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Chapter 29 - Chapter Xxix "Bony."

Mrs. Ellmother reluctantly entered the room.

Since Emily had seen her last, her personal appearance doubly justified the nickname by which her late mistress had distinguished her. The old servant was worn and wasted; her gown hung loose on her angular body; the big bones of her face stood out, more prominently than ever. She took Emily's offered hand doubtfully. "I hope I see you well, miss," she said--with hardly a vestige left of her former firmness of voice and manner.

"I am afraid you have been suffering from illness," Emily answered gently.

"It's the life I'm leading that wears me down; I want work and change."

Making that reply, she looked round, and discovered Francine observing her with undisguised curiosity. "You have got company with you," she said to Emily. "I had better go away, and come back another time."

Francine stopped her before she could open the door. "You mustn't go away; I wish to speak to you."

"About what, miss?"

The eyes of the two women met--one, near the end of her life, concealing under a rugged surface a nature sensitively affectionate and incorruptibly true; the other, young in years, with out the virtues of youth, hard in manner and hard at heart. In silence on either side, they stood face to face; strangers brought together by the force of circumstances, working inexorably toward their hidden end.

Emily introduced Mrs. Ellmother to Francine. "It may be worth your while," she hinted, "to hear what this young lady has to say."

Mrs. Ellmother listened, with little appearance of interest in anything that a stranger might have to say: her eyes rested on the card which contained her written request to Emily. Francine, watching her closely, understood what was passing in her mind. It might be worth while to conciliate the old woman by a little act of attention. Turning to Emily, Francine pointed to the card lying on the table. "You have not attended yet to Mr. Ellmother's request," she said.

Emily at once assured Mrs. Ellmother that the request was granted. "But is it wise," she asked, "to go out to service again, at your age?"

"I have been used to service all my life, Miss Emily--that's one reason. And service may help me to get rid of my own thoughts--that's another. If you can find me a situation somewhere, you will be doing me a good turn."

"Is it useless to suggest that you might come back, and live with me?" Emily ventured to say.

Mrs. Ellmother's head sank on her breast. "Thank you kindly, miss; it is useless."

"Why is it useless?" Francine asked.

Mrs. Ellmother was silent.

"Miss de Sor is speaking to you," Emily reminded her.

"Am I to answer Miss de Sor?"

Attentively observing what passed, and placing her own construction on looks and tones, it suddenly struck Francine that Emily herself might be in Mrs. Ellmother's confidence, and that she might have reasons of her own for assuming ignorance when awkward questions were asked. For the moment at least, Francine decided on keeping her suspicions to herself.

"I may perhaps offer you the employment you want," she said to Mrs. Ellmother. "I am staying at Brighton, for the present, with the lady who was Miss Emily's schoolmistress, and I am in need of a maid. Would you be willing to consider it, if I proposed to engage you?"

"Yes, miss."

"In that case, you can hardly object to the customary inquiry. Why did you leave your last place?"

Mrs. Ellmother appealed to Emily. "Did you tell this young lady how long I remained in my last place?"

Melancholy remembrances had been revived in Emily by the turn which the talk had now taken. Francine's cat-like patience, stealthily feeling its way to its end, jarred on her nerves. "Yes," she said; "in justice to you, I have mentioned your long term of service."

Mrs. Ellmother addressed Francine. "You know, miss, that I served my late mistress for over twenty-five years. Will you please remember that--and let it be a reason for not asking me why I left my place."

Francine smiled compassionately. "My good creature, you have mentioned the very reason why I should ask. You live five-and-twenty years with your mistress--and then

suddenly leave her--and you expect me to pass over this extraordinary proceeding without inquiry. Take a little time to think."

"I want no time to think. What I had in my mind, when I left Miss Letitia, is something which I refuse to explain, miss, to you, or to anybody."

She recovered some of her old firmness, when she made that reply. Francine saw the necessity of yielding--for the time at least, Emily remained silent, oppressed by remembrance of the doubts and fears which had darkened the last miserable days of her aunt's illness. She began already to regret having made Francine and Mrs. Ellmother known to each other.

"I won't dwell on what appears to be a painful subject," Francine graciously resumed. "I meant no offense. You are not angry, I hope?"

"Sorry, miss. I might have been angry, at one time. That time is over."

It was said sadly and resignedly: Emily heard the answer. Her heart ached as she looked at the old servant, and thought of the contrast between past and present. With what a hearty welcome this broken woman had been used to receive her in the bygone holiday-time! Her eyes moistened. She felt the merciless persistency of Francine, as if it had been an insult offered to herself. "Give it up!" she said sharply.

"Leave me, my dear, to manage my own business," Francine replied. "About your qualifications?" she continued, turning coolly to Mrs. Ellmother. "Can you dress hair?"

"Yes."

"I ought to tell you," Francine insisted, "that I am very particular about my hair."

"My mistress was very particular about her hair," Mrs. Ellmother answered.

"Are you a good needlewoman?"

"As good as ever I was--with the help of my spectacles."

Francine turned to Emily. "See how well we get on together. We are beginning to understand each other already. I am an odd creature, Mrs. Ellmother. Sometimes, I take sudden likings to persons--I have taken a liking to you. Do you begin to think a little better of me than you did? I hope you will produce the right impression on Miss Ladd; you shall have every assistance that I can give. I will beg Miss Ladd, as a favor to me, not to ask you that one forbidden question."

Poor Mrs. Ellmother, puzzled by the sudden appearance of Francine in the character of an eccentric young lady, the creature of genial impulse, thought it right to express her gratitude for the promised interference in her favor. "That's kind of you, miss," she said.

"No, no, only just. I ought to tell you there's one thing Miss Ladd is strict about--sweethearts. Are you quite sure," Francine inquired jocosely, "that you can answer for yourself, in that particular?"

This effort of humor produced its intended effect. Mrs. Ellmother, thrown off her guard, actually smiled. "Lord, miss, what will you say next!"

"My good soul, I will say something next that is more to the purpose. If Miss Ladd asks me why you have so unaccountably refused to be a servant again in this house, I shall take care to say that it is certainly not out of dislike to Miss Emily."

"You need say nothing of the sort," Emily quietly remarked.

"And still less," Francine proceeded, without noticing the interruption--"still less through any disagreeable remembrances of Miss Emily's aunt."

Mrs. Ellmother saw the trap that had been set for her. "It won't do, miss," she said.

"What won't do?"

"Trying to pump me."

Francine burst out laughing. Emily noticed an artificial ring in her gayety which suggested that she was exasperated, rather than amused, by the repulse which had baffled her curiosity once more.

Mrs. Ellmother reminded the merry young lady that the proposed arrangement between them had not been concluded yet. "Am I to understand, miss, that you will keep a place open for me in your service?"

"You are to understand," Francine replied sharply, "that I must have Miss Ladd's approval before I can engage you. Suppose you come to Brighton? I will pay your fare, of course."

"Never mind my fare, miss. Will you give up pumping?"

"Make your mind easy. It's quite useless to attempt pumping _you_. When will you come?"

Mrs. Ellmother pleaded for a little delay. "I'm altering my gowns," she said. "I get thinner and thinner--don't I, Miss Emily? My work won't be done before Thursday."

"Let us say Friday, then," Francine proposed.

"Friday!" Mrs. Ellmother exclaimed. "You forget that Friday is an unlucky day."

"I forgot that, certainly! How can you be so absurdly superstitious."

"You may call it what you like, miss. I have good reason to think as I do. I was married on a Friday--and a bitter bad marriage it turned out to be. Superstitious, indeed! You don't know what my experience has been. My only sister was one of a party of thirteen at dinner; and she died within the year. If we are to get on together nicely, I'll take that journey on Saturday, if you please."

"Anything to satisfy you," Francine agreed; "there is the address. Come in the middle of the day, and we will give you your dinner. No fear of our being thirteen in number. What will you do, if you have the misfortune to spill the salt?"

"Take a pinch between my finger and thumb, and throw it over my left shoulder," Mrs. Ellmother answered gravely. "Good-day, miss."

"Good-day."

Emily followed the departing visitor out to the hall. She had seen and heard enough to decide her on trying to break off the proposed negotiation--with the one kind purpose of protecting Mrs. Ellmother against the pitiless curiosity of Francine.

"Do you think you and that young lady are likely to get on well together?" she asked.

"I have told you already, Miss Emily, I want to get away from my own home and my own thoughts; I don't care where I go, so long as I do that." Having answered in those words, Mrs. Ellmother opened the door, and waited a while, thinking. "I wonder whether the dead know what is going on in the world they have left?" she said, looking at Emily. "If they do, there's one among them knows my thoughts, and feels for me. Good-by, miss--and don't think worse of me than I deserve."

Emily went back to the parlor. The only resource left was to plead with Francine for mercy to Mrs. Ellmother.

"Do you really mean to give it up?" she asked.

"To give up--what? 'Pumping,' as that obstinate old creature calls it?"

Emily persisted. "Don't worry the poor old soul! However strangely she may have left my aunt and me her motives are kind and good--I am sure of that. Will you let her keep her harmless little secret?"

"Oh, of course!"

"I don't believe you, Francine!"

"Don't you? I am like Cecilia--I am getting hungry. Shall we have some lunch?"

"You hard-hearted creature!"

"Does that mean--no luncheon until I have owned the truth? Suppose you own the truth? I won't tell Mrs. Ellmother that you have betrayed her."

"For the last time, Francine--I know no more of it than you do. If you persist in taking your own view, you as good as tell me I lie; and you will oblige me to leave the room."

Even Francine's obstinacy was compelled to give way, so far as appearances went. Still possessed by the delusion that Emily was deceiving her, she was now animated by a stronger motive than mere curiosity. Her sense of her own importance imperatively urged her to prove that she was not a person who could be deceived with impunity.

"I beg your pardon," she said with humility. "But I must positively have it out with Mrs. Ellmother. She has been more than a match for me--my turn next. I mean to get the better of her; and I shall succeed."

"I have already told you, Francine--you will fail."

"My dear, I am a dunce, and I don't deny it. But let me tell you one thing. I haven't lived all my life in the West Indies, among black servants, without learning something."

"What do you mean?"

"More, my clever friend, than you are likely to guess. In the meantime, don't forget the duties of hospitality. Ring the bell for luncheon."