

CHAPTER LVI. ALBAN SEES HIS WAY.

During the first days of Mirabel's sojourn at his hotel in London, events were in progress at Netherwoods, affecting the interests of the man who was the especial object of his distrust. Not long after Miss Ladd had returned to her school, she heard of an artist who was capable of filling the place to be vacated by Alban Morris. It was then the twenty-third of the month. In four days more the new master would be ready to enter on his duties; and Alban would be at liberty.

On the twenty-fourth, Alban received a telegram which startled him. The person sending the message was Mrs. Ellmother; and the words were: "Meet me at your railway station to-day, at two o'clock."

He found the old woman in the waiting-room; and he met with a rough reception.

"Minutes are precious, Mr. Morris," she said; "you are two minutes late. The next train to London stops here in half an hour--and I must go back by it."

"Good heavens, what brings you here? Is Emily--?"

"Emily is well enough in health--if that's what you mean? As to why I come here, the reason is that it's a deal easier for me (worse luck!) to take this journey than to write a letter. One good turn deserves another. I don't forget how kind you were to me, away there at the school--and I can't, and won't, see what's going on at the cottage, behind your back, without letting you know of it. Oh, you needn't be alarmed about her! I've made an excuse to get away for a few hours--but I haven't left her by herself. Miss Wyvil has come to London again; and Mr. Mirabel spends the best part of his time with her. Excuse me for a moment, will you? I'm so thirsty after the journey, I can hardly speak."

She presented herself at the counter in the waiting-room. "I'll trouble you, young woman, for a glass of ale." She returned to Alban in a better humor. "It's not bad stuff, that! When I have said my say, I'll have a drop more--just to wash the taste of Mr. Mirabel out of my mouth. Wait a bit; I have something to ask you. How much longer are you obliged to stop here, teaching the girls to draw?"

"I leave Netherwoods in three days more," Alban replied.

"That's all right! You may be in time to bring Miss Emily to her senses, yet."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean--if you don't stop it--she will marry the parson."

"I can't believe it, Mrs. Ellmother! I won't believe it!"

"Ah, it's a comfort to him, poor fellow, to say that! Look here, Mr. Morris; this is how it stands. You're in disgrace with Miss Emily--and he profits by it. I was fool enough to take a liking to Mr. Mirabel when I first opened the door to him; I know better now. He got on the blind side of me; and now he has got on the blind side of her. Shall I tell you how? By doing what you would have done if you had had the chance. He's helping her--or pretending to help her, I don't know which--to find the man who murdered poor Mr. Brown. After four years! And when all the police in England (with a reward to encourage them) did their best, and it came to nothing!"

"Never mind that!" Alban said impatiently. "I want to know how Mr. Mirabel is helping her?"

"That's more than I can tell you. You don't suppose they take me into their confidence? All I can do is to pick up a word, here and there, when fine weather tempts them out into the garden. She tells him to suspect Mrs. Rook, and to make inquiries after Miss Jethro. And he has his plans; and he writes them down, which is dead against his doing anything useful, in my opinion. I don't hold with your scribblers. At the same time I wouldn't count too positively, in your place, on his being likely to fail. That little Mirabel--if it wasn't for his beard, I should believe he was a woman, and a sickly woman too; he fainted in our house the other day--that little Mirabel is in earnest. Rather than leave Miss Emily from Saturday to Monday, he has got a parson out of employment to do his Sunday work for him. And, what's more, he has persuaded her (for some reasons of his own) to leave London next week."

"Is she going back to Monksmoor?"

"Not she! Mr. Mirabel has got a sister, a widow lady; she's a cripple, or something of the sort. Her name is Mrs. Delvin. She lives far away in the north country, by the sea; and Miss Emily is going to stay with her."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Sure? I've seen the letter."

"Do you mean the letter of invitation?"

"Yes--I do. Miss Emily herself showed it to me. I'm to go with her--'in attendance on my mistress,' as the lady puts it. This I will say for Mrs. Delvin: her handwriting is a credit to the school that taught her; and the poor bedridden creature words her invitation so nicely, that I myself couldn't have resisted it--and I'm a hard one, as you know. You don't seem to heed me, Mr. Morris."

"I beg your pardon, I was thinking."

"Thinking of what--if I may make so bold?"

"Of going back to London with you, instead of waiting till the new master comes to take my place."

"Don't do that, sir! You would do harm instead of good, if you showed yourself at the cottage now. Besides, it would not be fair to Miss Ladd, to leave her before the other man takes your girls off your hands. Trust me to look after your interests; and don't go near Miss Emily--don't even write to her--unless you have got something to say about the murder, which she will be eager to hear. Make some discovery in that direction, Mr. Morris, while the parson is only trying to do it or pretending to do it--and I'll answer for the result. Look at the clock! In ten minutes more the train will be here. My memory isn't as good as it was; but I do think I have told you all I had to tell."

"You are the best of good friends!" Alban said warmly.

"Never mind about that, sir. If you want to do a friendly thing in return, tell me if you know what has become of Miss de Sor."

"She has returned to Netherwoods."

"Aha! Miss Ladd is as good as her word. Would you mind writing to tell me of it, if Miss de Sor leaves the school again? Good Lord! there she is on the platform with bag and baggage. Don't let her see me, Mr. Morris! If she comes in here, I shall set the marks of my ten finger-nails on that false face of hers, as sure as I am a Christian woman."

Alban placed himself at the door, so as to hide Mrs. Ellmother. There indeed was Francine, accompanied by one of the teachers at the school. She took a seat on the bench outside the booking-office, in a state of sullen indifference--absorbed in herself--noticing nothing. Urged by ungovernable curiosity, Mrs. Ellmother stole on tiptoe to Alban's side to look at her. To a person acquainted with the circumstances there could be no possible doubt of what had happened. Francine had failed to excuse herself, and had been dismissed from Miss Ladd's house.

"I would have traveled to the world's end," Mrs. Ellmother said, "to see that!"

She returned to her place in the waiting-room, perfectly satisfied.

The teacher noticed Alban, on leaving the booking-office after taking the tickets. "I shall be glad," she said, looking toward Francine, "when I have resigned the charge of that young lady to the person who is to receive her in London."

"Is she to be sent back to her parents?" Alban asked.

"We don't know yet. Miss Ladd will write to St. Domingo by the next mail. In the meantime, her father's agent in London--the same person who pays her allowance--takes care of her until he hears from the West Indies."

"Does she consent to this?"

"She doesn't seem to care what becomes of her. Miss Ladd has given her every opportunity of explaining and excusing herself, and has produced no impression. You can see the state she is in. Our good mistress--always hopeful even in the worst cases, as you know--thinks she is feeling ashamed of herself, and is too proud and self-willed to own it. My own idea is, that some secret disappointment is weighing on her mind. Perhaps I am wrong."

No. Miss Ladd was wrong; and the teacher was right.

The passion of revenge, being essentially selfish in its nature, is of all passions the narrowest in its range of view. In gratifying her jealous hatred of Emily, Francine had correctly foreseen consequences, as they might affect the other object of her enmity--Alban Morris. But she had failed to perceive the imminent danger of another result, which in a calmer frame of mind might not have escaped discovery. In triumphing over Emily and Alban, she had been the indirect means of inflicting on herself the bitterest of all disappointments--she had brought Emily and Mirabel together. The first

forewarning of this catastrophe had reached her, on hearing that Mirabel would not return to Monksmoor. Her worst fears had been thereafter confirmed by a letter from Cecilia, which had followed her to Netherwoods. From that moment, she, who had made others wretched, paid the penalty in suffering as keen as any that she had inflicted. Completely prostrated; powerless, through ignorance of his address in London, to make a last appeal to Mirabel; she was literally, as had just been said, careless what became of her. When the train approached, she sprang to her feet--advanced to the edge of the platform--and suddenly drew back, shuddering. The teacher looked in terror at Alban. Had the desperate girl meditated throwing herself under the wheels of the engine? The thought had been in both their minds; but neither of them acknowledged it. Francine stepped quietly into the carriage, when the train drew up, and laid her head back in a corner, and closed her eyes. Mrs. Ellmother took her place in another compartment, and beckoned to Alban to speak to her at the window.

"Where can I see you, when you go to London?" she asked.

"At Doctor Allday's house."

"On what day?"

"On Tuesday next."