

CHAPTER XXXVI. THE WANDERING MIND.

For the moment, the Minister disappointed me.

Without speaking, without even looking up, he took out his pocketbook, and began to write in it. Constantly interrupted either by a trembling in the hand that held the pencil, or by a difficulty (as I imagined) in expressing thoughts imperfectly realized--his patience gave way; he dashed the book on the floor.

"My mind is gone!" he burst out. "Oh, Father in Heaven, let death deliver me from a body without a mind!"

Who could hear him, and be guilty of the cruelty of preaching self-control? I picked up the pocketbook, and offered to help him.

"Do you think you can?" he asked.

"I can at least try."

"Good fellow! What should I do without you? See now; here is my difficulty. I have got so many things to say, I want to separate them--or else they will all run into each other. Look at the book," my poor friend said mournfully; "they have run into each other in spite of me."

The entries proved to be nearly incomprehensible. Here and there I discovered some scattered words, which showed themselves more or less distinctly in the midst of the surrounding confusion. The first word that I could make out was "Education." Helped by that hint, I trusted to guess-work to guide me in speaking to him. It was necessary to be positive, or he would have lost all faith in me.

"Well?" he said impatiently.

"Well," I answered, "you have something to say to me about the education which you have given to your daughters."

"Don't put them together!" he cried. "Dear, patient, sweet Eunice must not be confounded with that she-devil--"

"Hush, hush, Mr. Gracedieu! Badly as Miss Helena has behaved, she is your own child."

"I repudiate her, sir! Think for a moment of what she has done--and then think of the religious education that I have given her. Heartless! Deceitful! The most ignorant creature in the lowest dens of this town could have done nothing more basely cruel. And this, after years on years of patient Christian instruction on my part! What is religion? What is education? I read a horrible book once (I forget who was the author); it called religion superstition, and education empty form. I don't know; upon my word I don't know that the book may not--Oh, my tongue! Why don't I keep a guard over my tongue? Are you a father, too? Don't interrupt me. Put yourself in my place, and think of it. Heartless, deceitful, and my daughter. Give me the pocketbook; I want to see which memorandum comes first."

He had now wrought himself into a state of excitement, which relieved his spirits of the depression that had weighed on them up to this time. His harmless vanity, always, as I suspect, a latent quality in his kindly nature, had already restored his confidence. With a self-sufficient smile he consulted his own unintelligible entries, and made his own wild discoveries.

"Ah, yes; 'M' stands for Minister; I come first. Am I to blame? Am I--God forgive me my many sins--am I heartless? Am I deceitful?"

"My good friend, not even your enemies could say that!"

"Thank you. Who comes next?" He consulted the book again. "Her mother, her sainted mother, comes next. People say she is like her mother. Was my wife heartless? Was the angel of my life deceitful?"

("That," I thought to myself, "is exactly what your wife was--and exactly what reappears in your wife's child.")

"Where does her wickedness come from?" he went on. "Not from her mother; not from me; not from a neglected education." He suddenly stepped up to me and laid his hands on my shoulders; his voice dropped to hoarse, moaning, awestruck tones. "Shall I tell you what it is? A possession of the devil."

It was so evidently desirable to prevent any continuation of such a train of thought as this, that I could feel no hesitation in interrupting him.

"Will you hear what I have to say?" I asked bluntly.

His humor changed again; he made me a low bow, and went back to his

chair. "I will hear you with pleasure," he answered politely. "You are the most eloquent man I know, with one exception--myself. Of course--myself."

"It is mere waste of time," I continued, "to regret the excellent education which your daughter has misused." Making that reply, I was tempted to add another word of truth. All education is at the mercy of two powerful counter-influences: the influence of temperament, and the influence of circumstances. But this was philosophy. How could I expect him to submit to philosophy? "What we know of Miss Helena," I went on, "must be enough for us. She has plotted, and she means to succeed. Stop her."

"Just my idea!" he declared firmly. "I refuse my consent to that abominable marriage."

In the popular phrase, I struck while the iron was hot. "You must do more than that, sir," I told him.

His vanity suddenly took the alarm--I was leading him rather too undisguisedly. He handed his book back to me. "You will find," he said loftily, "that I have put it all down there."

I pretended to find it, and read an imaginary entry to this effect: "After what she has already done, Helena is capable of marrying in defiance of my wishes and commands. This must be considered and provided against." So far, I had succeeded in flattering him. But when (thinking of his paternal authority) I alluded next to his daughter's age, his eyes rested on me with a look of downright terror.

"No more of that!" he said. "I won't talk of the girls' ages even with you."

What did he mean? It was useless to ask. I went on with the matter in hand--still deliberately speaking to him, as I might have spoken to a man with an intellect as clear as my own. In my experience, this practice generally stimulates a weak intelligence to do its best. We all know how children receive talk that is lowered, or books that are lowered, to their presumed level. "I shall take it for granted," I continued, "that Miss Helena is still under your lawful authority. She can only arrive at her ends by means of a runaway marriage. In that case, much depends on the man. You told me you couldn't help liking him. This was, of course, before you knew of the infamous manner in which he has behaved. You must have changed your opinion now."

He seemed to be at a loss how to reply. "I am afraid," he said, "the young

man was drawn into it by Helena."

Here was Miss Jillgall's apology for Philip Dunboyne repeated in other words. Despising and detesting the fellow as I did, I was forced to admit to myself that he must be recommended by personal attractions which it would be necessary to reckon with. I tried to get some more information from Mr. Gracedieu.

"The excuse you have just made for him," I resumed, "implies that he is a weak man; easily persuaded, easily led."

The Minister answered by nodding his head.

"Such weakness as that," I persisted, "is a vice in itself. It has led already, sir, to the saddest results."

He admitted this by another nod.

"I don't wish to shock you, Mr. Gracedieu; but I must recommend employing the means that present themselves. You must practice on this man's weakness, for the sake of the good that may come of it. I hear he is in London with his father. Try the strong influence, and write to his father. There is another reason besides for doing this. It is quite possible that the truth has been concealed from Mr. Dunboyne the elder. Take care that he is informed of what has really happened. Are you looking for pen, ink, and paper? Let me offer you the writing materials which I use in traveling."

I placed them before him. He took up the pen; he arranged the paper; he was eager to begin.

After writing a few words, he stopped--reflected--tried again--stopped again--tore up the little that he had done--and began a new letter, ending in the same miserable result. It was impossible to witness his helplessness, to see how pitiably patient he was over his own incapacity, and to let the melancholy spectacle go on. I proposed to write the letter; authenticating it, of course, by his signature. When he allowed me to take the pen, he turned away his face, ashamed to let me see what he suffered. Was this the same man, whose great nature had so nobly asserted itself in the condemned cell? Poor mortality!

The letter was easily written.

I had only to inform Mr. Dunboyne of his son's conduct; repeating, in the

plainest language that I could use, what Miss Jillgall had related to me. Arrived at the conclusion, I contrived to make Mr. Gracedieu express himself in these strong terms: "I protest against the marriage in justice to you, sir, as well as to myself. We can neither of us content to be accomplices in an act of domestic treason of the basest kind."

In silence, the Minister read the letter, and attached his signature to it. In silence, he rose and took my arm. I asked if he wished to go to his room. He only replied by a sign. I offered to sit with him, and try to cheer him. Gratefully, he pressed my hand: gently, he put me back from the door. Crushed by the miserable discovery of the decay of his own faculties! What could I do? what could I say? Nothing!

Miss Jillgall was in the drawing-room. With the necessary explanations, I showed her the letter. She read it with breathless interest. "It terrifies one to think how much depends on old Mr. Dunboyne," she said. "You know him. What sort of man is he?"

I could only assure her (after what I remembered of his letter to me) that he was a man whom we could depend upon.

Miss Jillgall possessed treasures of information to which I could lay no claim. Mr. Dunboyne, she told me, was a scholar, and a writer, and a rich man. His views on marriage were liberal in the extreme. Let his son find good principles, good temper, and good looks, in a wife, and he would promise to find the money.

"I get these particulars," said Miss Jillgall, "from dear Euneece. They are surely encouraging? That Helena may carry out Mr. Dunboyne's views in her personal appearance is, I regret to say, what I can't deny. But as to the other qualifications, how hopeful is the prospect! Good principles, and good temper? Ha! ha! Helena has the principles of Jezebel, and the temper of Lady Macbeth."

After dashing off this striking sketch of character, the fair artist asked to look at my letter again, and observed that the address was wanting. "I can set this right for you," she resumed, "thanks, as before, to my sweet Euneece. And (don't be in a hurry) I can make myself useful in another way. Oh, how I do enjoy making myself useful! If you trust your letter to the basket in the hall, Helena's lovely eyes--capable of the meanest conceivable actions--are sure to take a peep at the address. In that case, do you think your letter would get to London? I am afraid you detect a faint infusion of spitefulness in that question. Oh, for shame! I'll post the letter myself."