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Chapter 34 - In The Dark

A week later, Alban Morris happened to be in Miss Ladd's study, with a report to make on the subject of his drawing-class. Mrs. Ellmother interrupted them for a moment. She entered the room to return a book which Francine had borrowed that morning.

"Has Miss de Sor done with it already?" Miss Ladd asked.

"She won't read it, ma'am. She says the leaves smell of tobacco-smoke."

Miss Ladd turned to Alban, and shook her head with an air of good-humored reproof. "I know who has been reading that book last!" she said.

Alban pleaded guilty, by a look. He was the only master in the school who smoked. As Mrs. Ellmother passed him, on her way out, he noticed the signs of suffering in her wasted face.

"That woman is surely in a bad state of health," he said. "Has she seen the doctor?"

"She flatly refuses to consult the doctor," Miss Ladd replied. "If she was a stranger, I should meet the difficulty by telling Miss de Sor (whose servant she is) that Mrs. Ellmother must be sent home. But I cannot act in that peremptory manner toward a person in whom Emily is interested."

From that moment Mrs. Ellmother became a person in whom Alban was interested. Later in the day, he met her in one of the lower corridors of the house, and spoke to her. "I am afraid the air of this place doesn't agree with you," he said.

Mrs. Ellmother's irritable objection to being told (even indirectly) that she looked ill, expressed itself roughly in reply. "I daresay you mean well, sir--but I don't see how it matters to you whether the place agrees with me or not."

"Wait a minute," Alban answered good-humoredly. "I am not quite a stranger to you."

"How do you make that out, if you please?"

"I know a young lady who has a sincere regard for you."

"You don't mean Miss Emily?"

"Yes, I do. I respect and admire Miss Emily; and I have tried, in my poor way, to be of some little service to her."

Mrs. Ellmother's haggard face instantly softened. "Please to forgive me, sir, for forgetting my manners," she said simply. "I have had my health since the day I was born--and I don't like to be told, in my old age, that a new place doesn't agree with me."

Alban accepted this apology in a manner which at once won the heart of the North-countrywoman. He shook hands with her. "You're one of the right sort," she said; "there are not many of them in this house."

Was she alluding to Francine? Alban tried to make the discovery. Polite circumlocution would be evidently thrown away on Mrs. Ellmother. "Is your new mistress one of the right sort?" he asked bluntly.

The old servant's answer was expressed by a frowning look, followed by a plain question.

"Do you say that, sir, because you like my new mistress?"

"No."

"Please to shake hands again!" She said it--took his hand with a sudden grip that spoke for itself-- and walked away.

Here was an exhibition of character which Alban was just the man to appreciate. "If I had been an old woman," he thought in his dryly humorous way, "I believe I should have been like Mrs. Ellmother. We might have talked of Emily, if she had not left me in such a hurry. When shall I see her again?"

He was destined to see her again, that night--under circumstances which he remembered to the end of his life.

The rules of Netherwoods, in summer time, recalled the young ladies from their evening's recreation in the grounds at nine o'clock. After that hour, Alban was free to smoke his pipe, and to linger among trees and flower-beds before he returned to his hot little rooms in the village. As a relief to the drudgery of teaching the young ladies, he had been using his pencil, when the day's lessons were over, for his own amusement. It was past ten o'clock before he lighted his pipe, and began walking slowly to and fro on the path which led to the summer-house, at the southern limit of the grounds.

In the perfect stillness of the night, the clock of the village church was distinctly audible, striking the hours and the quarters. The moon had not risen; but the mysterious glimmer of starlight trembled on the large open space between the trees and the house.

Alban paused, admiring with an artist's eye the effect of light, so faintly and delicately beautiful, on the broad expanse of the lawn. "Does the man live who could paint

that?" he asked himself. His mind recalled the works of all landscape painters--the English artists of fifty years since. While recollections of many a noble picture were still passing through his mind, he was startled by the sudden appearance of a bareheaded woman on the terrace steps.

She hurried down to the lawn, staggering as she ran--stopped, and looked back at the house--hastened onward toward the trees--stopped again, looking backward and forward, uncertain which way to turn next--and then advanced once more. He could now hear her heavily gasping for breath. As she came nearer, the starlight showed a panic-stricken face--the face of Mrs. Ellmother.

Alban ran to meet her. She dropped on the grass before he could cross the short distance which separated them. As he raised her in his arms she looked at him wildly, and murmured and muttered in the vain attempt to speak. "Look at me again," he said. "Don't you remember the man who had some talk with you to-day?" She still stared at him vacantly: he tried again. "Don't you remember Miss Emily's friend?"

As the name passed his lips, her mind in some degree recovered its balance. "Yes," she said; "Emily's friend; I'm glad I have met with Emily's friend." She caught at Alban's arm--starting as if her own words had alarmed her. "What am I talking about? Did I say 'Emily'? A servant ought to say 'Miss Emily.' My head swims. Am I going mad?"

Alban led her to one of the garden chairs. "You're only a little frightened," he said. "Rest, and compose yourself."

She looked over her shoulder toward the house. "Not here! I've run away from a she-devil; I want to be out of sight. Further away, Mister--I don't know your name. Tell me your name; I won't trust you, unless you tell me your name!"

"Hush! hush! Call me Alban."

"I never heard of such a name; I won't trust you."

"You won't trust your friend, and Emily's friend? You don't mean that, I'm sure. Call me by my other name--call me 'Morris.'"

"Morris?" she repeated. "Ah, I've heard of people called 'Morris.' Look back! Your eyes are young--do you see her on the terrace?"

"There isn't a living soul to be seen anywhere."

With one hand he raised her as he spoke--and with the other he took up the chair. In a minute more, they were out of sight of the house. He seated her so that she could rest her head against the trunk of a tree.

"What a good fellow!" the poor old creature said, admiring him; "he knows how my head pains me. Don't stand up! You're a tall man. She might see you."

"She can see nothing. Look at the trees behind us. Even the starlight doesn't get through them."

Mrs. Ellmother was not satisfied yet. "You take it coolly," she said. "Do you know who saw us together in the passage to-day? You good Morris, _she_ saw us--she did. Wretch! Cruel, cunning, shameless wretch."

In the shadows that were round them, Alban could just see that she was shaking her clinched fists in the air. He made another attempt to control her. "Don't excite yourself! If she comes into the garden, she might hear you."

The appeal to her fears had its effect.

"That's true," she said, in lowered tones. A sudden distrust of him seized her the next moment. "Who told me I was excited?" she burst out. "It's you who are excited. Deny it if you dare; I begin to suspect you, Mr. Morris; I don't like your conduct. What has become of your pipe? I saw you put your pipe in your coat pocket. You did it when you set me down among the trees where _she_ could see me! You are in league with her--she is coming to meet you here--you know she doesn't like tobacco-smoke. Are you two going to put me in the madhouse?"

She started to her feet. It occurred to Alban that the speediest way of pacifying her might be by means of the pipe. Mere words would exercise no persuasive influence over that bewildered mind. Instant action, of some kind, would be far more likely to have the right effect. He put his pipe and his tobacco pouch into her hands, and so mastered her attention before he spoke.

"Do you know how to fill a man's pipe for him?" he asked.

"Haven't I filled my husband's pipe hundreds of times?" she answered sharply.

"Very well. Now do it for me."

She took her chair again instantly, and filled the pipe. He lighted it, and seated himself on the grass, quietly smoking. "Do you think I'm in league with her now?" he asked, purposely adopting the rough tone of a man in her own rank of life.

She answered him as she might have answered her husband, in the days of her unhappy marriage.

"Oh, don't gird at me, there's a good man! If I've been off my head for a minute or two, please not to notice me. It's cool and quiet here," the poor woman said gratefully. "Bless God for the darkness; there's something comforting in the darkness--along with a good man like you. Give me a word of advice. You are my friend in need. What am I to do? I daren't go back to the house!"

She was quiet enough now, to suggest the hope that she might be able to give Alban some information. "Were you with Miss de Sor," he asked, "before you came out here? What did she do to frighten you?"

There was no answer; Mrs. Ellmother had abruptly risen once more. "Hush!" she whispered. "Don't I hear somebody near us?"

Alban at once went back, along the winding path which they had followed. No creature was visible in the gardens or on the terrace. On returning, he found it impossible to use his eyes to any good purpose in the obscurity among the trees. He waited a while, listening intently. No sound was audible: there was not even air enough to stir the leaves.

As he returned to the place that he had left, the silence was broken by the chimes of the distant church clock, striking the three-quarters past ten.

Even that familiar sound jarred on Mrs. Ellmother's shattered nerves. In her state of mind and body, she was evidently at the mercy of any false alarm which might be raised by her own fears. Relieved of the feeling of distrust which had thus far troubled him, Alban sat down by her again--opened his match-box to relight his pipe--and changed his mind. Mrs. Ellmother had unconsciously warned him to be cautious.

For the first time, he thought it likely that the heat in the house might induce some of the inmates to try the cooler atmosphere in the grounds. If this happened, and if he continued to smoke, curiosity might tempt them to follow the scent of tobacco hanging on the stagnant air.

"Is there nobody near us?" Mrs. Ellmother asked. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Now tell me, did you really mean it, when you said just now that you wanted my advice?"

"Need you ask that, sir? Who else have I got to help me?"

"I am ready and willing to help you--but I can't do it unless I know first what has passed between you and Miss de Sor. Will you trust me?"

"I will!"

"May I depend on you?"

"Try me!"