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Chapter 17 - Doctor Allday

Absorbed in the effort to overcome his patient's reserve, the doctor had forgotten Emily's letter. He opened it immediately.

After reading the first sentence, he looked up with an expression of annoyance. "She has begun the examination of the papers already," he said.

"Then I can be of no further use to you," Miss Jethro rejoined. She made a second attempt to leave the room.

Doctor Allday turned to the next page of the letter. "Stop!" he cried. "She has found something--and here it is."

He held up a small printed Handbill, which had been placed between the first and second pages. "Suppose you look at it?" he said.

"Whether I am interested in it or not?" Miss Jethro asked.

"You may be interested in what Miss Emily says about it in her letter."

"Do you propose to show me her letter?"

"I propose to read it to you."

Miss Jethro took the Handbill without further objection. It was expressed in these words:

"MURDER. 100 POUNDS REWARD.--Whereas a murder was committed on the thirtieth September, 1877, at the Hand-in-Hand Inn, in the village of Zeeland, Hampshire, the above reward will be paid to any person or persons whose exertions shall lead to the arrest and conviction of the suspected murderer. Name not known. Supposed age, between twenty and thirty years. A well-made man, of small stature. Fair complexion, delicate features, clear blue eyes. Hair light, and cut rather short. Clean shaven, with the exception of narrow half-whiskers. Small, white, well-shaped hands. Wore valuable rings on the two last fingers of the left hand. Dressed neatly in a dark-gray tourist-suit. Carried a knapsack, as if on a pedestrian excursion. Remarkably good voice, smooth, full, and persuasive. Ingratiating manners. Apply to the Chief Inspector, Metropolitan Police Office, London."

Miss Jethro laid aside the Handbill without any visible appearance of agitation. The doctor took up Emily's letter, and read as follows:

"You will be as much relieved as I was, my kind friend, when you look at the paper inclosed. I found it loose in a blank book, with cuttings from newspapers, and odd announcements of lost property and other curious things (all huddled together between the leaves), which my aunt no doubt intended to set in order and fix in their proper places. She must have been thinking of her book, poor soul, in her last illness. Here is the origin of those 'terrible words' which frightened stupid Mrs. Mosey! Is it not encouraging to have discovered such a confirmation of my opinion as this? I feel a new interest in looking over the papers that still remain to be examined--"

Before he could get to the end of the sentence Miss Jethro's agitation broke through her reserve.

"Do what you proposed to do!" she burst out vehemently. "Stop her at once from carrying her examination any further! If she hesitates, insist on it!"

At last Doctor Allday had triumphed! "It has been a long time coming," he remarked, in his cool way; "and it's all the more welcome on that account. You dread the discoveries she may make, Miss Jethro, as I do. And _you_ know what those discoveries may be."

"What I do know, or don't know, is of no importance," she answered sharply.

"Excuse me, it is of very serious importance. I have no authority over this poor girl--I am not even an old friend. You tell me to insist. Help me to declare honestly that I know of circumstances which justify me; and I may insist to some purpose."

Miss Jethro lifted her veil for the first time, and eyed him searchingly.

"I believe I can trust you," she said. "Now listen! The one consideration on which I consent to open my lips, is consideration for Miss Emily's tranquillity. Promise me absolute secrecy, on your word of honor."

He gave the promise.

"I want to know one thing, first," Miss Jethro proceeded. "Did she tell you--as she once told me--that her father had died of heart-complaint?"

"Yes."

"Did you put any questions to her?"

"I asked how long ago it was."

"And she told you?"

"She told me."

"You wish to know, Doctor Allday, what discoveries Miss Emily may yet make, among her aunt's papers. Judge for yourself, when I tell you that she has been deceived about her father's death."

"Do you mean that he is still living?"

"I mean that she has been deceived--purposely deceived--about the manner of his death."

"Who was the wretch who did it?"

"You are wronging the dead, sir! The truth can only have been concealed out of the purest motives of love and pity. I don't desire to disguise the conclusion at which I have arrived after what I have heard from yourself. The person responsible must be Miss Emily's aunt--and the old servant must have been in her confidence. Remember! You are bound in honor not to repeat to any living creature what I have just said."

The doctor followed Miss Jethro to the door. "You have not yet told me," he said, "how her father died."

"I have no more to tell you."

With those words she left him.

He rang for his servant. To wait until the hour at which he was accustomed to go out, might be to leave Emily's peace of mind at the mercy of an accident. "I am going to the cottage," he said. "If anybody wants me, I shall be back in a quarter of an hour."

On the point of leaving the house, he remembered that Emily would probably expect him to return the Handbill. As he took it up, the first lines caught his eye: he read the date at which the murder had been committed, for the second time. On a sudden the ruddy color left his face.

"Good God!" he cried, "her father was murdered--and that woman was concerned in it."

Following the impulse that urged him, he secured the Handbill in his pocketbook--snatched up the card which his patient had presented as her introduction--and instantly left the house. He called the first cab that passed him, and drove to Miss Jethro's lodgings.

"Gone"--was the servant's answer when he inquired for her. He insisted on speaking to the landlady. "Hardly ten minutes have passed," he said, "since she left my house."

"Hardly ten minutes have passed," the landlady replied, "since that message was brought here by a boy."

The message had been evidently written in great haste: "I am unexpectedly obliged to leave London. A bank note is inclosed in payment of my debt to you. I will send for my luggage."

The doctor withdrew.

"Unexpectedly obliged to leave London," he repeated, as he got into the cab again. "Her flight condemns her: not a doubt of it now. As fast as you can!" he shouted to the man; directing him to drive to Emily's cottage.