

## CHAPTER VII. THE MURDERESS CONSULTS THE AUTHORITIES.

There was a considerate side to my friend's character, which showed itself when the warder had left us.

He was especially anxious to be careful of what he said to a woman in the Prisoner's terrible situation; especially in the event of her having been really subjected to the influence of religious belief. On the Minister's own authority, I declared that there was every reason to adopt this conclusion; and in support of what I had said I showed him the confession. It only contained a few lines, acknowledging that she had committed the murder and that she deserved her sentence. "From the planning of the crime to the commission of the crime, I was in my right senses throughout. I knew what I was doing." With that remarkable disavowal of the defense set up by her advocate, the confession ended.

My colleague read the paper, and handed it back to me without making any remark. I asked if he suspected the Prisoner of feigning conversion to please the Minister.

"She shall not discover it," he answered, gravely, "if I do."

It would not be true to say that the Doctor's obstinacy had shaken my belief in the good result of the Minister's interference. I may, however, acknowledge that I felt some misgivings, which were not dispelled when I found myself in the presence of the Prisoner.

I had expected to see her employed in reading the Bible. The good book was closed and was not even placed within her reach. The occupation to which she was devoting herself astonished and repelled me.

Some carelessness on the part of the attendant had left on the table the writing materials that had been needed for her confession. She was using them now--when death on the scaffold was literally within a few hours of her--to sketch a portrait of the female warder, who was on the watch! The Doctor and I looked at each other; and now the sincerity of her repentance was something that I began to question, too.

She laid down the pen, and proceeded quietly to explain herself.

"Even the little time that is left to me proves to be a weary time to get

through," she said. "I am making a last use of the talent for drawing and catching a likeness, which has been one of my gifts since I was a girl. You look as if you didn't approve of such employment as this for a woman who is going to be hanged. Well, sir, I have no doubt you are right." She paused, and tore up the portrait. "If I have misbehaved myself," she resumed, "I make amends. To find you in an indulgent frame of mind is of importance to me just now. I have a favor to ask of you. May the warder leave the cell for a few minutes?"

Giving the woman permission to withdraw for a while, I waited with some anxiety to hear what the Prisoner wanted of me.

"I have something to say to you," she proceeded, "on the subject of executions. The face of a person who is going to be hanged is hidden, as I have been told, by a white cap drawn over it. Is that true?"

How another man might have felt, in my place, I cannot, of course, say. To my mind, such a question--on her lips--was too shocking to be answered in words. I bowed.

"And the body is buried," she went on, "in the prison?"

I could remain silent no longer. "Is there no human feeling left in you?" I burst out. "What do these horrid questions mean?"

"Don't be angry with me, sir; you shall hear directly. I want to know first if I am to be buried in the prison?"

I replied as before, by a bow.

"Now," she said, "I may tell you what I mean. In the autumn of last year I was taken to see some waxworks. Portraits of criminals were among them. There was one portrait--" She hesitated; her infernal self-possession failed her at last. The color left her face; she was no longer able to look at me firmly. "There was one portrait," she resumed, "that had been taken after the execution. The face was so hideous; it was swollen to such a size in its frightful deformity--oh, sir, don't let me be seen in that state, even by the strangers who bury me! Use your influence--forbid them to take the cap off my face when I am dead--order them to bury me in it, and I swear to you I'll meet death tomorrow as coolly as the boldest man that ever mounted the scaffold!" Before I could stop her, she seized me by the hand, and wrung it with a furious power that left the mark of her grasp on me, in a bruise, for days afterward. "Will you do it?" she cried. "You're an honorable man; you

will keep your word. Give me your promise!"

I gave her my promise.

The relief to her tortured spirit expressed itself horribly in a burst of frantic laughter. "I can't help it," she gasped; "I'm so happy."

My enemies said of me, when I got my appointment, that I was too excitable a man to be governor of a prison. Perhaps they were not altogether wrong. Anyhow, the quick-witted Doctor saw some change in me, which I was not aware of myself. He took my arm and led me out of the cell. "Leave her to me," he whispered. "The fine edge of my nerves was worn off long ago in the hospital."

When we met again, I asked what had passed between the Prisoner and himself.

"I gave her time to recover," he told me; "and, except that she looked a little paler than usual, there was no trace left of the frenzy that you remember. 'I ought to apologize for troubling you,' she said; 'but it is perhaps natural that I should think, now and then, of what is to happen to me to-morrow morning. As a medical man, you will be able to enlighten me. Is death by hanging a painful death?' She had put it so politely that I felt bound to answer her. 'If the neck happens to be broken,' I said, 'hanging is a sudden death; fright and pain (if there is any pain) are both over in an instant. As to the other form of death which is also possible (I mean death by suffocation), I must own as an honest man that I know no more about it than you do.' After considering a little, she made a sensible remark, and followed it by an embarrassing request. 'A great deal,' she said, 'must depend on the executioner. I am not afraid of death, Doctor. Why should I be? My anxiety about my little girl is set at rest; I have nothing left to live for. But I don't like pain. Would you mind telling the executioner to be careful? Or would it be better if I spoke to him myself?' I said I thought it would come with a better grace from herself. She understood me directly; and we dropped the subject. Are you surprised at her coolness, after your experience of her?"

I confessed that I was surprised.

"Think a little," the Doctor said. "The one sensitive place in that woman's nature is the place occupied by her self-esteem."

I objected to this that she had shown fondness for her child.

My friend disposed of the objection with his customary readiness.

"The maternal instinct," he said. "A cat is fond of her kittens; a cow is fond of her calf. No, sir, the one cause of that outbreak of passion which so shocked you--a genuine outbreak, beyond all doubt--is to be found in the vanity of a fine feminine creature, overpowered by a horror of looking hideous, even after her death. Do you know I rather like that woman?"

"Is it possible that you are in earnest?" I asked.

"I know as well as you do," he answered, "that this is neither a time nor a place for jesting. The fact is, the Prisoner carries out an idea of mine. It is my positive conviction that the worst murders--I mean murders deliberately planned--are committed by persons absolutely deficient in that part of the moral organization which feels. The night before they are hanged they sleep. On their last morning they eat a breakfast. Incapable of realizing the horror of murder, they are incapable of realizing the horror of death. Do you remember the last murderer who was hanged here--a gentleman's coachman who killed his wife? He had but two anxieties while he was waiting for execution. One was to get his allowance of beer doubled, and the other was to be hanged in his coachman's livery. No! no! these wretches are all alike; they are human creatures born with the temperaments of tigers. Take my word for it, we need feel no anxiety about to-morrow. The Prisoner will face the crowd round the scaffold with composure; and the people will say, 'She died game.'"