CHAPTER VI. THE DOCTOR DOUBTS.

The Minister looked at me in an absent manner; his attention seemed to have been wandering. "What was it Miss Chance said?" he asked.

Before I could speak, a friend's voice at the door interrupted us. The Doctor, returning to me as he had promised, answered the Minister's question in these words:

"I must have passed the person you mean, sir, as I was coming in here; and I heard her say: 'You will find the tigress-cub take after its mother.' If she had known how to put her meaning into good English, Miss Chance--that is the name you mentioned, I think--might have told you that the vices of the parents are inherited by the children. And the one particular parent she had in her mind," the Doctor continued, gently patting the child's cheek, "was no doubt the mother of this unfortunate little creature--who may, or may not, live to show you that she comes of a bad stock and inherits a wicked nature."

I was on the point of protesting against my friend's interpretation, when the Minister stopped me.

"Let me thank you, sir, for your explanation," he said to the Doctor. "As soon as my mind is free, I will reflect on what you have said. Forgive me, Mr. Governor," he went on, "if I leave you, now that I have placed the Prisoner's confession in your hands. It has been an effort to me to say the little I have said, since I first entered this room. I can think of nothing but that unhappy criminal, and the death that she must die to-morrow."

"Does she wish you to be present?" I asked.

"She positively forbids it. 'After what you have done for me,' she said, 'the least I can do in return is to prevent your being needlessly distressed.' She took leave of me; she kissed the little girl for the last time--oh, don't ask me to tell you about it! I shall break down if I try. Come, my darling!" He kissed the child tenderly, and took her away with him.

"That man is a strange compound of strength and weakness," the Doctor remarked. "Did you notice his face, just now? Nine men out of ten, suffering as he suffered, would have failed to control themselves. Such resolution as his may conquer the difficulties that are in store for him yet."

It was a trial of my temper to hear my clever colleague justifying, in this way, the ignorant prediction of an insolent woman.

"There are exceptions to all rules," I insisted. "And why are the virtues of the parents not just as likely to descend to the children as the vices? There was a fund of good, I can tell you, in that poor baby's father--though I don't deny that he was a profligate man. And even the horrible mother--as you heard just now--has virtue enough left in her to feel grateful to the man who has taken care of her child. These are facts; you can't dispute them."

The Doctor took out his pipe. "Do you mind my smoking?" he asked. "Tobacco helps me to arrange my ideas."

I gave him the means of arranging his ideas; that is to say, I gave him the match-box. He blew some preliminary clouds of smoke and then he answered me:

"For twenty years past, my friend, I have been studying the question of hereditary transmission of qualities; and I have found vices and diseases descending more frequently to children than virtue and health. I don't stop to ask why: there is no end to that sort of curiosity. What I have observed is what I tell you; no more and no less. You will say this is a horribly discouraging result of experience, for it tends to show that children come into the world at a disadvantage on the day of their birth. Of course they do. Children are born deformed; children are born deaf, dumb, or blind; children are born with the seeds in them of deadly diseases. Who can account for the cruelties of creation? Why are we endowed with life--only to end in death? And does it ever strike you, when you are cutting your mutton at dinner, and your cat is catching its mouse, and your spider is suffocating its fly, that we are all, big and little together, born to one certain inheritance--the privilege of eating each other?"

"Very sad," I admitted. "But it will all be set right in another world."

"Are you quite sure of that?" the Doctor asked.

"Quite sure, thank God! And it would be better for you if you felt about it as I do."

"We won't dispute, my dear Governor. I don't scoff at comforting hopes; I don't deny the existence of occasional compensations. But I do see, nevertheless, that Evil has got the upper hand among us, on this curious

little planet. Judging by my observation and experience, that ill-fated baby's chance of inheriting the virtues of her parents is not to be compared with her chances of inheriting their vices; especially if she happens to take after her mother. There the virtue is not conspicuous, and the vice is one enormous fact. When I think of the growth of that poisonous hereditary taint, which may come with time--when I think of passions let loose and temptations lying in ambush--I see the smooth surface of the Minister's domestic life with dangers lurking under it which make me shake in my shoes. God! what a life I should lead, if I happened to be in his place, some years hence. Suppose I said or did something (in the just exercise of my parental authority) which offended my adopted daughter. What figure would rise from the dead in my memory, when the girl bounced out of the room in a rage? The image of her mother would be the image I should see. I should remember what her mother did when she was provoked; I should lock my bedroom door, in my own house, at night. I should come down to breakfast with suspicions in my cup of tea, if I discovered that my adopted daughter had poured it out. Oh, yes; it's quite true that I might be doing the girl a cruel injustice all the time; but how am I to be sure of that? I am only sure that her mother was hanged for one of the most merciless murders committed in our time. Pass the match-box. My pipe's out, and my confession of faith has come to an end."

It was useless to dispute with a man who possessed his command of language. At the same time, there was a bright side to the poor Minister's prospects which the Doctor had failed to see. It was barely possible that I might succeed in putting my positive friend in the wrong. I tried the experiment, at any rate.

"You seem to have forgotten," I reminded him, "that the child will have every advantage that education can offer to her, and will be accustomed from her earliest years to restraining and purifying influences, in a clergyman's household."

Now that he was enjoying the fumes of tobacco, the Doctor was as placid and sweet-tempered as a man could be.

"Quite true," he said.

"Do you doubt the influence of religion?" I asked sternly.

He answered, sweetly: "Not at all"

"Or the influence of kindness?"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"Or the force of example?"

"I wouldn't deny it for the world."

I had not expected this extraordinary docility. The Doctor had got the upper hand of me again--a state of things that I might have found it hard to endure, but for a call of duty which put an end to our sitting. One of the female warders appeared with a message from the condemned cell. The Prisoner wished to see the Governor and the Medical Officer.

"Is she ill?" the Doctor inquired.

"No, sir."

"Hysterical? or agitated, perhaps?"

"As easy and composed, sir, as a person can be."

We set forth together for the condemned cell.