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Chapter 66 - Alban's Narrative

"The information which I have obtained from Miss Jethro has been communicated to me, on the condition that I shall not disclose the place of her residence. 'Let me pass out of notice (she said) as completely as if I had passed out of life; I wish to be forgotten by some, and to be unknown by others.' With this one stipulation, she left me free to write the present narrative of what passed at the interview between us. I feel that the discoveries which I have made are too important to the persons interested to be trusted to memory.

1. _She Receives Me_.

"Finding Miss Jethro's place of abode, with far less difficulty than I had anticipated (thanks to favoring circumstances), I stated plainly the object of my visit. She declined to enter into conversation with me on the subject of the murder at Zeeland.

"I was prepared to meet with this rebuke, and to take the necessary measures for obtaining a more satisfactory reception. 'A person is suspected of having committed the murder,' I said; 'and there is reason to believe that you are in a position to say whether the suspicion is justified or not. Do you refuse to answer me, if I put the question?'

"Miss Jethro asked who the person was.

"I mentioned the name--Mr. Miles Mirabel.

"It is not necessary, and it would certainly be not agreeable to me, to describe the effect which this reply produced on Miss Jethro. After giving her time to compose herself, I entered into certain explanations, in order to convince her at the outset of my good faith. The result justified my anticipations. I was at once admitted to her confidence.

"She said, 'I must not hesitate to do an act of justice to an innocent man. But, in such a serious matter as this, you have a right to judge for yourself whether the person who is now speaking to you is a person whom you can trust. You may believe that I tell the truth about others, if I begin--whatever it may cost me--by telling the truth about myself.'

2. _She Speaks of Herself_.

"I shall not attempt to place on record the confession of a most unhappy woman. It was the common story of sin bitterly repented, and of vain effort to recover the lost place in social esteem. Too well known a story, surely, to be told again.

"But I may with perfect propriety repeat what Miss Jethro said to me, in allusion to later events in her life which are connected with my own personal experience. She recalled to my memory a visit which she had paid to me at Netherwoods, and a letter addressed to her by Doctor Allday, which I had read at her express request.

"She said, 'You may remember that the letter contained some severe reflections on my conduct. Among other things, the doctor mentions that he called at the lodging I occupied during my visit to London, and found I had taken to flight: also that he had reason to believe I had entered Miss Ladd's service, under false pretenses.'

"I asked if the doctor had wronged her.

"She answered 'No: in one case, he is ignorant; in the other, he is right. On leaving his house, I found myself followed in the street by the man to whom I owe the shame and misery of my past life. My horror of him is not to be described in words. The one way of escaping was offered by an empty cab that passed me. I reached the railway station safely, and went back to my home in the country. Do you blame me?'

"It was impossible to blame her--and I said so.

"She then confessed the deception which she had practiced on Miss Ladd. 'I have a cousin,' she said, 'who was a Miss Jethro like me. Before her marriage she had been employed as a governess. She pitied me; she sympathized with my longing to recover the character that I had lost. With her permission, I made use of the testimonials which she had earned as a teacher--I was betrayed (to this day I don't know by whom)--and I was dismissed from Netherwoods. Now you know that I deceived Miss Ladd, you may reasonably conclude that I am likely to deceive You.'

"I assured her, with perfect sincerity, that I had drawn no such conclusion. Encouraged by my reply, Miss Jethro proceeded as follows.

3. _She Speaks of Mirabel_.

"Four years ago, I was living near Cowes, in the Isle of Wight--in a cottage which had been taken for me by a gentleman who was the owner of a yacht. We had just returned from a short cruise, and the vessel was under orders to sail for Cherbourg with the next tide.

"While I was walking in my garden, I was startled by the sudden appearance of a man (evidently a gentleman) who was a perfect stranger to me. He was in a pitiable state of terror, and he implored my protection. In reply to my first inquiries, he mentioned the inn at Zeeland, and the dreadful death of a person unknown to him; whom I recognized (partly by the description given, and partly by comparison of dates) as Mr. James Brown. I shall say nothing of the shock inflicted on me: you don't want to know what I felt. What I did (having literally only a minute left for decision) was to hide the fugitive from discovery, and to exert my influence in his favor with the owner of the yacht. I saw nothing more of him. He was put on board, as soon as the police were out of sight, and was safely landed at Cherbourg.'

"I asked what induced her to run the risk of protecting a stranger, who was under suspicion of having committed a murder.

"She said, 'You shall hear my explanation directly. Let us have done with Mr. Mirabel first. We occasionally corresponded, during the long absence on the continent; never

alluding, at his express request, to the horrible event at the inn. His last letter reached me, after he had established himself at Vale Regis. Writing of the society in the neighborhood, he informed me of his introduction to Miss Wyvil, and of the invitation that he had received to meet her friend and schoolfellow at Monksmoor. I knew that Miss Emily possessed a Handbill describing personal peculiarities in Mr. Mirabel, not hidden under the changed appearance of his head and face. If she remembered or happened to refer to that description, while she was living in the same house with him, there was a possibility at least of her suspicion being excited. The fear of this took me to you. It was a morbid fear, and, as events turned out, an unfounded fear: but I was unable to control it. Failing to produce any effect on you, I went to Vale Regis, and tried (vainly again) to induce Mr. Mirabel to send an excuse to Monksmoor. He, like you, wanted to know what my motive was. When I tell you that I acted solely in Miss Emily's interests, and that I knew how she had been deceived about her father's death, need I say why I was afraid to acknowledge my motive?

"I understood that Miss Jethro might well be afraid of the consequences, if she risked any allusion to Mr. Brown's horrible death, and if it afterward chanced to reach his daughter's ears. But this state of feeling implied an extraordinary interest in the preservation of Emily's peace of mind. I asked Miss Jethro how that interest had been excited?"

"She answered, 'I can only satisfy you in one way. I must speak of her father now.'"

Emily looked up from the manuscript. She felt Cecilia's arm tenderly caressing her. She heard Cecilia say, "My poor dear, there is one last trial of your courage still to come. I am afraid of what you are going to read, when you turn to the next page. And yet--"

"And yet," Emily replied gently, "it must be done. I have learned my hard lesson of endurance, Cecilia, don't be afraid."

Emily turned to the next page.

4. _She Speaks of the Dead_.

"For the first time, Miss Jethro appeared to be at a loss how to proceed. I could see that she was suffering. She rose, and opening a drawer in her writing table, took a letter from it.

"She said, 'Will you read this? It was written by Miss Emily's father. Perhaps it may say more for me than I can say for myself?'"

"I copy the letter. It was thus expressed:

"You have declared that our farewell to-day is our farewell forever. For the second time, you have refused to be my wife; and you have done this, to use your own words, in mercy to Me.

"In mercy to Me, I implore you to reconsider your decision.

"If you condemn me to live without you--I feel it, I know it--you condemn me to despair which I have not fortitude enough to endure. Look at the passages which I have marked for you in the New Testament. Again and again, I say it; your true repentance has made you worthy of the pardon of God. Are you not worthy of the love, admiration, and respect of man? Think! oh, Sara, think of what our lives might be, and let them be united for time and for eternity.

"I can write no more. A deadly faintness oppresses me. My mind is in a state unknown to me in past years. I am in such confusion that I sometimes think I hate you. And then I recover from my delusion, and know that man never loved woman as I love you.

"You will have time to write to me by this evening's post. I shall stop at Zeeland to-morrow, on my way back, and ask for a letter at the post office. I forbid explanations and excuses. I forbid heartless allusions to your duty. Let me have an answer which does not keep me for a moment in suspense.

"For the last time, I ask you: Do you consent to be my wife? Say, Yes--or say, No.'

"I gave her back the letter--with the one comment on it, which the circumstances permitted me to make:

"You said No?"

"She bent her head in silence.

"I went on--not willingly, for I would have spared her if it had been possible. I said, 'He died, despairing, by his own hand--and you knew it?'"

"She looked up. 'No! To say that I knew it is too much. To say that I feared it is the truth.'

"Did you love him?"

"She eyed me in stern surprise. 'Have _I_ any right to love? Could I disgrace an honorable man by allowing him to marry me? You look as if you held me responsible for his death.'

"Innocently responsible,' I said.

"She still followed her own train of thought. 'Do you suppose I could for a moment anticipate that he would destroy himself, when I wrote my reply? He was a truly religious man. If he had been in his right mind, he would have shrunk from the idea of suicide as from the idea of a crime.'

"On reflection, I was inclined to agree with her. In his terrible position, it was at least possible that the sight of the razor (placed ready, with the other appliances of the toilet, for his fellow-traveler's use) might have fatally tempted a man whose last hope was crushed, whose mind was tortured by despair. I should have been merciless indeed, if I had held Miss Jethro accountable thus far. But I found it hard to sympathize with the course which she had pursued, in permitting Mr. Brown's death to be attributed to murder without a word of protest. 'Why were you silent?' I said.

"She smiled bitterly.

"A woman would have known why, without asking,' she replied. 'A woman would have understood that I shrank from a public confession of my shameful past life. A woman would have remembered what reasons I had for pitying the man who loved me, and for accepting any responsibility rather than associate his memory, before the world, with an unworthy passion for a degraded creature, ending in an act of suicide. Even if I had made that cruel sacrifice, would public opinion have believed such a person as I am--against the evidence of a medical man, and the verdict of a jury? No, Mr. Morris! I said nothing, and I was resolved to say nothing, so long as the choice of alternatives

was left to me. On the day when Mr. Mirabel implored me to save him, that choice was no longer mine--and you know what I did. And now again when suspicion (after all the long interval that had passed) has followed and found that innocent man, you know what I have done. What more do you ask of me?"

"Your pardon," I said, "for not having understood you--and a last favor. May I repeat what I have heard to the one person of all others who ought to know, and who must know, what you have told me?"

"It was needless to hint more plainly that I was speaking of Emily. Miss Jethro granted my request.

"It shall be as you please," she answered. "Say for me to _his_ daughter, that the grateful remembrance of her is my one refuge from the thoughts that tortured me, when we spoke together on her last night at school. She has made this dead heart of mine feel a reviving breath of life, when I think of her. Never, in our earthly pilgrimage, shall we meet again--I implore her to pity and forget me. Farewell, Mr. Morris; farewell forever."

"I confess that the tears came into my eyes. When I could see clearly again, I was alone in the room."