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Chapter 26 - Mother Eve

The servant received Emily, on her return from the library, with a sly smile. "Here he is again, miss, waiting to see you."

She opened the parlor door, and revealed Alban Morris, as restless as ever, walking up and down the room.

"When I missed you at the Museum, I was afraid you might be ill," he said. "Ought I to have gone away, when my anxiety was relieved? Shall I go away now?"

"You must take a chair, Mr. Morris, and hear what I have to say for myself. When you left me after your last visit, I suppose I felt the force of example. At any rate I, like you, had my suspicions. I have been trying to confirm them--and I have failed."

He paused, with the chair in his hand. "Suspicions of Me?" he asked.

"Certainly! Can you guess how I have been employed for the last two days? No--not even your ingenuity can do that. I have been hard at work, in another reading-room, consulting the same back numbers of the same newspaper, which you have been examining at the British Museum. There is my confession--and now we will have some tea."

She moved to the fireplace, to ring the bell, and failed to see the effect produced on Alban by those lightly-uttered words. The common phrase is the only phrase that can describe it. He was thunderstruck.

"Yes," she resumed, "I have read the report of the inquest. If I know nothing else, I know that the murder at Zeeland can't be the discovery which you are bent on keeping from me. Don't be alarmed for the preservation of your secret! I am too much discouraged to try again."

The servant interrupted them by answering the bell; Alban once more escaped detection. Emily gave her orders with an approach to the old gayety of her school days. "Tea, as soon as possible--and let us have the new cake. Are you too much of a man, Mr. Morris, to like cake?"

In this state of agitation, he was unreasonably irritated by that playful question. "There is one thing I like better than cake," he said; "and that one thing is a plain explanation."

His tone puzzled her. "Have I said anything to offend you?" she asked. "Surely you can make allowance for a girl's curiosity? Oh, you shall have your explanation--and, what is more, you shall have it without reserve!"

She was as good as her word. What she had thought, and what she had planned, when he left her after his last visit, was frankly and fully told. "If you wonder how I discovered the library," she went on, "I must refer you to my aunt's lawyer. He lives in the City--and I wrote to him to help me. I don't consider that my time has been wasted. Mr. Morris, we owe an apology to Mrs. Rook."

Alban's astonishment, when he heard this, forced its way to expression in words. "What can you possibly mean?" he asked.

The tea was brought in before Emily could reply. She filled the cups, and sighed as she looked at the cake. "If Cecilia was here, how she would enjoy it!" With that complimentary tribute to her friend, she handed a slice to Alban. He never even noticed it.

"We have both of us behaved most unkindly to Mrs. Rook," she resumed. "I can excuse your not seeing it; for I should not have seen it either, but for the newspaper. While I was reading, I had an opportunity of thinking over what we said and did, when the poor woman's behavior so needlessly offended us. I was too excited to think, at the time--and, besides, I had been upset, only the night before, by what Miss Jethro said to me."

Alban started. "What has Miss Jethro to do with it?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," Emily answered. "She spoke to me of her own private affairs. A long story--and you wouldn't be interested in it. Let me finish what I had to say. Mrs. Rook was naturally reminded of the murder, when she heard that my name was Brown; and she must certainly have been struck--as I was--by the coincidence of my father's death taking place at the same time when his unfortunate namesake was killed. Doesn't this sufficiently account for her agitation when she looked at the locket? We first took her by surprise: and then we suspected her of Heaven knows what, because the poor creature didn't happen to have her wits about her, and to remember at the right moment what a very common name 'James Brown' is. Don't you see it as I do?"

"I see that you have arrived at a remarkable change of opinion, since we spoke of the subject in the garden at school."

"In my place, you would have changed your opinion too. I shall write to Mrs. Rook by tomorrow's post."

Alban heard her with dismay. "Pray be guided by my advice!" he said earnestly. "Pray don't write that letter!"

"Why not?"

It was too late to recall the words which he had rashly allowed to escape him. How could he reply?

To own that he had not only read what Emily had read, but had carefully copied the whole narrative and considered it at his leisure, appeared to be simply impossible after what he had now heard. Her peace of mind depended absolutely on his discretion. In this serious emergency, silence was a mercy, and silence was a lie. If he remained silent, might the mercy be trusted to atone for the lie? He was too fond of Emily to decide that question fairly, on its own merits. In other words, he shrank from the terrible responsibility of telling her the truth.

"Isn't the imprudence of writing to such a person as Mrs. Rook plain enough to speak for itself?" he suggested cautiously.

"Not to me."

She made that reply rather obstinately. Alban seemed (in her view) to be trying to prevent her from atoning for an act of injustice. Besides, he despised her cake. "I want to know why you object," she said; taking back the neglected slice, and eating it herself.

"I object," Alban answered, "because Mrs. Rook is a coarse presuming woman. She may pervert your letter to some use of her own, which you may have reason to regret."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"It may be enough for you. When I have done a person an injury, and wish to make an apology, I don't think it necessary to inquire whether the person's manners happened to be vulgar or not."

Alban's patience was still equal to any demands that she could make on it. "I can only offer you advice which is honestly intended for your own good," he gently replied.

"You would have more influence over me, Mr. Morris, if you were a little readier to take me into your confidence. I daresay I am wrong--but I don't like following advice which is given to me in the dark."

It was impossible to offend him. "Very naturally," he said; "I don't blame you."

Her color deepened, and her voice rose. Alban's patient adherence to his own view--so courteously and considerately urged--was beginning to try her temper. "In plain words," she rejoined, "I am to believe that you can't be mistaken in your judgment of another person."

There was a ring at the door of the cottage while she was speaking. But she was too warmly interested in confuting Alban to notice it.

He was quite willing to be confuted. Even when she lost her temper, she was still interesting to him. "I don't expect you to think me infallible," he said. "Perhaps you will remember that I have had some experience. I am unfortunately older than you are."

"Oh if wisdom comes with age," she smartly reminded him, "your friend Miss Redwood is old enough to be your mother--and she suspected Mrs. Rook of murder, because the poor woman looked at a door, and disliked being in the next room to a fidgety old maid."

Alban's manner changed: he shrank from that chance allusion to doubts and fears which he dare not acknowledge. "Let us talk of something else," he said.

She looked at him with a saucy smile. "Have I driven you into a corner at last? And is that your way of getting out of it?"

Even his endurance failed. "Are you trying to provoke me?" he asked. "Are you no better than other women? I wouldn't have believed it of you, Emily."

"Emily?" She repeated the name in a tone of surprise, which reminded him that he had addressed her with familiarity at a most inappropriate time--the time when they were on the point of a quarrel. He felt the implied reproach too keenly to be able to answer her with composure.

"I think of Emily--I love Emily--my one hope is that Emily may love me. Oh, my dear, is there no excuse if I forget to call you 'Miss' when you distress me?"

All that was tender and true in her nature secretly took his part. She would have followed that better impulse, if he had only been calm enough to understand her momentary silence, and to give her time. But the temper of a gentle and generous man, once roused, is slow to subside. Alban abruptly left his chair. "I had better go!" he said.

"As you please," she answered. "Whether you go, Mr. Morris, or whether you stay, I shall write to Mrs. Rook."

The ring at the bell was followed by the appearance of a visitor. Doctor Allday opened the door, just in time to hear Emily's last words. Her vehemence seemed to amuse him.

"Who is Mrs. Rook?" he asked.

"A most respectable person," Emily answered indignantly; "housekeeper to Sir Jervis Redwood. You needn't sneer at her, Doctor Allday! She has not always been in service--she was landlady of the inn at Zeeland."

The doctor, about to put his hat on a chair, paused. The inn at Zeeland reminded him of the Handbill, and of the visit of Miss Jethro.

"Why are you so hot over it?" he inquired

"Because I detest prejudice!" With this assertion of liberal feeling she pointed to Alban, standing quietly apart at the further end of the room. "There is the most prejudiced man living--he hates Mrs. Rook. Would you like to be introduced to him? You're a philosopher; you may do him some good. Doctor Allday--Mr. Alban Morris."

The doctor recognized the man, with the felt hat and the objectionable beard, whose personal appearance had not impressed him favorably.

Although they may hesitate to acknowledge it, there are respectable Englishmen still left, who regard a felt hat and a beard as symbols of republican disaffection to the altar and the throne. Doctor Allday's manner might have expressed this curious form of patriotic feeling, but for the associations which Emily had revived. In his present frame of mind, he was outwardly courteous, because he was inwardly suspicious. Mrs. Rook had been described to him as formerly landlady of the inn at Zeeland. Were there reasons for Mr. Morris's hostile feeling toward this woman which might be referable to the crime committed in her house that might threaten Emily's tranquillity if they were made known? It would not be amiss to see a little more of Mr. Morris, on the first convenient occasion.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir."

"You are very kind, Doctor Allday."

The exchange of polite conventionalities having been accomplished, Alban approached Emily to take his leave, with mingled feelings of regret and anxiety--regret for having allowed himself to speak harshly; anxiety to part with her in kindness.

"Will you forgive me for differing from you?" It was all he could venture to say, in the presence of a stranger.

"Oh, yes!" she said quietly.

"Will you think again, before you decide?"

"Certainly, Mr. Morris. But it won't alter my opinion, if I do."

The doctor, hearing what passed between them, frowned. On what subject had they been differing? And what opinion did Emily decline to alter?

Alban gave it up. He took her hand gently. "Shall I see you at the Museum, to-morrow?" he asked.

She was politely indifferent to the last. "Yes--unless something happens to keep me at home."

The doctor's eyebrows still expressed disapproval. For what object was the meeting proposed? And why at a museum?

"Good-afternoon, Doctor Allday."

"Good-afternoon, sir."

For a moment after Alban's departure, the doctor stood irresolute. Arriving suddenly at a decision, he snatched up his hat, and turned to Emily in a hurry.

"I bring you news, my dear, which will surprise you. Who do you think has just left my house? Mrs. Ellmother! Don't interrupt me. She has made up her mind to go out to service again. Tired of leading an idle life--that's her own account of it--and asks me to act as her reference."

"Did you consent?"

"Consent! If I act as her reference, I shall be asked how she came to leave her last place. A nice dilemma! Either I must own that she deserted her mistress on her deathbed--or tell a lie. When I put it to her in that way, she walked out of the house in dead silence. If she applies to you next, receive her as I did--or decline to see her, which would be better still."

"Why am I to decline to see her?"

"In consequence of her behavior to your aunt, to be sure! No: I have said all I wanted to say--and I have no time to spare for answering idle questions. Good-by."

Socially-speaking, doctors try the patience of their nearest and dearest friends, in this respect--they are almost always in a hurry. Doctor Allday's precipitate departure did not tend to soothe Emily's irritated nerves. She began to find excuses for Mrs. Ellmother in a spirit of pure contradiction. The old servant's behavior might admit of justification: a friendly welcome might persuade her to explain herself. "If she applies to me," Emily determined, "I shall certainly receive her."

Having arrived at this resolution, her mind reverted to Alban.

Some of the sharp things she had said to him, subjected to after-reflection in solitude, failed to justify themselves. Her better sense began to reproach her. She tried to silence that unwelcome monitor by laying the blame on Alban. Why had he been so patient and so good? What harm was there in his calling her "Emily"? If he had told her to call him by his Christian name, she might have done it. How noble he looked, when he got up to go away; he was actually handsome! Women may say what they please and write what they please: their natural instinct is to find their master in a man--especially when they like him. Sinking lower and lower in her own estimation, Emily tried to turn the current of her thoughts in another direction. She took up a book--opened it, looked into it, threw it across the room.

If Alban had returned at that moment, resolved on a reconciliation--if he had said, "My dear, I want to see you like yourself again; will you give me a kiss, and make it up"--would he have left her crying, when he went away? She was crying now.