

CHAPTER V. MISS CHANCE ASSERTS HERSELF.

The services of our medical officer were required, in order to hasten the recovery of the Prisoner's senses.

When the Doctor and I left the cell together, she was composed, and ready (in the performance of her promise) to listen to the exhortations of the Minister. The sleeping child was left undisturbed, by the mother's desire. If the Minister felt tempted to regret what he had done, there was the artless influence which would check him! As we stepped into the corridor, I gave the female warder her instructions to remain on the watch, and to return to her post when she saw the Minister come out.

In the meantime, my companion had walked on a little way.

Possessed of ability and experience within the limits of his profession, he was in other respects a man with a crotchety mind; bold to the verge of recklessness in the expression of his opinion; and possessed of a command of language that carried everything before it. Let me add that he was just and merciful in his intercourse with others, and I shall have summed him up fairly enough. When I joined him he seemed to be absorbed in reflection.

"Thinking of the Prisoner?" I said.

"Thinking of what is going on, at this moment, in the condemned cell," he answered, "and wondering if any good will come of it."

I was not without hope of a good result, and I said so.

The Doctor disagreed with me. "I don't believe in that woman's penitence," he remarked; "and I look upon the parson as a poor weak creature. What is to become of the child?"

There was no reason for concealing from one of my colleagues the benevolent decision, on the part of the good Minister, of which I had been a witness. The Doctor listened to me with the first appearance of downright astonishment that I had ever observed in his face. When I had done, he made an extraordinary reply:

"Governor, I retract what I said of the parson just now. He is one of the boldest men that ever stepped into a pulpit."

Was the doctor in earnest? Strongly in earnest; there could be no doubt of it. Before I could ask him what he meant, he was called away to a patient on the other side of the prison. When we parted at the door of my room, I made it a request that my medical friend would return to me and explain what he had just said.

"Considering that you are the governor of a prison," he replied, "you are a singularly rash man. If I come back, how do you know I shall not bore you?"

"My rashness runs the risk of that," I rejoined.

"Tell me something, before I allow you to run your risk," he said. "Are you one of those people who think that the tempers of children are formed by the accidental influences which happen to be about them? Or do you agree with me that the tempers of children are inherited from their parents?"

The Doctor (as I concluded) was still strongly impressed by the Minister's resolution to adopt a child whose wicked mother had committed the most atrocious of all crimes. Was some serious foreboding in secret possession of his mind? My curiosity to hear him was now increased tenfold. I replied without hesitation:

"I agree with you."

He looked at me with his sense of humor twinkling in his eyes. "Do you know I rather expected that answer?" he said, slyly. "All right. I'll come back."

Left by myself, I took up the day's newspaper.

My attention wandered; my thoughts were in the cell with the Minister and the Prisoner. How would it end? Sometimes, I was inclined to doubt with the Doctor. Sometimes, I took refuge in my own more hopeful view. These idle reflections were agreeably interrupted by the appearance of my friend, the Chaplain.

"You are always welcome," I said; "and doubly welcome just now. I am feeling a little worried and anxious."

"And you are naturally," the Chaplain added, "not at all disposed to receive a stranger?"

"Is the stranger a friend of yours?" I asked.

"Oh, no! Having occasion, just now, to go into the waiting-room, I found a young woman there, who asked me if she could see you. She thinks you have forgotten her, and she is tired of waiting. I merely undertook, of course, to mention what she had said to me."

The nurse having been in this way recalled to my memory, I felt some little interest in seeing her, after what had passed in the cell. In plainer words, I was desirous of judging for myself whether she deserved the hostile feeling which the Prisoner had shown toward her. I thanked the Chaplain before he left me, and gave the servant the necessary instructions. When she entered the room, I looked at the woman attentively for the first time.

Youth and a fine complexion, a well-made figure and a natural grace of movement--these were her personal attractions, so far as I could see. Her defects were, to my mind, equally noticeable. Under a heavy forehead, her piercing eyes looked out at persons and things with an expression which was not to my taste. Her large mouth--another defect, in my opinion--would have been recommended to mercy, in the estimation of many men, by her magnificent teeth; white, well-shaped, cruelly regular. Believers in physiognomy might perhaps have seen the betrayal of an obstinate nature in the lengthy firmness of her chin. While I am trying to describe her, let me not forget her dress. A woman's dress is the mirror in which we may see the reflection of a woman's nature. Bearing in mind the melancholy and impressive circumstances under which she had brought the child to the prison, the gayety of color in her gown and her bonnet implied either a total want of feeling, or a total want of tact. As to her position in life, let me confess that I felt, after a closer examination, at a loss to determine it. She was certainly not a lady. The Prisoner had spoken of her as if she was a domestic servant who had forfeited her right to consideration and respect. And she had entered the prison, as a nurse might have entered it, in charge of a child. I did what we all do when we are not clever enough to find the answer to a riddle--I gave it up.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Perhaps you can tell me," she answered, "how much longer I am to be kept waiting in this prison."

"The decision," I reminded her, "doesn't depend on me."

"Then who does it depend on?"

The Minister had undoubtedly acquired the sole right of deciding. It was for him to say whether this woman should, or should not, remain in attendance on the child whom he had adopted. In the meanwhile, the feeling of distrust which was gaining on my mind warned me to remember the value of reserve in holding intercourse with a stranger.

She seemed to be irritated by my silence. "If the decision doesn't rest with you," she asked, "why did you tell me to stay in the waiting-room?"

"You brought the little girl into the prison," I said; "was it not natural to suppose that your mistress might want you--"

"Stop, sir!"

I had evidently given offense; I stopped directly.

"No person on the face of the earth," she declared, loftily, "has ever had the right to call herself my mistress. Of my own free will, sir, I took charge of the child."

"Because you are fond of her?" I suggested.

"I hate her."

It was unwise on my part--I protested. "Hate a baby little more than a year old!" I said.

"Her baby!"

She said it with the air of a woman who had produced an unanswerable reason. "I am accountable to nobody," she went on. "If I consented to trouble myself with the child, it was in remembrance of my friendship--notice, if you please, that I say friendship--with the unhappy father."

Putting together what I had just heard, and what I had seen in the cell, I drew the right conclusion at last. The woman, whose position in life had been thus far an impenetrable mystery to me, now stood revealed as one, among other objects of the Prisoner's jealousy, during her disastrous married life. A serious doubt occurred to me as to the authority under which the husband's mistress might be acting, after the husband's death. I instantly put it to the test.

"Do I understand you to assert any claim to the child?" I asked.

"Claim?" she repeated. "I know no more of the child than you do. I heard for the first time that such a creature was in existence, when her murdered father sent for me in his dying moments. At his entreaty I promised to take care of her, while her vile mother was out of the house and in the hands of the law. My promise has been performed. If I am expected (having brought her to the prison) to take her away again, understand this: I am under no obligation (even if I could afford it) to burden myself with that child; I shall hand her over to the workhouse authorities."

I forgot myself once more--I lost my temper.

"Leave the room," I said. "Your unworthy hands will not touch the poor baby again. She is provided for."

"I don't believe you!" the wretch burst out. "Who has taken the child?"

A quiet voice answered: "I have taken her."

We both looked round and saw the Minister standing in the open doorway, with the child in his arms. The ordeal that he had gone through in the condemned cell was visible in his face; he looked miserably haggard and broken. I was eager to know if his merciful interest in the Prisoner had purified her guilty soul--but at the same time I was afraid, after what he had but too plainly suffered, to ask him to enter into details.

"Only one word," I said. "Are your anxieties at rest?"

"God's mercy has helped me," he answered. "I have not spoken in vain. She believes; she repents; she has confessed the crime."

After handing the written and signed confession to me, he approached the venomous creature, still lingering in the room to hear what passed between us. Before I could stop him, he spoke to her, under a natural impression that he was addressing the Prisoner's servant.

"I am afraid you will be disappointed," he said, "when I tell you that your services will no longer be required. I have reasons for placing the child under the care of a nurse of my own choosing."

She listened with an evil smile.

"I know who furnished you with your reasons," she answered. "Apologies are quite needless, so far as I am concerned. If you had proposed to me to look after the new member of your family there, I should have felt it my duty to myself to have refused. I am not a nurse--I am an independent single lady. I see by your dress that you are a clergyman. Allow me to present myself as a mark of respect to your cloth. I am Miss Elizabeth Chance. May I ask the favor of your name?"

Too weary and too preoccupied to notice the insolence of her manner, the Minister mentioned his name. "I am anxious," he said, "to know if the child has been baptized. Perhaps you can enlighten me?"

Still insolent, Miss Elizabeth Chance shook her head carelessly. "I never heard--and, to tell you the truth, I never cared to hear--whether she was christened or not. Call her by what name you like, I can tell you this--you will find your adopted daughter a heavy handful."

The Minister turned to me. "What does she mean?"

"I will try to tell you," Miss Chance interposed. "Being a clergyman, you know who Deborah was? Very well. I am Deborah now; and I prophesy." She pointed to the child. "Remember what I say, reverend sir! You will find the tigress-cub take after its mother."

With those parting words, she favored us with a low curtsy, and left the room.