

CHAPTER III. THE CHILD APPEARS.

During my friend's absence, my attention was claimed by a sad incident--not unforeseen.

It is, I suppose, generally known that near relatives are admitted to take their leave of criminals condemned to death. In the case of the Prisoner now waiting for execution, no person applied to the authorities for permission to see her. I myself inquired if she had any relations living, and if she would like to see them. She answered: "None that I care to see, or that care to see me--except the nearest relation of all."

In those last words the miserable creature alluded to her only child, a little girl (an infant, I should say), who had passed her first year's birthday by a few months. The farewell interview was to take place on the mother's last evening on earth; and the child was now brought into my rooms, in charge of her nurse.

I had seldom seen a brighter or prettier little girl. She was just able to walk alone, and to enjoy the first delight of moving from one place to another. Quite of her own accord she came to me, attracted I daresay by the glitter of my watch-chain. Helping her to climb on my knee, I showed the wonders of the watch, and held it to her ear. At that past time, death had taken my good wife from me; my two boys were away at Harrow School; my domestic life was the life of a lonely man. Whether I was reminded of the bygone days when my sons were infants on my knee, listening to the ticking of my watch--or whether the friendless position of the poor little creature, who had lost one parent and was soon to lose the other by a violent death, moved me in depths of pity not easily reached in my later experience--I am not able to say. This only I know: my heart ached for the child while she was laughing and listening; and something fell from me on the watch which I don't deny might have been a tear. A few of the toys, mostly broken now, which my two children used to play with are still in my possession; kept, like my poor wife's favorite jewels, for old remembrance' sake. These I took from their repository when the attraction of my watch showed signs of failing. The child pounced on them with her chubby hands, and screamed with pleasure. And the hangman was waiting for her mother--and, more horrid still, the mother deserved it!

My duty required me to let the Prisoner know that her little daughter had arrived. Did that heart of iron melt at last? It might have been so, or it might

not; the message sent back kept her secret. All that it said to me was: "Let the child wait till I send for her."

The Minister had consented to help us. On his arrival at the prison, I received him privately in my study.

I had only to look at his face--pitiably pale and agitated--to see that he was a sensitive man, not always able to control his nerves on occasions which tried his moral courage. A kind, I might almost say a noble face, and a voice unaffectedly persuasive, at once prepossessed me in his favor. The few words of welcome that I spoke were intended to compose him. They failed to produce the impression on which I had counted.

"My experience," he said, "has included many melancholy duties, and has tried my composure in terrible scenes; but I have never yet found myself in the presence of an unrepentant criminal, sentenced to death--and that criminal a woman and a mother. I own, sir, that I am shaken by the prospect before me."

I suggested that he should wait a while, in the hope that time and quiet might help him. He thanked me, and refused.

"If I have any knowledge of myself," he said, "terrors of anticipation lose their hold when I am face to face with a serious call on me. The longer I remain here, the less worthy I shall appear of the trust that has been placed in me--the trust which, please God, I mean to deserve."

My own observation of human nature told me that this was wisely said. I led the way at once to the cell.