

**CHAPTER XXXIII. THE MINISTER'S MISFORTUNE.**

"Do you know that lady?" Miss Helena asked, as we entered the house.

"She is a perfect stranger to me," I answered.

"Are you sure you have not forgotten her?"

"Why do you think I have forgotten her?"

"Because she evidently remembered you."

The lady had no doubt looked at me twice. If this meant that my face was familiar to her, I could only repeat what I have already said. Never, to my knowledge, had I seen her before.

Leading the way upstairs, Miss Helena apologized for taking me into her father's bedroom. "He is able to sit up in an armchair," she said; "and he might do more, as I think, if he would exert himself. He won't exert himself. Very sad. Would you like to look at your room, before you see my father? It is quite ready for you. We hope"--she favored me with a fascinating smile, devoted to winning my heart when her interests required it--"we hope you will pay us a long visit; we look on you as one of ourselves."

I thanked her, and said I would shake hands with my old friend before I went to my room. We parted at the bedroom door.

It is out of my power to describe the shock that overpowered me when I first saw the Minister again, after the long interval of time that had separated us. Nothing that his daughter said, nothing that I myself anticipated, had prepared me for that lamentable change. For the moment, I was not sufficiently master of myself to be able to speak to him. He added to my embarrassment by the humility of his manner, and the formal elaboration of his apologies.

"I feel painfully that I have taken a liberty with you," he said, "after the long estrangement between us--for which my want of Christian forbearance is to blame. Forgive it, sir, and forget it. I hope to show that necessity justifies my presumption, in subjecting you to a wearisome journey for my sake."

Beginning to recover myself, I begged that he would make no more excuses.

My interruption seemed to confuse him.

"I wished to say," he went on, "that you are the one man who can understand me. There is my only reason for asking to see you, and looking forward as I do to your advice. You remember the night--or was it the day?--before that miserable woman was hanged? You were the only person present when I agreed to adopt the poor little creature, stained already (one may say) by its mother's infamy. I think your wisdom foresaw what a terrible responsibility I was undertaking; you tried to prevent it. Well! well! you have been in my confidence--you only. Mind! nobody in this house knows that one of the two girls is not really my daughter. Pray stop me, if you find me wandering from the point. My wish is to show that you are the only man I can open my heart to. She--" He paused, as if in search of a lost idea, and left the sentence uncompleted. "Yes," he went on, "I was thinking of my adopted child. Did I ever tell you that I baptized her myself? and by a good Scripture name too--Eunice. Ah, sir, that little helpless baby is a grown-up girl now; of an age to inspire love, and to feel love. I blush to acknowledge it; I have behaved with a want of self-control, with a cowardly weakness.--No! I am, indeed, wandering this time. I ought to have told you first that I have been brought face to face with the possibility of Eunice's marriage. And, to make it worse still, I can't help liking the young man. He comes of a good family--excellent manners, highly educated, plenty of money, a gentleman in every sense of the word. And poor little Eunice is so fond of him! Isn't it dreadful to be obliged to check her dearly-loved Philip? The young gentleman's name is Philip. Do you like the name? I say I am obliged to check her sweetheart in the rudest manner, when all he wants to do is to ask me modestly for my sweet Eunice's hand. Oh, what have I not suffered, without a word of sympathy to comfort me, before I had courage enough to write to you! Shall I make a dreadful confession? If my religious convictions had not stood in my way, I believe I should have committed suicide. Put yourself in my place. Try to see yourself shrinking from a necessary explanation, when the happiness of a harmless girl--so dutiful, so affectionate--depended on a word of kindness from your lips. And that word you are afraid to speak! Don't take offense, sir; I mean myself, not you. Why don't you say something?" he burst out fiercely, incapable of perceiving that he had allowed me no opportunity of speaking to him. "Good God! don't you understand me, after all?"

The signs of mental confusion in his talk had so distressed me, that I had not been composed enough to feel sure of what he really meant, until he described himself as "shrinking from a necessary explanation." Hearing those words, my knowledge of the circumstances helped me; I realized what his situation really was.

"Compose yourself," I said, "I understand you at last."

He had suddenly become distrustful. "Prove it," he muttered, with a furtive look at me. "I want to be satisfied that you understand my position."

"This is your position," I told him. "You are placed between two deplorable alternatives. If you tell this young gentleman that Miss Eunice's mother was a criminal hanged for murder, his family--even if he himself doesn't recoil from it--will unquestionably forbid the marriage; and your adopted daughter's happiness will be the sacrifice."

"True!" he said. "Frightfully true! Go on."

"If, on the other hand, you sanction the marriage, and conceal the truth, you commit a deliberate act of deceit; and you leave the lives of the young couple at the mercy of a possible discovery, which might part husband and wife--cast a slur on their children--and break up the household."

He shuddered while he listened to me. "Come to the end of it," he cried.

I had no more to say, and I was obliged to answer him to that effect.

"No more to say?" he replied. "You have not told me yet what I most want to know."

I did a rash thing; I asked what it was that he most wanted to know.

"Can't you see it for yourself?" he demanded indignantly. "Suppose you were put between those two alternatives which you mentioned just now."

"Well?"

"What would you do, sir, in my place? Would you own the disgraceful truth--before the marriage--or run the risk, and keep the horrid story to yourself?"

Either way, my reply might lead to serious consequences. I hesitated.

He threatened me with his poor feeble hand. It was only the anger of a moment; his humor changed to supplication. He reminded me piteously of bygone days: "You used to be a kind-hearted man. Has age hardened you? Have you no pity left for your old friend? My poor heart is sadly in want of a word of wisdom, spoken kindly."

Who could have resisted this? I took his hand: "Be at ease, dear Minister. In your place I should run the risk, and keep that horrid story to myself."

He sank back gently in his chair. "Oh, the relief of it!" he said. "How can I thank you as I ought for quieting my mind?"

I seized the opportunity of quieting his mind to good purpose by suggesting a change of subject. "Let us have done with serious talk for the present," I proposed. "I have been an idle man for the last five years, and I want to tell you about my travels."

His attention began to wander, he evidently felt no interest in my travels. "Are you sure," he asked anxiously, "that we have said all we ought to say? No!" he cried, answering his own question. "I believe I have forgotten something--I am certain I have forgotten something. Perhaps I mentioned it in the letter I wrote to you. Have you got my letter?"

I showed it to him. He read the letter, and gave it back to me with a heavy sigh. "Not there!" he said despairingly. "Not there!"

"Is the lost remembrance connected with anybody in the house?" I asked, trying to help him. "Does it relate, by any chance, to one of the young ladies?"

"You wonderful man! Nothing escapes you. Yes; the thing I have forgotten concerns one of the girls. Stop! Let me get at it by myself. Surely it relates to Helena?" He hesitated; his face clouded over with an expression of anxious thought. "Yes; it relates to Helena," he repeated "but how?" His eyes filled with tears. "I am ashamed of my weakness," he said faintly. "You don't know how dreadful it is to forget things in this way."

The injury that his mind had sustained now assumed an aspect that was serious indeed. The subtle machinery, which stimulates the memory, by means of the association of ideas, appeared to have lost its working power in the intellect of this unhappy man. I made the first suggestion that occurred to me, rather than add to his distress by remaining silent.

"If we talk of your daughter," I said, "the merest accident--a word spoken at random by you or me--may be all your memory wants to rouse it."

He agreed eagerly to this: "Yes! Yes! Let me begin. Helena met you, I think, at the station. Of course, I remember that; it only happened a few hours

since. Well?" he went on, with a change in his manner to parental pride, which it was pleasant to see, "did you think my daughter a fine girl? I hope Helena didn't disappoint you?"

"Quite the contrary." Having made that necessary reply, I saw my way to keeping his mind occupied by a harmless subject. "It must, however, be owned," I went on, "that your daughter surprised me."

"In what way?"

"When she mentioned her name. Who could have supposed that you--an inveterate enemy to the Roman Catholic Church--would have christened your daughter by the name of a Roman Catholic Saint?"

He listened to this with a smile. Had I happily blundered on some association which his mind was still able to pursue?

"You happen to be wrong this time," he said pleasantly. "I never gave my girl the name of Helena; and, what is more, I never baptized her. You ought to know that. Years and years ago, I wrote to tell you that my poor wife had made me a proud and happy father. And surely I said that the child was born while she was on a visit to her brother's rectory. Do you remember the name of the place? I told you it was a remote little village, called--Suppose we put your memory to a test? Can you remember the name?" he asked, with a momentary appearance of triumph showing itself, poor fellow, in his face.

After the time that had elapsed, the name had slipped my memory. When I confessed this, he exulted over me, with an unalloyed pleasure which it was cheering to see.

"Your memory is failing you now," he said. "The name is Long Lanes. And what do you think my wife did--this is so characteristic of her!--when I presented myself at her bedside. Instead of speaking of our own baby, she reminded me of the name that I had given to our adopted daughter when I baptized the child. 'You chose the ugliest name that a girl can have,' she said. I begged her to remember that 'Eunice' was a name in Scripture. She persisted in spite of me. (What firmness of character!) 'I detest the name of Eunice!' she said; 'and now that I have a girl of my own, it's my turn to choose the name; I claim it as my right.' She was beginning to get excited; I allowed her to have her own way, of course. 'Only let me know,' I said, 'what the name is to be when you have thought of it.' My dear sir, she had the name ready, without thinking about it: 'My baby shall be called by the name

that is sweetest in my ears, the name of my dear lost mother.' We had--what shall I call it?--a slight difference of opinion when I heard that the name was to be Helena. I really could not reconcile it to my conscience to baptize a child of mine by the name of a Popish saint. My wife's brother set things right between us. A worthy good man; he died not very long ago--I forget the date. Not to detain you any longer, the rector of Long Lanes baptized our daughter. That is how she comes by her un-English name; and so it happens that her birth is registered in a village which her father has never inhabited. I hope, sir, you think a little better of my memory now?"

I was afraid to tell him what I really did think.

He was not fifty years old yet; and he had just exhibited one of the sad symptoms which mark the broken memory of old age. Lead him back to the events of many years ago, and (as he had just proved to me) he could remember well and relate coherently. But let him attempt to recall circumstances which had only taken place a short time since, and forgetfulness and confusion presented the lamentable result, just as I have related it.

The effort that he had made, the agitation that he had undergone in talking to me, had confirmed my fears that he would overtask his wasted strength. He lay back in his chair. "Let us go on with our conversation," he murmured. "We haven't recovered what I had forgotten, yet." His eyes closed, and opened again languidly. "There was something I wanted to recall--" he resumed, "and you were helping me." His weak voice died away; his weary eyes closed again. After waiting until there could be no doubt that he was resting peacefully in sleep, I left the room.