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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[I Say No](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 30 - Lady Doris

The arrival of Miss Ladd, some time before she had been expected, interrupted the two girls at a critical moment. She had hurried over her business in London, eager to pass the rest of the day with her favorite pupil. Emily's affectionate welcome was, in some degree at least, inspired by a sensation of relief. To feel herself in the embrace of the warm-hearted schoolmistress was like finding a refuge from Francine.

When the hour of departure arrived, Miss Ladd invited Emily to Brighton for the second time. "On the last occasion, my dear, you wrote me an excuse; I won't be treated in that way again. If you can't return with us now, come to-morrow." She added in a whisper, "Otherwise, I shall think you include _me_ in your dislike of Francine."

There was no resisting this. It was arranged that Emily should go to Brighton on the next day.

Left by herself, her thoughts might have reverted to Mrs. Ellmother's doubtful prospects, and to Francine's strange allusion to her life in the West Indies, but for the arrival of two letters by the afternoon post. The handwriting on one of them was unknown to her. She opened that one first. It was an answer to the letter of apology which she had persisted in writing to Mrs. Rook. Happily for herself, Alban's influence had not been without its effect, after his departure. She had written kindly--but she had written briefly at the same time.

Mrs. Rook's reply presented a nicely compounded mixture of gratitude and grief. The gratitude was addressed to Emily as a matter of course. The grief related to her "excellent master." Sir Jervis's strength had suddenly failed. His medical attendant, being summoned, had expressed no surprise. "My patient is over seventy years of age," the doctor remarked. "He will sit up late at night, writing his book; and he refuses to take exercise, till headache and giddiness force him to try the fresh air. As the necessary result, he has broken down at last. It may end in paralysis, or it may end in death." Reporting this expression of medical opinion, Mrs. Rook's letter glided imperceptibly from respectful sympathy to modest regard for her own interests in the future. It might be the sad fate of her husband and herself to be thrown on the world again. If necessity brought them to London, would "kind Miss Emily grant her the honor of an interview, and favor a poor unlucky woman with a word of advice?"

"She may pervert your letter to some use of her own, which you may have reason to regret." Did Emily remember Alban's warning words? No: she accepted Mrs. Rook's reply as a gratifying tribute to the justice of her own opinions.

Having proposed to write to Alban, feeling penitently that she had been in the wrong, she was now readier than ever to send him a letter, feeling compassionately that she had been in the right. Besides, it was due to the faithful friend, who was still working for her in the reading room, that he should be informed of Sir Jervis's illness. Whether the old man lived or whether he died, his literary labors were fatally interrupted in either case; and one of the consequences would be the termination of her employment at the Museum. Although the second of the two letters which she had received was addressed to her in Cecilia's handwriting, Emily waited to read it until she had first written to Alban. "He will come to-morrow," she thought; "and we shall both make apologies. I shall regret that I was angry with him and he will regret that he was mistaken in his judgment of Mrs. Rook. We shall be as good friends again as ever."

In this happy frame of mind she opened Cecilia's letter. It was full of good news from first to last.

The invalid sister had made such rapid progress toward recovery that the travelers had arranged to set forth on their journey back to England in a fortnight. "My one regret," Cecilia added, "is the parting with Lady Doris. She and her husband are going to Genoa, where they will embark in Lord Janeaway's yacht for a cruise in the Mediterranean. When we have said that miserable word good-by--oh, Emily, what a hurry I shall be in to get back to you! Those allusions to your lonely life are so dreadful, my dear, that I have destroyed your letter; it is enough to break one's heart only to look at it. When once I get to London, there shall be no more solitude for my poor afflicted friend. Papa will be free from his parliamentary duties in August--and he has promised to have the house full of delightful people to meet you. Who do you think will be one of our guests? He is illustrious; he is fascinating; he deserves a line all to himself, thus:

"The Reverend Miles Mirabell!

"Lady Doris has discovered that the country parsonage, in which this brilliant clergyman submits to exile, is only twelve miles away from our house. She has written to Mr. Mirabell to introduce me, and to mention the date of my return. We will have some fun with the popular preacher--we will both fall in love with him together.

"Is there anybody to whom you would like me to send an invitation? Shall we have Mr. Alban Morris? Now I know how kindly he took care of you at the railway station, your good opinion of him is my opinion. Your letter also mentions a doctor. Is he nice? and do you think he will let me eat pastry, if we have him too? I am so overflowing with hospitality (all for your sake) that I am ready to invite anybody, and everybody, to cheer you and make you happy. Would you like to meet Miss Ladd and the whole school?"

"As to our amusements, make your mind easy.

"I have come to a distinct understanding with Papa that we are to have dances every evening--except when we try a little concert as a change. Private theatricals are to follow, when we want another change after the dancing and the music. No early rising; no fixed hour for breakfast; everything that is most exquisitely delicious at dinner--and, to crown all, your room next to mine, for delightful midnight gossipings, when we ought to be in bed. What do you say, darling, to the programme?"

"A last piece of news--and I have done.

"I have actually had a proposal of marriage, from a young gentleman who sits opposite me at the table d'hotel! When I tell you that he has white eyelashes, and red hands, and such enormous front teeth that he can't shut his mouth, you will not need to be told that I refused him. This vindictive person has abused me ever since, in the most shameful manner. I heard him last night, under my window, trying to set one of his friends against me. 'Keep clear of her, my dear fellow; she's the most heartless creature living.' The friend took my part; he said, 'I don't agree with you; the young lady is a person of great sensibility.' 'Nonsense!' says my amiable lover; 'she eats too much--her sensibility is all stomach.' There's a wretch for you. What a shameful advantage to take of sitting opposite to me at dinner! Good-by, my love, till we meet soon, and are as happy together as the day is long."

Emily kissed the signature. At that moment of all others, Cecilia was such a refreshing contrast to Francine!

Before putting the letter away, she looked again at that part of it which mentioned Lady Doris's introduction of Cecilia to Mr. Mirabel. "I don't feel the slightest interest in Mr. Mirabel," she thought, smiling as the idea occurred to her; "and I need never have known him, but for Lady Doris--who is a perfect stranger to me."

She had just placed the letter in her desk, when a visitor was announced. Doctor Allday presented himself (in a hurry as usual).

"Another patient waiting?" Emily asked mischievously. "No time to spare, again?"

"Not a moment," the old gentleman answered. "Have you heard from Mrs. Ellmother?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean to say you have answered her?"

"I have done better than that, doctor--I have seen her this morning."

"And consented to be her reference, of course?"

"How well you know me!"

Doctor Allday was a philosopher: he kept his temper. "Just what I might have expected," he said. "Eve and the apple! Only forbid a woman to do anything, and she does it directly--because you have forbidden her. I'll try the other way with you now, Miss Emily. There was something else that I meant to have forbidden."

"What was it?"

"May I make a special request?"

"Certainly."

"Oh, my dear, write to Mrs. Rook! I beg and entreat of you, write to Mrs. Rook!"

Emily's playful manner suddenly disappeared.

Ignoring the doctor's little outbreak of humor, she waited in grave surprise, until it was his pleasure to explain himself.

Doctor Allday, on his side, ignored the ominous change in Emily; he went on as pleasantly as ever. "Mr. Morris and I have had a long talk about you, my dear. Mr. Morris is a capital fellow; I recommend him as a sweetheart. I also back him in the matter of Mrs. Rook.--What's the matter now? You're as red as a rose. Temper again, eh?"

"Hatred of meanness!" Emily answered indignantly. "I despise a man who plots, behind my back, to get another man to help him. Oh, how I have been mistaken in Alban Morris!"

"Oh, how little you know of the best friend you have!" cried the doctor, imitating her. "Girls are all alike; the only man they can understand, is the man who flatters them. _Will_ you oblige me by writing to Mrs. Rook?"

Emily made an attempt to match the doctor, with his own weapons. "Your little joke comes too late," she said satirically. "There is Mrs. Rook's answer. Read it, and--" she checked herself, even in her anger she was incapable of speaking ungenerously to the old man who had so warmly befriended her. "I won't say to _you_, " she resumed, "what I might have said to another person."

"Shall I say it for you?" asked the incorrigible doctor. "Read it, and be ashamed of yourself!--That was what you had in your mind, isn't it? Anything to please you, my dear." He put on his spectacles, read the letter, and handed it back to Emily with an impenetrable countenance. "What do you think of my new spectacles?" he asked, as he took the glasses off his nose. "In the experience of thirty years, I have had three grateful patients." He put the spectacles back in the case. "This comes from the third. Very gratifying--very gratifying."

Emily's sense of humor was not the uppermost sense in her at that moment. She pointed with a peremptory forefinger to Mrs. Rook's letter. "Have you nothing to say about this?"

The doctor had so little to say about it that he was able to express himself in one word:

"Humbug!"

He took his hat--nodded kindly to Emily--and hurried away to feverish pulses waiting to be felt, and to furred tongues that were ashamed to show themselves.