

CHAPTER L. MISS LADD ADVISES.

Mrs. Ellmother sat by the dying embers of the kitchen fire; thinking over the events of the day in perplexity and distress.

She had waited at the cottage door for a friendly word with Alban, after he had left Emily. The stern despair in his face warned her to let him go in silence. She had looked into the parlor next. Pale and cold, Emily lay on the sofa--sunk in helpless depression of body and mind. "Don't speak to me," she whispered; "I am quite worn out." It was but too plain that the view of Alban's conduct which she had already expressed, was the view to which she had adhered at the interview between them. They had parted in grief---perhaps in anger--perhaps forever. Mrs. Ellmother lifted Emily in compassionate silence, and carried her upstairs, and waited by her until she slept.

In the still hours of the night, the thoughts of the faithful old servant--dwelling for a while on past and present--advanced, by slow degrees, to consideration of the doubtful future. Measuring, to the best of her ability, the responsibility which had fallen on her, she felt that it was more than she could bear, or ought to bear, alone. To whom could she look for help?

The gentlefolks at Monkmoor were strangers to her. Doctor Allday was near at hand--but Emily had said, "Don't send for him; he will torment me with questions--and I want to keep my mind quiet, if I can." But one person was left, to whose ever-ready kindness Mrs. Ellmother could appeal--and that person was Miss Ladd.

It would have been easy to ask the help of the good schoolmistress in comforting and advising the favorite pupil whom she loved. But Mrs. Ellmother had another object in view: she was determined that the cold-blooded cruelty of Emily's treacherous friend should not be allowed to triumph with impunity. If an ignorant old woman could do nothing else, she could tell the plain truth, and could leave Miss Ladd to decide whether such a person as Francine deserved to remain under her care.

To feel justified in taking this step was one thing: to put it all clearly in writing was another. After vainly making the attempt overnight, Mrs. Ellmother tore up her letter, and communicated with Miss Ladd by means of a telegraphic message, in the morning. "Miss Emily is in great distress. I must not leave her. I have something besides to say to you which cannot be

put into a letter. Will you please come to us?"

Later in the forenoon, Mrs. Ellmother was called to the door by the arrival of a visitor. The personal appearance of the stranger impressed her favorably. He was a handsome little gentleman; his manners were winning, and his voice was singularly pleasant to hear.

"I have come from Mr. Wyvil's house in the country," he said; "and I bring a letter from his daughter. May I take the opportunity of asking if Miss Emily is well?"

"Far from it, sir, I am sorry to say. She is so poorly that she keeps her bed."

At this reply, the visitor's face revealed such sincere sympathy and regret, that Mrs. Ellmother was interested in him: she added a word more. "My mistress has had a hard trial to bear, sir. I hope there is no bad news for her in the young lady's letter?"

"On the contrary, there is news that she will be glad to hear--Miss Wyvil is coming here this evening. Will you excuse my asking if Miss Emily has had medical advice?"

"She won't hear of seeing the doctor, sir. He's a good friend of hers--and he lives close by. I am unfortunately alone in the house. If I could leave her, I would go at once and ask his advice."

"Let me go!" Mirabel eagerly proposed.

Mrs. Ellmother's face brightened. "That's kindly thought of, sir--if you don't mind the trouble."

"My good lady, nothing is a trouble in your young mistress's service. Give me the doctor's name and address--and tell me what to say to him."

"There's one thing you must be careful of," Mrs. Ellmother answered. "He mustn't come here, as if he had been sent for--she would refuse to see him."

Mirabel understood her. "I will not forget to caution him. Kindly tell Miss Emily I called--my name is Mirabel. I will return to-morrow."

He hastened away on his errand--only to find that he had arrived too late. Doctor Allday had left London; called away to a serious case of illness. He was not expected to get back until late in the afternoon. Mirabel left a

message, saying that he would return in the evening.

The next visitor who arrived at the cottage was the trusty friend, in whose generous nature Mrs. Ellmother had wisely placed confidence. Miss Ladd had resolved to answer the telegram in person, the moment she read it.

"If there is bad news," she said, "let me hear it at once. I am not well enough to bear suspense; my busy life at the school is beginning to tell on me."

"There is nothing that need alarm you, ma'am--but there is a great deal to say, before you see Miss Emily. My stupid head turns giddy with thinking of it. I hardly know where to begin."

"Begin with Emily," Miss Ladd suggested.

Mrs. Ellmother took the advice. She described Emily's unexpected arrival on the previous day; and she repeated what had passed between them afterward. Miss Ladd's first impulse, when she had recovered her composure, was to go to Emily without waiting to hear more. Not presuming to stop her, Mrs. Ellmother ventured to put a question "Do you happen to have my telegram about you, ma'am?" Miss Ladd produced it. "Will you please look at the last part of it again?"

Miss Ladd read the words: "I have something besides to say to you which cannot be put into a letter." She at once returned to her chair.

"Does what you have still to tell me refer to any person whom I know?" she said.

"It refers, ma'am, to Miss de Sor. I am afraid I shall distress you."

"What did I say, when I came in?" Miss Ladd asked. "Speak out plainly; and try--it's not easy, I know--but try to begin at the beginning."

Mrs. Ellmother looked back through her memory of past events, and began by alluding to the feeling of curiosity which she had excited in Francine, on the day when Emily had made them known to one another. From this she advanced to the narrative of what had taken place at Netherwoods--to the atrocious attempt to frighten her by means of the image of wax--to the discovery made by Francine in the garden at night--and to the circumstances under which that discovery had been communicated to Emily.

Miss Ladd's face reddened with indignation. "Are you sure of all that you have said?" she asked.

"I am quite sure, ma'am. I hope I have not done wrong," Mrs. Ellmother added simply, "in telling you all this?"

"Wrong?" Miss Ladd repeated warmly. "If that wretched girl has no defense to offer, she is a disgrace to my school--and I owe you a debt of gratitude for showing her to me in her true character. She shall return at once to Netherwoods; and she shall answer me to my entire satisfaction--or leave my house. What cruelty! what duplicity! In all my experience of girls, I have never met with the like of it. Let me go to my dear little Emily--and try to forget what I have heard."

Mrs. Ellmother led the good lady to Emily's room--and, returning to the lower part of the house, went out into the garden. The mental effort that she had made had left its result in an aching head, and in an overpowering sense of depression. "A mouthful of fresh air will revive me," she thought.

The front garden and back garden at the cottage communicated with each other. Walking slowly round and round, Mrs. Ellmother heard footsteps on the road outside, which stopped at the gate. She looked through the grating, and discovered Alban Morris.

"Come in, sir!" she said, rejoiced to see him. He obeyed in silence. The full view of his face shocked Mrs. Ellmother. Never in her experience of the friend who had been so kind to her at Netherwoods, had he looked so old and so haggard as he looked now. "Oh, Mr. Alban, I see how she has distressed you! Don't take her at her word. Keep a good heart, sir--young girls are never long together of the same mind."

Alban gave her his hand. "I mustn't speak about it," he said. "Silence helps me to bear my misfortune as becomes a man. I have had some hard blows in my time: they don't seem to have blunted my sense of feeling as I thought they had. Thank God, she doesn't know how she has made me suffer! I want to ask her pardon for having forgotten myself yesterday. I spoke roughly to her, at one time. No: I won't intrude on her; I have said I am sorry, in writing. Do you mind giving it to her? Good-by--and thank you. I mustn't stay longer; Miss Ladd expects me at Netherwoods."

"Miss Ladd is in the house, sir, at this moment."

"Here, in London!"

"Upstairs, with Miss Emily."

"Upstairs? Is Emily ill?"

"She is getting better, sir. Would you like to see Miss Ladd?"

"I should indeed! I have something to say to her--and time is of importance to me. May I wait in the garden?"

"Why not in the parlor, sir?"

"The parlor reminds me of happier days. In time, I may have courage enough to look at the room again. Not now."

"If she doesn't make it up with that good man," Mrs. Ellmother thought, on her way back to the house, "my nurse-child is what I have never believed her to be yet--she's a fool."

In half an hour more, Miss Ladd joined Alban on the little plot of grass behind the cottage. "I bring Emily's reply to your letter," she said. "Read it, before you speak to me."

Alban read it: "Don't suppose you have offended me--and be assured that I feel gratefully the tone in which your note is written. I try to write forbearingly on my side; I wish I could write acceptably as well. It is not to be done. I am as unable as ever to enter into your motives. You are not my relation; you were under no obligation of secrecy: you heard me speak ignorantly of the murder of my father, as if it had been the murder of a stranger; and yet you kept me--deliberately, cruelly kept me--deceived! The remembrance of it burns me like fire. I cannot--oh, Alban, I cannot restore you to the place in my estimation which you have lost! If you wish to help me to bear my trouble, I entreat you not to write to me again."

Alban offered the letter silently to Miss Ladd. She signed to him to keep it.

"I know what Emily has written," she said; "and I have told her, what I now tell you--she is wrong; in every way, wrong. It is the misfortune of her impetuous nature that she rushes to conclusions--and those conclusions once formed, she holds to them with all the strength of her character. In this matter, she has looked at her side of the question exclusively; she is blind to your side."

"Not willfully!" Alban interposed.

Miss Ladd looked at him with admiration. "You defend Emily?" she said.

"I love her," Alban answered.

Miss Ladd felt for him, as Mrs. Ellmother had felt for him. "Trust to time, Mr. Morris," she resumed. "The danger to be afraid of is--the danger of some headlong action, on her part, in the interval. Who can say what the end may be, if she persists in her present way of thinking? There is something monstrous, in a young girl declaring that it is her duty to pursue a murderer, and to bring him to justice! Don't you see it yourself?"

Alban still defended Emily. "It seems to me to be a natural impulse," he said--"natural, and noble."

"Noble!" Miss Ladd exclaimed.

"Yes--for it grows out of the love which has not died with her father's death."

"Then you encourage her?"

"With my whole heart--if she would give me the opportunity!"

"We won't pursue the subject, Mr. Morris. I am told by Mrs. Ellmother that you have something to say to me. What is it?"

"I have to ask you," Alban replied, "to let me resign my situation at Netherwoods."

Miss Ladd was not only surprised; she was also--a very rare thing with her--inclined to be suspicious. After what he had said to Emily, it occurred to her that Alban might be meditating some desperate project, with the hope of recovering his lost place in her favor.

"Have you heard of some better employment?" she asked.

"I have heard of no employment. My mind is not in a state to give the necessary attention to my pupils."

"Is that your only reason for wishing to leave me?"

"It is one of my reasons."

"The only one which you think it necessary to mention?"

"Yes."

"I shall be sorry to lose you, Mr. Morris."

"Believe me, Miss Ladd, I am not ungrateful for your kindness."

"Will you let me, in all kindness, say something more?" Miss Ladd answered.
"I don't intrude on your secrets--I only hope that you have no rash project in view."

"I don't understand you, Miss Ladd."

"Yes, Mr. Morris--you do."

She shook hands with him--and went back to Emily.