

## CHAPTER IX. THE GOVERNOR RECEIVES A VISIT.

A few days after the good man had left us, I met with a serious accident, caused by a false step on the stone stairs of the prison.

The long illness which followed this misfortune, and my removal afterward (in the interests of my recovery) to a milder climate than the climate of England, obliged me to confide the duties of governor of the prison to a representative. I was absent from my post for rather more than a year. During this interval no news reached me from my reverend friend.

Having returned to the duties of my office, I thought of writing to the Minister. While the proposed letter was still in contemplation, I was informed that a lady wished to see me. She sent in her card. My visitor proved to be the Minister's wife.

I observed her with no ordinary attention when she entered the room.

Her dress was simple; her scanty light hair, so far as I could see it under her bonnet, was dressed with taste. The paleness of her lips, and the faded color in her face, suggested that she was certainly not in good health. Two peculiarities struck me in her personal appearance. I never remembered having seen any other person with such a singularly narrow and slanting forehead as this lady presented; and I was impressed, not at all agreeably, by the flashing shifting expression in her eyes. On the other hand, let me own that I was powerfully attracted and interested by the beauty of her voice. Its fine variety of compass, and its musical resonance of tone, fell with such enchantment on the ear, that I should have liked to put a book of poetry into her hand, and to have heard her read it in summer-time, accompanied by the music of a rocky stream.

The object of her visit--so far as she explained it at the outset--appeared to be to offer her congratulations on my recovery, and to tell me that her husband had assumed the charge of a church in a large town not far from her birthplace.

Even those commonplace words were made interesting by her delicious voice. But however sensitive to sweet sounds a man may be, there are limits to his capacity for deceiving himself--especially when he happens to be enlightened by experience of humanity within the walls of a prison. I had, it may be remembered, already doubted the lady's good temper, judging from

her husband's over-wrought description of her virtues. Her eyes looked at me furtively; and her manner, gracefully self-possessed as it was, suggested that she had something of a delicate, or disagreeable, nature to say to me, and that she was at a loss how to approach the subject so as to produce the right impression on my mind at the outset. There was a momentary silence between us. For the sake of saying something, I asked how she and the Minister liked their new place of residence.

"Our new place of residence," she answered, "has been made interesting by a very unexpected event--an event (how shall I describe it?) which has increased our happiness and enlarged our family circle."

There she stopped: expecting me, as I fancied, to guess what she meant. A woman, and that woman a mother, might have fulfilled her anticipations. A man, and that man not listening attentively, was simply puzzled.

"Pray excuse my stupidity," I said; "I don't quite understand you."

The lady's temper looked at me out of the lady's shifting eyes, and hid itself again in a moment. She set herself right in my estimation by taking the whole blame of our little misunderstanding on her own innocent shoulders.

"I ought to have spoken more plainly," she said. "Let me try what I can do now. After many years of disappointment in my married life, it has pleased Providence to bestow on me the happiness--the inexpressible happiness--of being a mother. My baby is a sweet little girl; and my one regret is that I cannot nurse her myself."

My languid interest in the Minister's wife was not stimulated by the announcement of this domestic event.

I felt no wish to see the "sweet little girl"; I was not even reminded of another example of long-deferred maternity, which had occurred within the limits of my own family circle. All my sympathies attached themselves to the sad little figure of the adopted child. I remembered the poor baby on my knee, enchanted by the ticking of my watch--I thought of her, peacefully and prettily asleep under the horrid shelter of the condemned cell--and it is hardly too much to say that my heart was heavy, when I compared her prospects with the prospects of her baby-rival. Kind as he was, conscientious as he was, could the Minister be expected to admit to an equal share in his love the child endeared to him as a father, and the child who merely reminded him of an act of mercy? As for his wife, it seemed the merest waste of time to put her state of feeling (placed between the two

children) to the test of inquiry. I tried the useless experiment, nevertheless.

"It is pleasant to think," I began, "that your other daughter--"

She interrupted me, with the utmost gentleness: "Do you mean the child that my husband was foolish enough to adopt?"

"Say rather fortunate enough to adopt," I persisted. "As your own little girl grows up, she will want a playfellow. And she will find a playfellow in that other child, whom the good Minister has taken for his own."

"No, my dear sir--not if I can prevent it."

The contrast between the cruelty of her intention, and the musical beauty of the voice which politely expressed it in those words, really startled me. I was at a loss how to answer her, at the very time when I ought to have been most ready to speak.

"You must surely understand," she went on, "that we don't want another person's child, now we have a little darling of our own?"

"Does your husband agree with you in that view?" I asked.

"Oh dear, no! He said what you said just now, and (oddly enough) almost in the same words. But I don't at all despair of persuading him to change his mind--and you can help me."

She made that audacious assertion with such an appearance of feeling perfectly sure of me, that my politeness gave way under the strain laid on it. "What do you mean?" I asked sharply.

Not in the least impressed by my change of manner, she took from the pocket of her dress a printed paper. "You will find what I mean there," she replied--and put the paper into my hand.

It was an appeal to the charitable public, occasioned by the enlargement of an orphan-asylum, with which I had been connected for many years. What she meant was plain enough now. I said nothing: I only looked at her.

Pleased to find that I was clever enough to guess what she meant, on this occasion, the Minister's wife informed me that the circumstances were all in our favor. She still persisted in taking me into partnership--the circumstances were in our favor.

"In two years more," she explained, "the child of that detestable creature who was hanged--do you know, I cannot even look at the little wretch without thinking of the gallows?--will be old enough (with your interest to help us) to be received into the asylum. What a relief it will be to get rid of that child! And how hard I shall work at canvassing for subscribers' votes! Your name will be a tower of strength when I use it as a reference. Pardon me--you are not looking so pleasantly as usual. Do you see some obstacles in our way?"

"I see two obstacles."

"What can they possibly be?"

For the second time, my politeness gave way under the strain laid on it. "You know perfectly well," I said, "what one of the obstacles is."

"Am I to understand that you contemplate any serious resistance on the part of my husband?"

"Certainly!"

She was unaffectedly amused by my simplicity.

"Are you a single man?" she asked.

"I am a widower."

"Then your experience ought to tell you that I know every weak point in the Minister's character. I can tell him, on your authority, that the hateful child will be placed in competent and kindly hands--and I have my own sweet baby to plead for me. With these advantages in my favor, do you actually suppose I can fail to make my way of thinking his way of thinking? You must have forgotten your own married life! Suppose we go on to the second of your two obstacles. I hope it will be better worth considering than the first."

"The second obstacle will not disappoint you," I answered; "I am the obstacle, this time."

"You refuse to help me?"

"Positively."

"Perhaps reflection may alter your resolution?"

"Reflection will do nothing of the kind."

"You are rude, sir!"

"In speaking to you, madam, I have no alternative but to speak plainly."

She rose. Her shifting eyes, for once, looked at me steadily.

"What sort of enemy have I made of you?" she asked. "A passive enemy who is content with refusing to help me? Or an active enemy who will write to my husband?"

"It depends entirely," I told her, "on what your husband does. If he questions me about you, I shall tell him the truth."

"And if not?"

"In that case, I shall hope to forget that you ever favored me with a visit."

In making this reply I was guiltless of any malicious intention. What evil interpretation she placed on my words it is impossible for me to say; I can only declare that some intolerable sense of injury hurried her into an outbreak of rage. Her voice, strained for the first time, lost its tuneful beauty of tone.

"Come and see us in two years' time," she burst out--"and discover the orphan of the gallows in our house if you can! If your Asylum won't take her, some other Charity will. Ha, Mr. Governor, I deserve my disappointment! I ought to have remembered that you are only a jailer after all. And what is a jailer? Proverbially a brute. Do you hear that? A brute!"

Her strength suddenly failed her. She dropped back into the chair from which she had risen, with a faint cry of pain. A ghastly pallor stole over her face. There was wine on the sideboard; I filled a glass. She refused to take it. At that time in the day, the Doctor's duties required his attendance in the prison. I instantly sent for him. After a moment's look at her, he took the wine out of my hand, and held the glass to her lips.

"Drink it," he said. She still refused. "Drink it," he reiterated, "or you will die."

That frightened her; she drank the wine. The Doctor waited for a while with his fingers on her pulse. "She will do now," he said.

"Can I go?" she asked.

"Go wherever you please, madam--so long as you don't go upstairs in a hurry."

She smiled: "I understand you, sir--and thank you for your advice."

I asked the Doctor, when we were alone, what made him tell her not to go upstairs in a hurry.

"What I felt," he answered, "when I had my fingers on her pulse. You heard her say that she understood me."

"Yes; but I don't know what she meant."

"She meant, probably, that her own doctor had warned her as I did."

"Something seriously wrong with her health?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Heart."