the room, she passed by a portrait of her father, which her aunt had hung on the wall over the fireplace. She threw herself on the sofa and burst into a passionate fit of crying. "Oh, my father--my dear, gentle, loving father; my first, best, truest friend--murdered! murdered! Oh, God, where was your justice, where was your mercy, when he died that dreadful death?"

A hand was laid on her shoulder; a voice said to her, "Hush, my child! God knows best."

Emily looked up, and saw that Mrs. Ellmother had followed her. "You poor old soul," she said, suddenly remembering; "I frightened you in the other room."

"I have got over it, my dear. I am old; and I have lived a hard life. A hard life schools a person. I make no complaints." She stopped, and began to shudder again. "Will you believe me if I tell you something?" she asked. "I warned my self-willed mistress. Standing by your father's coffin, I warned her. Hide the truth as you may (I said), a time will come when our child will know what you are keeping from her now. One or both of us may live to see it. I am the one who has lived; no refuge in the grave for me. I want to hear about it--there's no fear of frightening or hurting me now. I want to hear how you found it out. Was it by accident, my dear? or did a person tell you?"

Emily's mind was far away from Mrs. Ellmother. She rose from the sofa, with her hands held fast over her aching heart.

"The one duty of my life," she said--"I am thinking of the one duty of my life. Look! I am calm now; I am resigned to my hard lot. Never, never again, can the dear memory of my father be what it was! From this time, it is the horrid memory of a crime. The crime has gone unpunished; the man has escaped others. He shall not escape Me." She paused, and looked at Mrs. Ellmother absently. "What did you say just now? You want to hear how I know what I know? Naturally! naturally! Sit down here--sit down, my old friend, on the sofa with me--and take your mind back to Netherwoods. Alban Morris--"

Mrs. Ellmother recoiled from Emily in dismay. "Don't tell me he had anything to do with it! The kindest of men; the best of men!"

"The man of all men living who least deserves your good opinion or mine," Emily answered sternly.

"You!" Mrs. Ellmother exclaimed, "you say that!"

"I say it. He--who won on me to like him--he was in the conspiracy to deceive me; and you know it! He heard me talk of the newspaper story of the murder of my father--I say, he heard me talk of it composedly, talk of it carelessly, in the innocent belief that it was the murder of a stranger--and he never opened his lips to prevent that horrid profanation! He never even said, speak of something else; I won't hear you! No more of him! God forbid I should ever see him again. No! Do what I told you. Carry your mind back to Netherwoods. One night you let Francine de Sor frighten you. You ran away from her into the garden. Keep quiet! At your age, must I set you an example of self-control?"

"I want to know, Miss Emily, where Francine de Sor is now?"

"She is at the house in the country, which I have left."

"Where does she go next, if you please? Back to Miss Ladd?"

"I suppose so. What interest have you in knowing where she goes next?"

"I won't interrupt you, miss. It's true that I ran away into the garden. I can guess who followed me. How did she find her way to me and Mr. Morris, in the dark?"

"The smell of tobacco guided her--she knew who smoked--she had seen him talking to you, on that very day--she followed the scent--she heard what you two said to each other--and she has repeated it to me. Oh, my old friend, the malice of a revengeful girl has enlightened me, when you, my nurse--and he, my lover--left me in the dark: it has told me how my father died!"

"That's said bitterly, miss!"

"Is it said truly?"

"No. It isn't said truly of myself. God knows you would never have been kept

in the dark, if your aunt had listened to me. I begged and prayed--I went down on my knees to her--I warned her, as I told you just now. Must I tell you what a headstrong woman Miss Letitia was? She insisted. She put the choice before me of leaving her at once and forever--or giving in. I wouldn't have given in to any other creature on the face of this earth. I am obstinate, as you have often told me. Well, your aunt's obstinacy beat mine; I was too fond of her to say No. Besides, if you ask me who was to blame in the first place, I tell you it wasn't your aunt; she was frightened into it."

"Who frightened her?"

"Your godfather--the great London surgeon--he who was visiting in our house at the time."

"Sir Richard?"

"Yes--Sir Richard. He said he wouldn't answer for the consequences, in the delicate state of your health, if we told you the truth. Ah, he had it all his own way after that. He went with Miss Letitia to the inquest; he won over the coroner and the newspaper men to his will; he kept your aunt's name out of the papers; he took charge of the coffin; he hired the undertaker and his men, strangers from London; he wrote the certificate--who but he! Everybody was cap in hand to the famous man!"

"Surely, the servants and the neighbors asked questions?"

"Hundreds of questions! What did that matter to Sir Richard? They were like so many children, in his hands. And, mind you, the luck helped him. To begin with, there was the common name. Who was to pick out your poor father among the thousands of James Browns? Then, again, the house and lands went to the male heir, as they called him--the man your father quarreled with in the bygone time. He brought his own establishment with him. Long before you got back from the friends you were staying with--don't you remember it?--we had cleared out of the house; we were miles and miles away; and the old servants were scattered abroad, finding new situations wherever they could. How could you suspect us? We had nothing to fear in that way; but my conscience pricked me. I made another attempt to prevail on Miss Letitia, when you had recovered your health. I said, 'There's no fear of a relapse now; break it to her gently, but tell her the truth.' No! Your aunt was too fond of you. She daunted me with dreadful fits of crying, when I tried to persuade her. And that wasn't the worst of it. She bade me remember what an excitable man your father was--she reminded me that the misery of your mother's death laid him low with brain fever--she said,

'Emily takes after her father; I have heard you say it yourself; she has his constitution, and his sensitive nerves. Don't you know how she loved him--how she talks of him to this day? Who can tell (if we are not careful) what dreadful mischief we may do?' That was how my mistress worked on me. I got infected with her fears; it was as if I had caught an infection of disease. Oh, my dear, blame me if it must be; but don't forget how I have suffered for it since! I was driven away from my dying mistress, in terror of what she might say, while you were watching at her bedside. I have lived in fear of what you might ask me--and have longed to go back to you--and have not had the courage to do it. Look at me now!"

The poor woman tried to take out her handkerchief; her quivering hand helplessly entangled itself in her dress. "I can't even dry my eyes," she said faintly. "Try to forgive me, miss!"

Emily put her arms round the old nurse's neck. "It is you," she said sadly, "who must forgive me."

For a while they were silent. Through the window that was open to the little garden, came the one sound that could be heard--the gentle trembling of leaves in the evening wind.

The silence was harshly broken by the bell at the cottage door. They both started.

Emily's heart beat fast. "Who can it be?" she said.

Mrs. Ellmother rose. "Shall I say you can't see anybody?" she asked, before leaving the room.

"Yes! yes!"

Emily heard the door opened--heard low voices in the passage. There was a momentary interval. Then, Mrs. Ellmother returned. She said nothing. Emily spoke to her.

"Is it a visitor?"

"Yes."

"Have you said I can't see anybody?"

"I couldn't say it."

"Why not?"

"Don't be hard on him, my dear. It's Mr. Alban Morris."