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Chapter 28 - Francine

"You're surprised to see me, of course?" Saluting Emily in those terms, Francine looked round the parlor with an air of satirical curiosity. "Dear me, what a little place to live in!"

"What brings you to London?" Emily inquired.

"You ought to know, my dear, without asking. Why did I try to make friends with you at school? And why have I been trying ever since? Because I hate you--I mean because I can't resist you--no! I mean because I hate myself for liking you. Oh, never mind my reasons. I insisted on going to London with Miss Ladd--when that horrid woman announced that she had an appointment with her lawyer. I said, 'I want to see Emily.' 'Emily doesn't like you.' 'I don't care whether she likes me or not; I want to see her. That's the way we snap at each other, and that's how I always carry my point. Here I am, till my duenna finishes her business and fetches me. What a prospect for You! Have you got any cold meat in the house? I'm not a glutton, like Cecilia--but I'm afraid I shall want some lunch."

"Don't talk in that way, Francine!"

"Do you mean to say you're glad to see me?"

"If you were only a little less hard and bitter, I should always be glad to see you."

"You darling! (excuse my impetuosity). What are you looking at? My new dress? Do you envy me?"

"No; I admire the color--that's all."

Francine rose, and shook out her dress, and showed it from every point of view. "See how it's made: Paris, of course! Money, my dear; money will do anything--except making one learn one's lessons."

"Are you not getting on any better, Francine?"

"Worse, my sweet friend--worse. One of the masters, I am happy to say, has flatly refused to teach me any longer. 'Pupils without brains I am accustomed to,' he said in his broken English; 'but a pupil with no heart is beyond my endurance.' Ha! ha! the mouldy old refugee has an eye for character, though. No heart--there I am, described in two words."

"And proud of it," Emily remarked.

"Yes--proud of it. Stop! let me do myself justice. You consider tears a sign that one has some heart, don't you? I was very near crying last Sunday. A popular preacher did it; no less a person than Mr. Mirabel--you look as if you had heard of him."

"I have heard of him from Cecilia."

"Is she at Brighton? Then there's one fool more in a fashionable watering place. Oh, she's in Switzerland, is she? I don't care where she is; I only care about Mr. Mirabel. We all heard he was at Brighton for his health, and was going to preach. Didn't we cram the church! As to describing him, I give it up. He is the only little man I ever admired--hair as long as mine, and the sort of beard you see in pictures. I wish I had his fair complexion and his white hands. We were all in love with him--or with his voice, which was it?--when he began to read the commandments. I wish I could imitate him when he came to the fifth commandment. He began in his deepest bass voice: 'Honor thy father--' He stopped and looked up to heaven as if he saw the rest of it there. He went on with a tremendous emphasis on the next word. '_And_ thy mother,' he said (as if that was quite a different thing) in a tearful, fluty, quivering voice which was a compliment to mothers in itself. We all felt it, mothers or not. But the great sensation was when he got into the pulpit. The manner in which he dropped on his knees, and hid his face in his hands, and showed his beautiful rings was, as a young lady said behind me, simply seraphic. We understood his celebrity, from that moment--I wonder whether I can remember the sermon."

"You needn't attempt it on my account," Emily said.

"My dear, don't be obstinate. Wait till you hear him."

"I am quite content to wait."

"Ah, you're just in the right state of mind to be converted; you're in a fair way to become one of his greatest admirers. They say he is so agreeable in private life; I am dying to know him.--Do I hear a ring at the bell? Is somebody else coming to see you?"

The servant brought in a card and a message.

"The person will call again, miss."

Emily looked at the name written on the card.

"Mrs. Ellmother!" she exclaimed.

"What an extraordinary name!" cried Francine. "Who is she?"

"My aunt's old servant."

"Does she want a situation?"

Emily looked at some lines of writing at the back of the card. Doctor Allday had rightly foreseen events. Rejected by the doctor, Mrs. Ellmother had no alternative but to ask Emily to help her.

"If she is out of place," Francine went on, "she may be just the sort of person I am looking for."

"You?" Emily asked, in astonishment.

Francine refused to explain until she got an answer to her question. "Tell me first," she said, "is Mrs. Ellmother engaged?"

"No; she wants an engagement, and she asks me to be her reference."

"Is she sober, honest, middle-aged, clean, steady, good-tempered, industrious?" Francine rattled on. "Has she all the virtues, and none of the vices? Is she not too good-looking, and has she no male followers? In one terrible word--will she satisfy Miss Ladd?"

"What has Miss Ladd to do with it?"

"How stupid you are, Emily! Do put the woman's card down on the table, and listen to me. Haven't I told you that one of my masters has declined to have anything more to do with me? Doesn't that help you to understand how I get on with the rest of them? I am no longer Miss Ladd's pupil, my dear. Thanks to my laziness and my temper, I am to be raised to the dignity of 'a parlor boarder.' In other words, I am to be a young lady who patronizes the school; with a room of my own, and a servant of my own. All provided for by a private arrangement between my father and Miss Ladd, before I left the West Indies. My mother was at the bottom of it, I have not the least doubt. You don't appear to understand me."

"I don't, indeed!"

Francine considered a little. "Perhaps they were fond of you at home," she suggested.

"Say they loved me, Francine--and I loved them."

"Ah, my position is just the reverse of yours. Now they have got rid of me, they don't want me back again at home. I know as well what my mother said to my father, as if I had heard her. 'Francine will never get on at school, at her age. Try her, by all means; but make some other arrangement with Miss Ladd in case of a failure--or she will be returned on our hands like a bad shilling.' There is my mother, my anxious, affectionate mother, hit off to a T."

"She is your mother, Francine; don't forget that."

"Oh, no; I won't forget it. My cat is my kitten's mother--there! there! I won't shock your sensibilities. Let us get back to matter of fact. When I begin my new life, Miss Ladd makes one condition. My maid is to be a model of discretion--an elderly woman, not a skittish young person who will only encourage me. I must submit to the elderly woman, or I shall be sent back to the West Indies after all. How long did Mrs. Ellmother live with your aunt?"

"Twenty-five years, and more."

"Good heavens, it's a lifetime! Why isn't this amazing creature living with you, now your aunt is dead? Did you send her away?"

"Certainly not."

"Then why did she go?"

"I don't know."

"Do you mean that she went away without a word of explanation?"

"Yes; that is exactly what I mean."

"When did she go? As soon as your aunt was dead?"

"That doesn't matter, Francine."

"In plain English, you won't tell me? I am all on fire with curiosity--and that's how you put me out! My dear, if you have the slightest regard for me, let us have the woman in here when she comes back for her answer. Somebody must satisfy me. I mean to make Mrs. Ellmother explain herself."

"I don't think you will succeed, Francine."

"Wait a little, and you will see. By-the-by, it is understood that my new position at the school gives me the privilege of accepting invitations. Do you know any nice people to whom you can introduce me?"

"I am the last person in the world who has a chance of helping you," Emily answered. "Excepting good Doctor Allday--" On the point of adding the name of Alban Morris, she checked herself without knowing why, and substituted the name of her school-friend. "And not forgetting Cecilia," she resumed, "I know nobody."

"Cecilia's a fool," Francine remarked gravely; "but now I think of it, she may be worth cultivating. Her father is a member of Parliament--and didn't I hear that he has a fine place in the country? You see, Emily, I may expect to be married (with my money), if I can only get into good society. (Don't suppose I am dependent on my father; my marriage portion is provided for in my uncle's will. Cecilia may really be of some use to me. Why shouldn't I make a friend of her, and get introduced to her father--in the autumn, you know, when the house is full of company? Have you any idea when she is coming back?"

"No."

"Do you think of writing to her?"

"Of course!"

"Give her my kind love; and say I hope she enjoys Switzerland."

"Francine, you are positively shameless! After calling my dearest friend a fool and a glutton, you send her your love for your own selfish ends; and you expect me to help you in deceiving her! I won't do it."

"Keep your temper, my child. We are all selfish, you little goose. The only difference is--some of us own it, and some of us don't. I shall find my own way to Cecilia's good graces quite easily: the way is through her mouth. You mentioned a certain Doctor Allday. Does he give parties? And do the right sort of men go to them? Hush! I think I hear the bell again. Go to the door, and see who it is."

Emily waited, without taking any notice of this suggestion. The servant announced that "the person had called again, to know if there was any answer."

"Show her in here," Emily said.

The servant withdrew, and came back again.

"The person doesn't wish to intrude, miss; it will be quite sufficient if you will send a message by me."

Emily crossed the room to the door.

"Come in, Mrs. Ellmother," she said. "You have been too long away already. Pray come in."