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## Chapter 23 - Miss Redwood

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"I got invited to Sir Jervis's house," Alban resumed, "by treating the old savage as unceremoniously as he had treated me. 'That's an idle trade of yours,' he said, looking at my sketch. 'Other ignorant people have made the same remark,' I answered. He rode away, as if he was not used to be spoken to in that manner, and then thought better of it, and came back. 'Do you understand wood engraving?' he asked. 'Yes.' 'And etching?' 'I have practiced etching myself.' 'Are you a Royal Academician?' 'I'm a drawing-master at a ladies' school.' 'Whose school?' 'Miss Ladd's.' 'Damn it, you know the girl who ought to have been my secretary.' I am not quite sure whether you will take it as a compliment--Sir Jervis appeared to view you in the light of a reference to my respectability. At any rate, he went on with his questions. 'How long do you stop in these parts?' 'I haven't made up my mind.' 'Look here; I want to consult you--are you listening?' 'No; I'm sketching.' He burst into a horrid scream. I asked if he felt himself taken ill. 'Ill?' he said--'I'm laughing.' It was a diabolical laugh, in one syllable--not 'ha! ha! ha!' only 'ha!'--and it made him look wonderfully like that eminent person, whom I persist in thinking he resembles. 'You're an impudent dog,' he said; 'where are you living?' He was so delighted when he heard of my uncomfortable position in the kennel-bedroom, that he offered his hospitality on the spot. 'I can't go to you in such a pigstye as that,' he said; 'you must come to me. What's your name?' 'Alban Morris; what's yours?' 'Jervis Redwood. Pack up your traps when you've done your job, and come and try my kennel. There it is, in a corner of your drawing, and devilish like, too.' I packed up my traps, and I tried his kennel. And now you have had enough of Sir Jervis Redwood."

"Not half enough!" Emily answered. "Your story leaves off just at the interesting moment. I want you to take me to Sir Jervis's house."

"And I want you, Miss Emily, to take me to the British Museum. Don't let me startle you! When I called here earlier in the day, I was told that you had gone to the reading-room. Is your reading a secret?"

His manner, when he made that reply, suggested to Emily that there was some foregone conclusion in his mind, which he was putting to the test. She answered without alluding to the impression which he had produced on her.

"My reading is no secret. I am only consulting old newspapers."

He repeated the last words to himself. "Old newspapers?" he said--as if he was not quite sure of having rightly understood her.

She tried to help him by a more definite reply.

"I am looking through old newspapers," she resumed, "beginning with the year eighteen hundred and seventy-six."

"And going back from that time," he asked eagerly; "to earlier dates still?"

"No--just the contrary--advancing from 'seventy-six' to the present time."

He suddenly turned pale--and tried to hide his face from her by looking out of the window. For a moment, his agitation deprived him of his presence of mind. In that moment, she saw that she had alarmed him.

"What have I said to frighten you?" she asked.

He tried to assume a tone of commonplace gallantry. "There are limits even to your power over me," he replied. "Whatever else you may do, you can never frighten me. Are you searching those old newspapers with any particular object in view?"

"Yes."

"May I know what it is?"

"May I know why I frightened you?"

He began to walk up and down the room again--then checked himself abruptly, and appealed to her mercy.

"Don't be hard on me," he pleaded. "I am so fond of you--oh, forgive me! I only mean that it distresses me to have any concealments from you. If I could open my whole heart at this moment, I should be a happier man."

She understood him and believed him. "My curiosity shall never embarrass you again," she answered warmly. "I won't even remember that I wanted to hear how you got on in Sir Jervis's house."

His gratitude seized the opportunity of taking her harmlessly into his confidence. "As Sir Jervis's guest," he said, "my experience is at your service. Only tell me how I can interest you."

She replied, with some hesitation, "I should like to know what happened when you first saw Mrs. Rook." To her surprise and relief, he at once complied with her wishes.

"We met," he said, "on the evening when I first entered the house. Sir Jervis took me into the dining-room--and there sat Miss Redwood, with a large black cat on her lap. Older than her brother, taller than her brother, leaner than her brother--with strange stony eyes, and a skin like parchment--she looked (if I may speak in contradictions) like a living corpse. I was presented, and the corpse revived. The last lingering relics of former good breeding showed themselves faintly in her brow and in her smile. You will hear more of Miss Redwood presently. In the meanwhile, Sir Jervis made me reward his hospitality by professional advice. He wished me to decide whether the artists whom he had employed to illustrate his wonderful book had cheated him by overcharges and bad work--and Mrs. Rook was sent to fetch the engravings from his study upstairs. You remember her petrified appearance, when she first read the inscription on your locket? The same result followed when she found herself face to face with

me. I saluted her civilly--she was deaf and blind to my politeness. Her master snatched the illustrations out of her hand, and told her to leave the room. She stood stockstill, staring helplessly. Sir Jervis looked round at his sister; and I followed his example. Miss Redwood was observing the housekeeper too attentively to notice anything else; her brother was obliged to speak to her. 'Try Rook with the bell,' he said. Miss Redwood took a fine old bronze hand-bell from the table at her side, and rang it. At the shrill silvery sound of the bell, Mrs. Rook put her hand to her head as if the ringing had hurt her--turned instantly, and left us. 'Nobody can manage Rook but my sister,' Sir Jervis explained; 'Rook is crazy.' Miss Redwood differed with him. 'No!' she said. Only one word, but there were volumes of contradiction in it. Sir Jervis looked at me slyly; meaning, perhaps, that he thought his sister crazy too. The dinner was brought in at the same moment, and my attention was diverted to Mrs. Rook's husband."

"What was he like?" Emily asked.

"I really can't tell you; he was one of those essentially commonplace persons, whom one never looks at a second time. His dress was shabby, his head was bald, and his hands shook when he waited on us at table--and that is all I remember. Sir Jervis and I feasted on salt fish, mutton, and beer. Miss Redwood had cold broth, with a wine-glass full of rum poured into it by Mr. Rook. 'She's got no stomach,' her brother informed me; 'hot things come up again ten minutes after they have gone down her throat; she lives on that beastly mixture, and calls it broth-grog!' Miss Redwood sipped her elixir of life, and occasionally looked at me with an appearance of interest which I was at a loss to understand. Dinner being over, she rang her antique bell. The shabby old man-servant answered her call. 'Where's your wife?' she inquired. 'Ill, miss.' She took Mr. Rook's arm to go out, and stopped as she passed me. 'Come to my room, if you please, sir, to-morrow at two o'clock,' she said. Sir Jervis explained again: 'She's all to pieces in the morning' (he invariably called his sister 'She'); 'and gets patched up toward the middle of the day. Death has forgotten her, that's about the truth of it.' He lighted his pipe and pondered over the hieroglyphics found among the ruined cities of Yucatan; I lighted my pipe, and read the only book I could find in the dining-room--a dreadful record of shipwrecks and disasters at sea. When the room was full of tobacco-smoke we fell asleep in our chairs--and when we awoke again we got up and went to bed. There is the true story of my first evening at Redwood Hall."

Emily begged him to go on. "You have interested me in Miss Redwood," she said. "You kept your appointment, of course?"

"I kept my appointment in no very pleasant humor. Encouraged by my favorable report of the illustrations which he had submitted to my judgment, Sir Jervis proposed to make me useful to him in a new capacity. 'You have nothing particular to do,' he said, 'suppose you clean my pictures?' I gave him one of my black looks, and made no other reply. My interview with his sister tried my powers of self-command in another way. Miss Redwood declared her purpose in sending for me the moment I entered the room. Without any preliminary remarks--speaking slowly and emphatically, in a wonderfully strong voice for a woman of her age--she said, 'I have a favor to ask of you, sir. I want you to tell me what Mrs. Rook has done.' I was so staggered that I stared at her like a fool. She went on: 'I suspected Mrs. Rook, sir, of having guilty remembrances on her conscience before she had been a week in our service.' Can you imagine my astonishment when I heard that Miss Redwood's view of Mrs. Rook was my view? Finding that I still said nothing, the old lady entered into details: 'We arranged, sir,' (she persisted in calling me 'sir,' with the formal politeness of the old school)--'we arranged, sir, that Mrs. Rook and her husband should occupy the bedroom next to mine, so that I might have her near me in case of my being taken ill in the night. She looked at the door between the two rooms--suspicious! She asked if there was any objection to her changing to another room--suspicious! suspicious! Pray take a seat, sir, and tell me which Mrs. Rook is guilty of--theft or murder?' "

"What a dreadful old woman!" Emily exclaimed. "How did you answer her?"

"I told her, with perfect truth, that I knew nothing of Mrs. Rook's secrets. Miss Redwood's humor took a satirical turn. 'Allow me to ask, sir, whether your eyes were shut, when our housekeeper found herself unexpectedly in your presence?' I referred the old lady to her brother's opinion. 'Sir Jervis believes Mrs. Rook to be crazy,' I reminded her. 'Do you refuse to trust me, sir?' 'I have no information to give you, madam.' She waved her skinny old hand in the direction of the door. I made my bow, and retired. She called me back. 'Old women used to be prophets, sir, in the bygone time,' she said. 'I will venture on a prediction. You will be the means of depriving us of the services of Mr. and Mrs. Rook. If you will be so good as to stay here a day or two longer you will hear that those two people have given us notice to quit. It will be her doing, mind--he is a mere cypher. I wish you good-morning.' Will you believe me, when I tell you that the prophecy was fulfilled?"

"Do you mean that they actually left the house?"

"They would certainly have left the house," Alban answered, "if Sir Jervis had not insisted on receiving the customary month's warning. He asserted his resolution by locking up the old husband in the pantry. His sister's suspicions never entered his head; the housekeeper's conduct (he said) simply proved that she was, what he had always considered her to be, crazy. 'A capital servant, in spite of that drawback,' he remarked; 'and you will see, I shall bring her to her senses.' The impression produced on me was naturally of a very different kind. While I was still uncertain how to entrap Mrs. Rook into confirming my suspicions, she herself had saved me the trouble. She had placed her own guilty interpretation on my appearance in the house--I had driven her away!"

Emily remained true to her resolution not to let her curiosity embarrass Alban again. But the unexpressed question was in her thoughts--"Of what guilt does he suspect Mrs. Rook? And, when he first felt his suspicions, was my father in his mind?"

Alban proceeded.

"I had only to consider next, whether I could hope to make any further discoveries, if I continued to be Sir Jervis's guest. The object of my journey had been gained; and I had no desire to be employed as picture-cleaner. Miss Redwood assisted me in arriving at a decision. I was sent for to speak to her again. The success of her prophecy had raised her spirits. She asked, with ironical humility, if I proposed to honor them by still remaining their guest, after the disturbance that I had provoked. I answered that I proposed to leave by the first train the next morning. 'Will it be convenient for you to travel to some place at a good distance from this part of the world?' she asked. I had my own reasons for going to London, and said so. 'Will you mention that to my brother this evening, just before we sit down to dinner?' she continued. 'And will you tell him plainly that you have no intention of returning to the North? I shall make use of Mrs. Rook's arm, as usual, to help me downstairs--and I will take care that she hears what you say. Without venturing on another prophecy, I will only hint to you that I have my own idea of what will happen; and I should like you to see for yourself, sir, whether my anticipations are realized.' Need I tell you that this strange old woman proved to be right once more? Mr. Rook was released; Mrs. Rook made humble apologies, and laid the whole blame on her husband's temper: and Sir Jervis bade me remark that his method had succeeded in bringing the housekeeper to her senses. Such were the results produced by the announcement of my departure for London--purposely made in Mrs. Rook's hearing. Do you agree with me, that my journey to Northumberland has not been taken in vain?"

Once more, Emily felt the necessity of controlling herself.

Alban had said that he had "reasons of his own for going to London." Could she venture to ask him what those reasons were? She could only persist in restraining her curiosity, and conclude that he would have mentioned his motive, if it had been (as she had at one time supposed) connected with herself. It was a wise decision. No earthly consideration would have induced Alban to answer her, if she had put the question to him.

All doubt of the correctness of his own first impression was now at an end; he was convinced that Mrs. Rook had been an accomplice in the crime committed, in 1877, at the village inn. His object in traveling to London was to consult the newspaper narrative of the murder. He, too, had been one of the readers at the Museum--had examined the back numbers of the newspaper--and had arrived at the conclusion that Emily's father had been the victim of the crime. Unless he found means to prevent it, her course of reading would take her from the year 1876 to the year 1877, and under that date, she would see the fatal report, heading the top of a column, and printed in conspicuous type.

In the meanwhile Emily had broken the silence, before it could lead to embarrassing results, by asking if Alban had seen Mrs. Rook again, on the morning when he left Sir Jervis's house.

"There was nothing to be gained by seeing her," Alban replied. "Now that she and her husband had decided to remain at Redwood Hall, I knew where to find her in case of necessity. As it happened I saw nobody, on the morning of my departure, but Sir Jervis himself. He still held to his idea of having his pictures cleaned for nothing. 'If you can't do it yourself,' he said, 'couldn't you teach my secretary?' He described the lady whom he had engaged in your place as a 'nasty middle-aged woman with a perpetual cold in her head.' At the same time (he remarked) he was a friend to the women, 'because he got them cheap.' I declined to teach the unfortunate secretary the art of picture-cleaning. Finding me determined, Sir Jervis was quite ready to say good-by. But he made use of me to the last. He employed me as postman and saved a stamp. The letter addressed to you arrived at breakfast-time. Sir Jervis said, 'You are going to London; suppose you take it with you?'"

"Did he tell you that there was a letter of his own inclosed in the envelope?"

"No. When he gave me the envelope it was already sealed."

Emily at once handed to him Sir Jervis's letter. "That will tell you who employs me at the Museum, and what my work is," she said.

He looked through the letter, and at once offered--eagerly offered--to help her.

"I have been a student in the reading-room at intervals, for years past," he said. "Let me assist you, and I shall have something to do in my holiday time." He was so anxious to be of use that he interrupted her before she could thank him. "Let us take alternate years," he suggested. "Did you not tell me you were searching the newspapers published in eighteen hundred and seventy-six?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I will take the next year. You will take the year after. And so on."

"You are very kind," she answered--"but I should like to propose an improvement on your plan."

"What improvement?" he asked, rather sharply.

"If you will leave the five years, from 'seventy-six to 'eighty-one, entirely to me," she resumed, "and take the next five years, reckoning backward from 'seventy-six, you will help me to better purpose. Sir Jervis expects me to look for reports of Central American Explorations, through the newspapers of the last forty years; and I have taken the liberty of limiting the heavy task imposed on me. When I report my progress to my employer, I should like to say that I have got through ten years of the examination, instead of five. Do you see any objection to the arrangement I propose?"

He proved to be obstinate--incomprehensibly obstinate.

"Let us try my plan to begin with," he insisted. "While you are looking through 'seventy-six, let me be at work on 'seventy-seven. If you still prefer your own arrangement, after that, I will follow your suggestion with pleasure. Is it agreed?"

Her acute perception--enlightened by his tone as well as by his words--detected something under the surface already.

"It isn't agreed until I understand you a little better," she quietly replied. "I fancy you have some object of your own in view."

She spoke with her usual directness of look and manner. He was evidently disconcerted. "What makes you think so?" he asked.

"My own experience of myself makes me think so," she answered. "If I had some object to gain, I should persist in carrying it out--like you."

"Does that mean, Miss Emily, that you refuse to give way?"

"No, Mr. Morris. I have made myself disagreeable, but I know when to stop. I trust you--and submit."

If he had been less deeply interested in the accomplishment of his merciful design, he might have viewed Emily's sudden submission with some distrust. As it was, his eagerness to prevent her from discovering the narrative of the murder hurried him into an act of indiscretion. He made an excuse to leave her immediately, in the fear that she might change her mind.

"I have inexcusably prolonged my visit," he said. "If I presume on your kindness in this way, how can I hope that you will receive me again? We meet to-morrow in the reading-room."

He hastened away, as if he was afraid to let her say a word in reply.

Emily reflected.

"Is there something he doesn't want me to see, in the news of the year 'seventy-seven?" The one explanation which suggested itself to her mind assumed that form of expression--and the one method of satisfying her curiosity that seemed likely to succeed, was to search the volume which Alban had reserved for his own reading.

For two days they pursued their task together, seated at opposite desks. On the third day Emily was absent.

Was she ill?

She was at the library in the City, consulting the file of The Times for the year 1877.