

CHAPTER XXXV. THE FUTURE LOOKS GLOOMY.

My ever-helpful guide led me to my room--well out of Mr. Gracedieu's hearing, if he happened to be awake--at the other end of the passage. Having opened the door, she paused on the threshold. The decrees of that merciless English despot, Propriety, claimed her for their own. "Oh, dear!" she said to herself, "ought I to go in?"

My interest as a man (and, what is more, an old man) in the coming disclosure was too serious to be trifled with in this way. I took her arm, and led her into my room as if I was at a dinner-party, leading her to the table. Is it the good or the evil fortune of mortals that the comic side of life, and the serious side of life, are perpetually in collision with each other? We burst out laughing, at a moment of grave importance to us both. Perfectly inappropriate, and perfectly natural. But we were neither of us philosophers, and we were ashamed of our own merriment the moment it had ceased.

"When you hear what I have to tell you," Miss Jillgall began, "I hope you will think as I do. What has slipped Mr. Gracedieu's memory, it may be safer to say--for he is sometimes irritable, poor dear--where he won't know anything about it."

With that she told the lamentable story of the desertion of Eunice.

In silence I listened, from first to last. How could I trust myself to speak, as I must have spoken, in the presence of a woman? The cruel injury inflicted on the poor girl, who had interested and touched me in the first innocent year of her life--who had grown to womanhood to be the victim of two wretches, both trusted by her, both bound to her by the sacred debt of love--so fired my temper that I longed to be within reach of the man, with a horsewhip in my hand. Seeing in my face, as I suppose, what was passing in my mind, Miss Jillgall expressed sympathy and admiration in her own quaint way: "Ah, I like to see you so angry! It's grand to know that a man who has governed prisoners has got such a pitying heart. Let me tell you one thing, sir. You will be more angry than ever, when you see my sweet girl to-morrow. And mind this--it is Helena's devouring vanity, Helena's wicked jealousy of her sister's good fortune, that has done the mischief. Don't be too hard on Philip? I do believe, if the truth was told, he is ashamed of himself."

I felt inclined to be harder on Philip than ever. "Where is he?" I asked.

Miss Jillgall started. "Oh, Mr. Governor, don't show the severe side of yourself, after the pretty compliment I have just paid to you! What a masterful voice! and what eyes, dear sir; what terrifying eyes! I feel as if I was one of your prisoners, and had misbehaved myself."

I repeated my question with improvement, I hope, in my looks and tones: "Don't think me obstinate, my dear lady. I only want to know if he is in this town."

Miss Jillgall seemed to take a curious pleasure in disappointing me; she had not forgotten my unfortunate abruptness of look and manner. "You won't find him here," she said.

"Perhaps he has left England?"

"If you must know, sir, he is in London--with Mr. Dunboyne."

The name startled me.

In a moment more it recalled to my memory a remarkable letter, addressed to me many years ago, which will be found in my introductory narrative. The writer--an Irish gentleman, named Dunboyne confided to me that his marriage had associated him with the murderess, who had then been recently executed, as brother-in-law to that infamous woman. This circumstance he had naturally kept a secret from every one, including his son, then a boy. I alone was made an exception to the general rule, because I alone could tell him what had become of the poor little girl, who in spite of the disgraceful end of her mother was still his niece. If the child had not been provided for, he felt it his duty to take charge of her education, and to watch over her prospects in the future. Such had been his object in writing to me; and such was the substance of his letter. I had merely informed him, in reply, that his kind intentions had been anticipated, and that the child's prosperous future was assured.

Miss Jillgall's keen observation noticed the impression that had been produced upon me. "Mr. Dunboyne's name seems to surprise you." she said.

"This is the first time I have heard you mention it," I answered.

She looked as if she could hardly believe me. "Surely you must have heard the name," she said, "when I told you about poor Eunece?"

"No."

"Well, then, Mr. Gracedieu must have mentioned it?"

"No."

This second reply in the negative irritated her.

"At any rate," she said, sharply, "you appeared to know Mr. Dunboyne's name, just now."

"Certainly!"

"And yet," she persisted, "the name seemed to come upon you as a surprise. I don't understand it. If I have mentioned Philip's name once, I have mentioned it a dozen times."

We were completely at cross-purposes. She had taken something for granted which was an unfathomable mystery to me.

"Well," I objected, "if you did mention his name a dozen times--excuse me for asking the question---what then?"

"Good heavens!" cried Miss Jillgall, "do you mean to say you never guessed that Philip was Mr. Dunboyne's son?"

I was petrified.

His son! Dunboyne's son! How could I have guessed it?

At a later time only, the good little creature who had so innocently deceived me, remembered that the mischief might have been wrought by the force of habit. While he had still a claim on their regard the family had always spoken of Eunice's unworthy lover by his Christian name; and what had been familiar in their mouths felt the influence of custom, before time enough had elapsed to make them think as readily of the enemy as they had hitherto thought of the friend.

But I was ignorant of this: and the disclosure by which I found myself suddenly confronted was more than I could support. For the moment, speech was beyond me.

His son! Dunboyne's son!

What a position that young man had occupied, unsuspected by his father, unknown to himself! kept in ignorance of the family disgrace, he had been a guest in the house of the man who had consoled his infamous aunt on the eve of her execution--who had saved his unhappy cousin from poverty, from sorrow, from shame. And but one human being knew this. And that human being was myself!

Observing my agitation, Miss Jillgall placed her own construction on it.

"Do you know anything bad of Philip?" she asked eagerly. "If it's something that will prevent Helena from marrying him, tell me what it is, I beg and pray."

I knew no more of "Philip" (whom she still called by his Christian name!) than she had told me herself: there was no help for it but to disappoint her. At the same time I was unable to conceal that I was ill at ease, and that it might be well to leave me by myself. After a look round the bedchamber to see that nothing was wanting to my comfort, she made her quaint curtsy, and left me with her own inimitable form of farewell. "Oh, indeed, I have been here too long! And I'm afraid I have been guilty, once or twice, of vulgar familiarity. You will excuse me, I hope. This has been an exciting interview--I think I am going to cry."

She ran out of the room; and carried away with her some of my kindest feelings, short as the time of our acquaintance had been. What a wife and what a mother was lost there--and all for want of a pretty face!

Left alone, my thoughts inevitably reverted to Dunboyne the elder, and to all that had happened in Mr. Gracedieu's family since the Irish gentleman had written to me in bygone years.

The terrible choice of responsibilities which had preyed on the Minister's mind had been foreseen by Mr. Dunboyne, when he first thought of adopting his infant niece, and had warned him to dread what might happen in the future, if he brought her up as a member of the family with his own boy, and if the two young people became at a later period attached to each other. How had the wise foresight, which offered such a contrast to the poor Minister's impulsive act of mercy, met with its reward? Fate or Providence (call it which we may) had brought Dunboyne's son and the daughter of the murderess together; had inspired those two strangers with love; and had emboldened them to plight their troth by a marriage engagement. Was the man's betrayal of the trust placed in him by the faithful girl to be esteemed a

fortunate circumstance by the two persons who knew the true story of her parentage, the Minister and myself? Could we rejoice in an act of infidelity which had embittered and darkened the gentle harmless life of the victim? Or could we, on the other hand, encourage the ruthless deceit, the hateful treachery, which had put the wicked Helena--with no exposure to dread if she married--into her wronged sister's place? Impossible! In the one case as in the other, impossible!

Equally hopeless did the prospect appear, when I tried to determine what my own individual course of action ought to be.

In my calmer moments, the idea had occurred to my mind of going to Dunboyne the younger, and, if he had any sense of shame left, exerting my influence to lead him back to his betrothed wife. How could I now do this, consistently with my duty to the young man's father; knowing what I knew, and not forgetting that I had myself advised Mr. Gracedieu to keep the truth concealed, when I was equally ignorant of Philip Dunboyne's parentage and of Helena Gracedieu's treachery?

Even if events so ordered it that the marriage of Eunice might yet take place--without any interference exerted to produce that result, one way or the other, on my part--it would be just as impossible for me to speak out now, as it had been in the long-past years when I had so cautiously answered Mr. Dunboyne's letter. But what would he think of me if accident led, sooner or later, to the disclosure which I had felt bound to conceal? The more I tried to forecast the chances of the future, the darker and the darker was the view that faced me.

To my sinking heart and wearied mind, good Dame Nature presented a more acceptable prospect, when I happened to look out of the window of my room. There I saw the trees and flowerbeds of a garden, tempting me irresistibly under the cloudless sunshine of a fine day. I was on my way out, to recover heart and hope, when a knock at the door stopped me.

Had Miss Jillgall returned? When I said "Come in," Mr. Gracedieu opened the door, and entered the room.

He was so weak that he staggered as he approached me. Leading him to a chair, I noticed a wild look in his eyes, and a flush on his haggard cheeks. Something had happened.

"When you were with me in my room," he began, "did I not tell you that I had forgotten something?"

"Certainly you did."

"Well, I have found the lost remembrance. My misfortune--I ought to call it the punishment for my sins, is recalled to me now. The worst curse that can fall on a father is the curse that has come to me. I have a wicked daughter. My own child, sir! my own child!"

Had he been awake, while Miss Jillgall and I had been talking outside his door? Had he heard her ask me if Mr. Gracedieu had said nothing of Helena's infamous conduct to her sister, while he was speaking of Eunice? The way to the lost remembrance had perhaps been found there. In any case, after that bitter allusion to his "wicked daughter" some result must follow. Helena Gracedieu and a day of reckoning might be nearer to each other already than I had ventured to hope.

I waited anxiously for what he might say to me next.