

CHAPTER VIII. THE MINISTER SAYS GOOD-BY.

The Capital Punishment of the Prisoner is in no respect connected with my purpose in writing the present narrative. Neither do I desire to darken these pages by describing in detail an act of righteous retribution which must present, by the nature of it, a scene of horror. For these reasons I ask to be excused, if I limit what I must needs say of the execution within the compass of a few words--and pass on.

The one self-possessed person among us was the miserable woman who suffered the penalty of death.

Not very discreetly, as I think, the Chaplain asked her if she had truly repented. She answered: "I have confessed the crime, sir. What more do you want?" To my mind--still hesitating between the view that believes with the Minister, and the view that doubts with the Doctor--this reply leaves a way open to hope of her salvation. Her last words to me, as she mounted the steps of the scaffold, were: "Remember your promise." It was easy for me to be true to my word. At that bygone time, no difficulties were placed in my way by such precautions as are now observed in the conduct of executions within the walls of the prison. From the time of her death to the time of her burial, no living creature saw her face. She rests, veiled in her prison grave.

Let me now turn to living interests, and to scenes removed from the thunder-clouds of crime.

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On the next day I received a visit from the Minister.

His first words entreated me not to allude to the terrible event of the previous day. "I cannot escape thinking of it," he said, "but I may avoid speaking of it." This seemed to me to be the misplaced confidence of a weak man in the refuge of silence. By way of changing the subject, I spoke of the child. There would be serious difficulties to contend with (as I ventured to suggest), if he remained in the town, and allowed his new responsibilities to become the subject of public talk.

His reply to this agreeably surprised me. There were no difficulties to be feared.

The state of his wife's health had obliged him (acting under medical advice) to try the influence of her native air. An interval of some months might elapse before the good effect of the change had sufficiently declared itself; and a return to the peculiar climate of the town might bring on a relapse. There had consequently been no alternative to but resign his charge. Only on that day the resignation had been accepted--with expressions of regret sincerely reciprocated by himself. He proposed to leave the town immediately; and one of the objects of his visit was to bid me good-by.

"The next place I live in," he said, "will be more than a hundred miles away. At that distance I may hope to keep events concealed which must be known only to ourselves. So far as I can see, there are no risks of discovery lurking in this place. My servants (only two in number) have both been born here, and have both told my wife that they have no wish to go away. As to the person who introduced herself to me by the name of Miss Chance, she was traced to the railway station yesterday afternoon, and took her ticket for London."

I congratulated the Minister on the good fortune which had befriended him, so far.

"You will understand how carefully I have provided against being deceived," he continued, "when I tell you what my plans are. The persons among whom my future lot is cast--and the child herself, of course--must never suspect that the new member of my family is other than my own daughter. This is deceit, I admit; but it is deceit that injures no one. I hope you see the necessity for it, as I do."

There could be no doubt of the necessity.

If the child was described as adopted, there would be curiosity about the circumstances, and inquiries relating to the parents. Prevaricating replies lead to suspicion, and suspicion to discovery. But for the wise course which the Minister had decided on taking, the poor child's life might have been darkened by the horror of the mother's crime, and the infamy of the mother's death.

Having quieted my friend's needless scruples by this perfectly sincere expression of opinion, I ventured to approach the central figure in his domestic circle, by means of a question relating to his wife. How had that lady received the unfortunate little creature, for whose appearance on the home-scene she must have been entirely unprepared?

The Minister's manner showed some embarrassment; he prefaced what he had to tell me with praises of his wife, equally creditable no doubt to both of them. The beauty of the child, the pretty ways of the child, he said, fascinated the admirable woman at first sight. It was not to be denied that she had felt, and had expressed, misgivings, on being informed of the circumstances under which the Minister's act of mercy had been performed. But her mind was too well balanced to incline to this state of feeling, when her husband had addressed her in defense of his conduct. She then understood that the true merit of a good action consisted in patiently facing the sacrifices involved. Her interest in the new daughter being, in this way, ennobled by a sense of Christian duty, there had been no further difference of opinion between the married pair.

I listened to this plausible explanation with interest, but, at the same time, with doubts of the lasting nature of the lady's submission to circumstances; suggested, perhaps, by the constraint in the Minister's manner. It was well for both of us when we changed the subject. He reminded me of the discouraging view which the Doctor had taken of the prospect before him.

"I will not attempt to decide whether your friend is right or wrong," he said. "Trusting, as I do, in the mercy of God, I look hopefully to a future time when all that is brightest and best in the nature of my adopted child will be developed under my fostering care. If evil tendencies show themselves, my reliance will be confidently placed on pious example, on religious instruction, and, above all, on intercession by prayer. Repeat to your friend," he concluded, "what you have just heard me say. Let him ask himself if he could confront the uncertain future with my cheerful submission and my steadfast hope."

He intrusted me with that message, and gave me his hand. So we parted.

I agreed with him, I admired him; but my faith seemed to want sustaining power, as compared with his faith. On his own showing (as it appeared to me), there would be two forces in a state of conflict in the child's nature as she grew up--inherited evil against inculcated good. Try as I might, I failed to feel the Minister's comforting conviction as to which of the two would win.