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Chapter 9 - Mrs. Rook And The Locket

As mistress of a prosperous school, bearing a widely-extended reputation, Miss Ladd prided herself on the liberality of her household arrangements. At breakfast and dinner, not only the solid comforts but the elegant luxuries of the table, were set before the young ladies "Other schools may, and no doubt do, offer to pupils the affectionate care to which they have been accustomed under the parents' roof," Miss Ladd used to say. "At my school, that care extends to their meals, and provides them with a _cuisine_ which, I flatter myself, equals the most successful efforts of the cooks at home." Fathers, mothers, and friends, when they paid visits to this excellent lady, brought away with them the most gratifying recollections of her hospitality. The men, in particular, seldom failed to recognize in their hostess the rarest virtue that a single lady can possess--the virtue of putting wine on the table which may be gratefully remembered by her guests the next morning.

An agreeable surprise awaited Mrs. Rook when she entered the house of bountiful Miss Ladd.

Luncheon was ready for Sir Jervis Redwood's confidential emissary in the waiting-room. Detained at the final rehearsals of music and recitation, Miss Ladd was worthily represented by cold chicken and ham, a fruit tart, and a pint decanter of generous sherry. "Your mistress is a perfect lady!" Mrs. Rook said to the servant, with a burst of enthusiasm. "I can carve for myself, thank you; and I don't care how long Miss Emily keeps me waiting."

As they ascended the steps leading into the house, Alban asked Emily if he might look again at her locket.

"Shall I open it for you?" she suggested.

No: I only want to look at the outside of it."

He examined the side on which the monogram appeared, inlaid with diamonds. An inscription was engraved beneath.

"May I read it?" he said.

"Certainly!"

The inscription ran thus: "In loving memory of my father. Died 30th September, 1877."

"Can you arrange the locket," Alban asked, "so that the side on which the diamonds appear hangs outward?"

She understood him. The diamonds might attract Mrs. Rook's notice; and in that case, she might ask to see the locket of her own accord. "You are beginning to be of use to me, already," Emily said, as they turned into the corridor which led to the waiting-room.

They found Sir Jervis's housekeeper luxuriously recumbent in the easiest chair in the room.

Of the eatable part of the lunch some relics were yet left. In the pint decanter of sherry, not a drop remained. The genial influence of the wine (hastened by the hot weather) was visible in Mrs. Rook's flushed face, and in a special development of her ugly smile. Her widening lips stretched to new lengths; and the white upper line of her eyeballs were more freely and horribly visible than ever.

"And this is the dear young lady?" she said, lifting her hands in over-acted admiration. At the first greetings, Alban perceived that the impression produced was, in Emily's case as in his case, instantly unfavorable.

The servant came in to clear the table. Emily stepped aside for a minute to give some directions about her luggage. In that interval Mrs. Rook's cunning little eyes turned on Alban with an expression of malicious scrutiny.

"You were walking the other way," she whispered, "when I met you." She stopped, and glanced over her shoulder at Emily. "I see what attraction has brought you back to the school. Steal your way into that poor little fool's heart; and then make her miserable for the rest of her life!--No need, miss, to hurry," she said, shifting the polite side of her toward Emily, who returned at the moment. "The visits of the trains to your station here are like the visits of the angels described by the poet, 'few and far between.' Please excuse the quotation. You wouldn't think it to look at me--I'm a great reader."

"Is it a long journey to Sir Jervis Redwood's house?" Emily asked, at a loss what else to say to a woman who was already becoming unendurable to her.

Mrs. Rook looked at the journey from an oppressively cheerful point of view.

"Oh, Miss Emily, you shan't feel the time hang heavy in my company. I can converse on a variety of topics, and if there is one thing more than another that I like, it's amusing a pretty young lady. You think me a strange creature, don't you? It's only my high spirits. Nothing strange about me--unless it's my queer Christian name. You look a little dull, my dear. Shall I begin amusing you before we are on the railway? Shall I tell you how I came by my queer name?"

Thus far, Alban had controlled himself. This last specimen of the housekeeper's audacious familiarity reached the limits of his endurance.

"We don't care to know how you came by your name," he said.

"Rude," Mrs. Rook remarked, composedly. "But nothing surprises me, coming from a man."

She turned to Emily. "My father and mother were a wicked married couple," she continued, "before I was born. They 'got religion,' as the saying is, at a Methodist meeting

in a field. When I came into the world--I don't know how you feel, miss; I protest against being brought into the world first--my mother was determined to dedicate me to piety, before I was out of my long clothes. What name do you suppose she had me christened by? She chose it, or made it, herself--the name of 'Righteous! Righteous Rook! Was there ever a poor baby degraded by such a ridiculous name before? It's needless to say, when I write letters, I sign R. Rook--and leave people to think it's Rosamond, or Rosabelle, or something sweetly pretty of that kind. You should have seen my husband's face when he first heard that his sweetheart's name was 'Righteous! He was on the point of kissing me, and he stopped. I daresay he felt sick. Perfectly natural under the circumstances."

Alban tried to stop her again. "What time does the train go?" he asked.

Emily entreated him to restrain himself, by a look. Mrs. Rook was still too inveterately amiable to take offense. She opened her traveling-bag briskly, and placed a railway guide in Alban's hands.

"I've heard that the women do the men's work in foreign parts," she said. "But this is England; and I am an Englishwoman. Find out when the train goes, my dear sir, for yourself."

Alban at once consulted the guide. If there proved to be no immediate need of starting for the station, he was determined that Emily should not be condemned to pass the interval in the housekeeper's company. In the meantime, Mrs. Rook was as eager as ever to show her dear young lady what an amusing companion she could be.

"Talking of husbands," she resumed, "don't make the mistake, my dear, that I committed. Beware of letting anybody persuade you to marry an old man. Mr. Rook is old enough to be my father. I bear with him. Of course, I bear with him. At the same time, I have not (as the poet says) 'passed through the ordeal unscathed.' My spirit--I have long since ceased to believe in anything of the sort: I only use the word for want of a better--my spirit, I say, has become embittered. I was once a pious young woman; I do assure you I was nearly as good as my name. Don't let me shock you; I have lost faith and hope; I have become--what's the last new name for a free-thinker? Oh, I keep up with the times, thanks to old Miss Redwood! She takes in the newspapers, and makes me read them to her. What _is_ the new name? Something ending in ic. Bombastic? No, Agnostic?--that's it! I have become an Agnostic. The inevitable result of marrying an old man; if there's any blame it rests on my husband."

"There's more than an hour yet before the train starts," Alban interposed. "I am sure, Miss Emily, you would find it pleasanter to wait in the garden."

"Not at all a bad notion," Mrs. Rook declared. "Here's a man who can make himself useful, for once. Let's go into the garden."

She rose, and led the way to the door. Alban seized the opportunity of whispering to Emily.

"Did you notice the empty decanter, when we first came in? That horrid woman is drunk."

Emily pointed significantly to the locket. "Don't let her go. The garden will distract her attention: keep her near me here."

Mrs. Rook gayly opened the door. "Take me to the flower-beds," she said. "I believe in nothing--but I adore flowers."

Mrs. Rook waited at the door, with her eye on Emily. "What do _you_ say, miss?"

"I think we shall be more comfortable if we stay where we are."

"Whatever pleases you, my dear, pleases me." With this reply, the compliant housekeeper--as amiable as ever on the surface--returned to her chair.

Would she notice the locket as she sat down? Emily turned toward the window, so as to let the light fall on the diamonds.

No: Mrs. Rook was absorbed, at the moment, in her own reflections. Miss Emily, having prevented her from seeing the garden, she was maliciously bent on disappointing Miss Emily in return. Sir Jervis's secretary (being young) took a hopeful view no doubt of her future prospects. Mrs. Rook decided on darkening that view in a mischievously-suggestive manner, peculiar to herself.

"You will naturally feel some curiosity about your new home," she began, "and I haven't said a word about it yet. How very thoughtless of me! Inside and out, dear Miss Emily, our house is just a little dull. I say _our_ house, and why not--when the management of it is all thrown on me. We are built of stone; and we are much too long, and are not half high enough. Our situation is on the coldest side of the county, away in the west. We are close to the Cheviot hills; and if you fancy there is anything to see when you look out of window, except sheep, you will find yourself woefully mistaken. As for walks, if you go out on one side of the house you may, or may not, be gored by cattle. On the other side, if the darkness overtakes you, you may, or may not, tumble down a deserted lead mine. But the company, inside the house, makes amends for it all," Mrs. Rook proceeded, enjoying the expression of dismay which was beginning to show itself on Emily's face. "Plenty of excitement for you, my dear, in our small family. Sir Jervis will introduce you to plaster casts of hideous Indian idols; he will keep you writing for him, without mercy, from morning to night; and when he does let you go, old Miss Redwood will find she can't sleep, and will send for the pretty young lady-secretary to read to her. My husband I am sure you will like. He is a respectable man, and bears the highest character. Next to the idols, he's the most hideous object in the house. If you are good enough to encourage him, I don't say that he won't amuse you; he will tell you, for instance, he never in his life hated any human being as he hates his wife. By the way, I must not forget--in the interests of truth, you know--to mention one drawback that does exist in our domestic circle. One of these days we shall have our brains blown out or our throats cut. Sir Jervis's mother left him ten thousand pounds' worth of precious stones all contained in a little cabinet with drawers. He won't let the banker take care of his jewels; he won't sell them; he won't even wear one of the rings on his finger, or one of the pins at his breast. He keeps his cabinet on his dressing-room table; and he says, 'I like to gloat over my jewels, every night, before I go to bed.' Ten thousand pounds' worth of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and what not--at the mercy of the first robber who happens to hear of them. Oh, my dear, he would have no choice, I do assure you, but to use his pistols. We shouldn't quietly submit to be robbed. Sir Jervis inherits the spirit of his ancestors. My husband has the temper of a game cock. I myself, in defense of the property of my employers, am capable of becoming a perfect fiend. And we none of us understand the use of firearms!"

While she was in full enjoyment of this last aggravation of the horrors of the prospect, Emily tried another change of position--and, this time, with success. Greedy admiration suddenly opened Mrs. Rook's little eyes to their utmost width. "My heart alive, miss, what do I see at your watch-chain? How they sparkle! Might I ask for a closer view?"

Emily's fingers trembled; but she succeeded in detaching the locket from the chain. Alban handed it to Mrs. Rook.

She began by admiring the diamonds--with a certain reserve. "Nothing like so large as Sir Jervis's diamonds; but choice specimens no doubt. Might I ask what the value--?"

She stopped. The inscription had attracted her notice: she began to read it aloud: "In loving memory of my father. Died--"

Her face instantly became rigid. The next words were suspended on her lips.

Alban seized the chance of making her betray herself--under pretense of helping her. "Perhaps you find the figures not easy to read," he said. "The date is 'thirtieth September, eighteen hundred and seventy-seven'--nearly four years since."

Not a word, not a movement, escaped Mrs. Rook. She held the locket before her as she had held it from the first. Alban looked at Emily. Her eyes were riveted on the housekeeper: she was barely capable of preserving the appearance of composure. Seeing the necessity of acting for her, he at once said the words which she was unable to say for herself.

"Perhaps, Mrs. Rook, you would like to look at the portrait?" he suggested. "Shall I open the locket for you?"

Without speaking, without looking up, she handed the locket to Alban.

He opened it, and offered it to her. She neither accepted nor refused it: her hands remained hanging over the arms of the chair. He put the locket on her lap.

The portrait produced no marked effect on Mrs. Rook. Had the date prepared her to see it? She sat looking at it--still without moving: still without saying a word. Alban had no mercy on her. "That is the portrait of Miss Emily's father," he said. "Does it represent the same Mr. Brown whom you had in your mind when you asked me if Miss Emily's father was still living?"

That question roused her. She looked up, on the instant; she answered loudly and insolently: "No!"

"And yet," Alban persisted, "you broke down in reading the inscription: and considering what talkative woman you are, the portrait has had a strange effect on you--to say the least of it."

She eyed him steadily while he was speaking--and turned to Emily when he had done. "You mentioned the heat just now, miss. The heat has overcome me; I shall soon get right again."

The insolent futility of that excuse irritated Emily into answering her. "You will get right again perhaps all the sooner," she said, "if we trouble you with no more questions, and leave you to recover by yourself."

The first change of expression which relaxed the iron tensity of the housekeeper's face showed itself when she heard that reply. At last there was a feeling in Mrs. Rook which openly declared itself--a feeling of impatience to see Alban and Emily leave the room.

They left her, without a word more.