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Chapter 36 - Change Of Air

The inmates of Netherwoods rose early, and went to bed early. When Alban and Mrs. Ellmother arrived at the back door of the house, they found it locked.

The only light visible, along the whole length of the building, glimmered through the Venetian blind of the window-entrance to Francine's sitting-room. Alban proposed to get admission to the house by that way. In her horror of again encountering Francine, Mrs. Ellmother positively refused to follow him when he turned away from the door. "They can't be all asleep yet," she said--and rang the bell.

One person was still out of bed--and that person was the mistress of the house. They recognized her voice in the customary question: "Who's there?" The door having been opened, good Miss Ladd looked backward and forward between Alban and Mrs. Ellmother, with the bewildered air of a lady who doubted the evidence of her own eyes. The next moment, her sense of humor overpowered her. She burst out laughing.

"Close the door, Mr. Morris," she said, "and be so good as to tell me what this means. Have you been giving a lesson in drawing by starlight?"

Mrs. Ellmother moved, so that the light of the lamp in Miss Ladd's hand fell on her face. "I am faint and giddy," she said; "let me go to my bed."

Miss Ladd instantly followed her. "Pray forgive me! I didn't see you were ill, when I spoke," she gently explained. "What can I do for you?"

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. I want nothing but peace and quiet. I wish you good-night."

Alban followed Miss Ladd to her study, on the front side of the house. He had just mentioned the circumstances under which he and Mrs. Ellmother had met, when they were interrupted by a tap at the door. Francine had got back to her room unperceived, by way of the French window. She now presented herself, with an elaborate apology, and with the nearest approach to a penitent expression of which her face was capable.

"I am ashamed, Miss Ladd, to intrude on you at this time of night. My only excuse is, that I am anxious about Mrs. Ellmother. I heard you just now in the hall. If she is really ill, I am the unfortunate cause of it."

"In what way, Miss de Sor?"

"I am sorry to say I frightened her--while we were talking in my room--quite unintentionally. She rushed to the door and ran out. I supposed she had gone to her bedroom; I had no idea she was in the grounds."

In this false statement there was mingled a grain of truth. It was true that Francine believed Mrs. Ellmother to have taken refuge in her room--for she had examined the room. Finding it empty, and failing to discover the fugitive in other parts of the house, she had become alarmed, and had tried the grounds next--with the formidable result which has been already related. Concealing this circumstance, she had lied in such a skillfully artless manner that Alban (having no suspicion of what had really happened to sharpen his wits) was as completely deceived as Miss Ladd. Proceeding to further explanation--and remembering that she was in Alban's presence--Francine was careful to keep herself within the strict limit of truth. Confessing that she had frightened her servant by a description of sorcery, as it was practiced among the slaves on her father's estate, she only lied again, in declaring that Mrs. Ellmother had supposed she was in earnest, when she was guilty of no more serious offense than playing a practical joke.

In this case, Alban was necessarily in a position to detect the falsehood. But it was so evidently in Francine's interests to present her conduct in the most favorable light, that the discovery failed to excite his suspicion. He waited in silence, while Miss Ladd administered a severe reproof. Francine having left the room, as penitently as she had entered it (with her handkerchief over her tearless eyes), he was at liberty, with certain reserves, to return to what had passed between Mrs. Ellmother and himself.

"The fright which the poor old woman has suffered," he said, "has led to one good result. I have found her ready at last to acknowledge that she is ill, and inclined to believe that the change to Netherwoods has had something to do with it. I have advised her to take the course which you suggested, by leaving this house. Is it possible to dispense with the usual delay, when she gives notice to leave Miss de Sor's service?"

"She need feel no anxiety, poor soul, on that account," Miss Ladd replied. "In any case, I had arranged that a week's notice on either side should be enough. As it is, I will speak to Francine myself. The least she can do, to express her regret, is to place no difficulties in Mrs. Ellmother's way."

The next day was Sunday.

Miss Ladd broke through her rule of attending to secular affairs on week days only; and, after consulting with Mrs. Ellmother, arranged with Francine that her servant should be at liberty to leave Netherwoods (health permitting) on the next day. But one difficulty remained. Mrs. Ellmother was in no condition to take the long journey to her birthplace in Cumberland; and her own lodgings in London had been let.

Under these circumstances, what was the best arrangement that could be made for her? Miss Ladd wisely and kindly wrote to Emily on the subject, and asked for a speedy reply.

Later in the day, Alban was sent for to see Mrs. Ellmother. He found her anxiously waiting to hear what had passed, on the previous night, between Miss Ladd and himself. "Were you careful, sir, to say nothing about Miss Emily?"

"I was especially careful; I never alluded to her in any way."

"Has Miss de Sor spoken to you?"

"I have not given her the opportunity."

"She's an obstinate one--she might try."

"If she does, she shall hear my opinion of her in plain words." The talk between them turned next on Alban's discovery of the secret, of which Mrs. Ellmother had believed herself to be the sole depository since Miss Letitia's death. Without alarming her by any needless allusion to Doctor Allday or to Miss Jethro, he answered her inquiries (so far as he was himself concerned) without reserve. Her curiosity once satisfied, she showed no disposition to pursue the topic. She pointed to Miss Ladd's cat, fast asleep by the side of an empty saucer.

"Is it a sin, Mr. Morris, to wish I was Tom? _He_ doesn't trouble himself about his life that is past or his life that is to come. If I could only empty my saucer and go to sleep, I shouldn't be thinking of the number of people in this world, like myself, who would be better out of it than in it. Miss Ladd has got me my liberty tomorrow; and I don't even know where to go, when I leave this place."

"Suppose you follow Tom's example?" Alban suggested. "Enjoy to-day (in that comfortable chair) and let to-morrow take care of itself."

To-morrow arrived, and justified Alban's system of philosophy. Emily answered Miss Ladd's letter, to excellent purpose, by telegraph.

"I leave London to-day with Cecilia" (the message announced) "for Monksmoor Park, Hants. Will Mrs. Ellmother take care of the cottage in my absence? I shall be away for a month, at least. All is prepared for her if she consents."

Mrs. Ellmother gladly accepted this proposal. In the interval of Emily's absence, she could easily arrange to return to her own lodgings. With words of sincere gratitude she took leave of Miss Ladd; but no persuasion would induce her to say good-by to Francine. "Do me one more kindness, ma'am; don't tell Miss de Sor when I go away." Ignorant of the provocation which had produced this unforgiving temper of mind, Miss Ladd gently remonstrated. "Miss de Sor received my reproof in a penitent spirit; she expresses sincere sorrow for having thoughtlessly frightened you. Both yesterday and to-day she has made kind inquiries after your health. Come! come! don't bear malice--wish her good-by." Mrs. Ellmother's answer was characteristic. "I'll say good-by by telegraph, when I get to London."

Her last words were addressed to Alban. "If you can find a way of doing it, sir, keep those two apart."

"Do you mean Emily and Miss de Sor?"

"Yes."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know."

"Is that quite reasonable, Mrs. Ellmother?"

"I daresay not. I only know that I _am_ afraid."

The pony chaise took her away. Alban's class was not yet ready for him. He waited on the terrace.

Innocent alike of all knowledge of the serious reason for fear which did really exist, Mrs. Ellmother and Alban felt, nevertheless, the same vague distrust of an intimacy between the two girls. Idle, vain, malicious, false--to know that Francine's character presented these faults, without any discoverable merits to set against them, was surely enough to justify a gloomy view of the prospect, if she succeeded in winning the position of Emily's friend. Alban reasoned it out logically in this way--without satisfying himself, and without accounting for the remembrance that haunted him of Mrs. Ellmother's farewell look. "A commonplace man would say we are both in a morbid state of mind," he thought; "and sometimes commonplace men turn out to be right."

He was too deeply preoccupied to notice that he had advanced perilously near Francine's window. She suddenly stepped out of her room, and spoke to him.

"Do you happen to know, Mr. Morris, why Mrs. Ellmother has gone away without bidding me good-by?"

"She was probably afraid, Miss de Sor, that you might make her the victim of another joke."

Francine eyed him steadily. "Have you any particular reason for speaking to me in that way?"

"I am not aware that I have answered you rudely--if that is what you mean."

"That is _not_ what I mean. You seem to have taken a dislike to me. I should be glad to know why."

"I dislike cruelty--and you have behaved cruelly to Mrs. Ellmother "

"Meaning to be cruel?" Francine inquired.

"You know as well as I do, Miss de Sor, that I can't answer that question."

Francine looked at him again "Am I to understand that we are enemies?" she asked.

"You are to understand," he replied, "that a person whom Miss Ladd employs to help her in teaching, cannot always presume to express his sentiments in speaking to the young ladies."

"If that means anything, Mr. Morris, it means that we are enemies."

"It means, Miss de Sor, that I am the drawing-master at this school, and that I am called to my class."

Francine returned to her room, relieved of the only doubt that had troubled her. Plainly no suspicion that she had overheard what passed between Mrs. Ellmother and herself existed in Alban's mind. As to the use to be made of her discovery, she felt no difficulty in deciding to wait, and be guided by events. Her curiosity and her self-esteem had been alike gratified--she had got the better of Mrs. Ellmother at last, and with that triumph she was content. While Emily remained her friend, it would be an act of useless cruelty to disclose the terrible truth. There had certainly been a coolness between them at Brighton. But Francine--still influenced by the magnetism

attraction which drew her to Emily--did not conceal from herself that she had offered the provocation, and had been therefore the person to blame. "I can set all that right," she thought, "when we meet at Monksmoor Park." She opened her desk and wrote the shortest and sweetest of letters to Cecilia. "I am entirely at the disposal of my charming friend, on any convenient day--may I add, my dear, the sooner the better?"