

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE SHAMELESS SISTER.

For some reason, which my unassisted penetration was unable to discover, Miss Helena Gracedieu kept out of my way.

At dinner, on the day of my arrival, and at breakfast on the next morning, she was present of course; ready to make herself agreeable in a modest way, and provided with the necessary supply of cheerful small-talk. But the meal having come to an end, she had her domestic excuse ready, and unostentatiously disappeared like a well-bred young lady. I never met her on the stairs, never found myself intruding on her in the drawing-room, never caught her getting out of my way in the garden. As much at a loss for an explanation of these mysteries as I was, Miss Jillgall's interest in my welfare led her to caution me in a vague and general way.

"Take my word for it, dear Mr. Governor, she has some design on you. Will you allow an insignificant old maid to offer a suggestion? Oh, thank you; I will venture to advise. Please look back at your experience of the very worst female prisoner you ever had to deal with--and be guided accordingly if Helena catches you at a private interview."

In less than half an hour afterward, Helena caught me. I was writing in my room, when the maidservant came in with a message: "Miss Helena's compliments, sir, and would you please spare her half an hour, downstairs?"

My first excuse was of course that I was engaged. This was disposed of by a second message, provided beforehand, no doubt, for an anticipated refusal: "Miss Helena wished me to say, sir, that her time is your time." I was still obstinate; I pleaded next that my day was filled up. A third message had evidently been prepared, even for this emergency: "Miss Helena will regret, sir, having the pleasure deferred, but she will leave you to make your own appointment for to-morrow." Persistency so inveterate as this led to a result which Mr. Gracedieu's cautious daughter had not perhaps contemplated: it put me on my guard. There seemed to be a chance, to say the least of it, that I might serve Eunice's interests if I discovered what the enemy had to say. I locked up my writing--declared myself incapable of putting Miss Helena to needless inconvenience--and followed the maid to the lower floor of the house.

The room to which I was conducted proved to be empty. I looked round me.

If I had been told that a man lived there who was absolutely indifferent to appearances, I should have concluded that his views were faithfully represented by his place of abode. The chairs and tables reminded me of a railway waiting-room. The shabby little bookcase was the mute record of a life indifferent to literature. The carpet was of that dreadful drab color, still the cherished favorite of the average English mind, in spite of every protest that can be entered against it, on behalf of Art. The ceiling, recently whitewashed; made my eyes ache when they looked at it. On either side of the window, flaccid green curtains hung helplessly with nothing to loop them up. The writing-desk and the paper-case, viewed as specimens of woodwork, recalled the ready-made bedrooms on show in cheap shops. The books, mostly in slate-colored bindings, were devoted to the literature which is called religious; I only discovered three worldly publications among them-- Domestic Cookery, Etiquette for Ladies, and Hints on the Breeding of Poultry. An ugly little clock, ticking noisily in a black case, and two candlesticks of base metal placed on either side of it, completed the ornaments on the chimney-piece. Neither pictures nor prints hid the barrenness of the walls. I saw no needlework and no flowers. The one object in the place which showed any pretensions to beauty was a looking-glass in an elegant gilt frame--sacred to vanity, and worthy of the office that it filled. Such was Helena Gracedieu's sitting-room. I really could not help thinking: How like her!

She came in with a face perfectly adapted to the circumstances--pleased and smiling; amiably deferential, in consideration of the claims of her father's guest--and, to my surprise, in some degree suggestive of one of those incorrigible female prisoners, to whom Miss Jillgall had referred me when she offered a word of advice.

"How kind of you to come so soon! Excuse my receiving you in my housekeeping-room; we shall not be interrupted here. Very plainly furnished, is it not? I dislike ostentation and display. Ornaments are out of place in a room devoted to domestic necessities. I hate domestic necessities. You notice the looking-glass? It's a present. I should never have put such a thing up. Perhaps my vanity excuses it."

She pointed the last remark by a look at herself in the glass; using it, while she despised it. Yes: there was a handsome face, paying her its reflected compliment--but not so well matched as it might have been by a handsome figure. Her feet were too large; her shoulders were too high; the graceful undulations of a well-made girl were absent when she walked; and her bosom was, to my mind, unduly developed for her time of life.

She sat down by me with her back to the light. Happening to be opposite to the window, I offered her the advantage of a clear view of my face. She waited for me, and I waited for her--and there was an awkward pause before we spoke. She set the example.

"Isn't it curious?" she remarked. "When two people have something particular to say to each other, and nothing to hinder them, they never seem to know how to say it. You are the oldest, sir. Why don't you begin?"

"Because I have nothing particular to say."

"In plain words, you mean that I must begin?"

"If you please."

"Very well. I want to know whether I have given you (and Miss Jillgall, of course) as much time as you want, and as many opportunities as you could desire?"

"Pray go on, Miss Helena."

"Have I not said enough already?"

"Not enough, I regret to say, to convey your meaning to me."

She drew her chair a little further away from me. "I am sadly disappointed," she said. "I had such a high opinion of your perfect candor. I thought to myself: There is such a striking expression of frankness in his face. Another illusion gone! I hope you won't think I am offended, if I say a bold word. I am only a young girl, to be sure; but I am not quite such a fool as you take me for. Do you really think I don't know that Miss Jillgall has been telling you everything that is bad about me; putting every mistake that I have made, every fault that I have committed, in the worst possible point of view? And you have listened to her--quite naturally! And you are prejudiced, strongly prejudiced, against me--what else could you be, under the circumstances? I don't complain; I have purposely kept out of your way, and out of Miss Jillgall's way; in short, I have afforded you every facility, as the prospectuses say. I only want to know if my turn has come at last. Once more, have I given you time enough, and opportunities enough?"

"A great deal more than enough."

"Do you mean that you have made up your mind about me without stopping to think?"

"That is exactly what I mean. An act of treachery, Miss Helena, is an act of treachery; no honest person need hesitate to condemn it. I am sorry you sent for me."

I got up to go. With an ironical gesture of remonstrance, she signed to me to sit down again.

"Must I remind you, dear sir, of our famous native virtue? Fair play is surely due to a young person who has nobody to take her part. You talked of treachery just now. I deny the treachery. Please give me a hearing."

I returned to my chair.

"Or would you prefer waiting," she went out, "till my sister comes here later in the day, and continues what Miss Jillgall has begun, with the great advantage of being young and nice-looking?"

When the female mind gets into this state, no wise man answers the female questions.

"Am I to take silence as meaning Go on?" Miss Helena inquired.

I begged her to interpret my silence in the sense most agreeable to herself.

This naturally encouraged her. She made a proposal:

"Do you mind changing places, sir?"

"Just as you like, Miss Helena."

We changed chairs; the light now fell full on her face. Had she deliberately challenged me to look into her secret mind if I could? Anything like the stark insensibility of that young girl to every refinement of feeling, to every becoming doubt of herself, to every customary timidity of her age and sex in the presence of a man who had not disguised his unfavorable opinion of her, I never met with in all my experience of the world and of women.

"I wish to be quite mistress of myself," she explained; "your face, for some reason which I really don't know, irritates me. The fact is, I have great pride in keeping my temper. Please make allowances. Now about Miss Jillgall. I

suppose she told you how my sister first met with Philip Dunboyne?"

"Yes."

"She also mentioned, perhaps, that he was a highly-cultivated man?"

"She did."

"Now we shall get on. When Philip came to our town here, and saw me for the first time--Do you object to my speaking familiarly of him, by his Christian name?"

"In the case of any one else in your position, Miss Helena, I should venture to call it bad taste."

I was provoked into saying that. It failed entirely as a well-meant effort in the way of implied reproof. Miss Helena smiled.

"You grant me a liberty which you would not concede to another girl." That was how she viewed it. "We are getting on better already. To return to what I was saying. When Philip first saw me--I have it from himself, mind--he felt that I should have been his choice, if he had met with me before he met with my sister. Do you blame him?"

"If you will take my advice," I said, "you will not inquire too closely into my opinion of Mr. Philip Dunboyne."

"Perhaps you don't wish me to say anymore?" she suggested.

"On the contrary, pray go on, if you like."

After that concession, she was amiability itself. "Oh, yes," she assured me, "that's easily done." And she went on accordingly: "Philip having informed me of the state of his affections, I naturally followed his example. In fact, we exchanged confessions. Our marriage engagement followed as a matter of course. Do you blame me?"

"I will wait till you have done."

"I have no more to say."

She made that amazing reply with such perfect composure, that I began to fear there must have been some misunderstanding between us. "Is that

really all you have to say for yourself?" I persisted.

Her patience with me was most exemplary. She lowered herself to my level. Not trusting to words only on this occasion, she (so to say) beat her meaning into my head by gesticulating on her fingers, as if she was educating a child.

"Philip and I," she began, "are the victims of an accident, which kept us apart when we ought to have met together--we are not responsible for an accident." She impressed this on me by touching her forefinger. "Philip and I fell in love with each other at first sight--we are not responsible for the feelings implanted in our natures by an all-wise Providence." She assisted me in understanding this by touching her middle finger. "Philip and I owe a duty to each other, and accept a responsibility under those circumstances--the responsibility of getting married." A touch on her third finger, and an indulgent bow, announced that the lesson was ended. "I am not a clever man like you," she modestly acknowledged, "but I ask you to help us, when you next see my father, with some confidence. You know exactly what to say to him, by this time. Nothing has been forgotten."

"Pardon me," I said, "a person has been forgotten."

"Indeed? What person?"

"Your sister."

A little perplexed at first, Miss Helena reflected, and recovered herself.

"Ah, yes," she said; "I was afraid I might be obliged to trouble you for an explanation--I see it now. You are shocked (very properly) when feelings of enmity exist between near relations; and you wish to be assured that I bear no malice toward Eunice. She is violent, she is sulky, she is stupid, she is selfish; and she cruelly refuses to live in the same house with me. Make your mind easy, sir, I forgive my sister."

Let me not attempt to disguise it--Miss Helena Gracedieu confounded me.

Ordinary audacity is one of those forms of insolence which mature experience dismisses with contempt. This girl's audacity struck down all resistance, for one shocking reason: it was unquestionably sincere. Strong conviction of her own virtue stared at me in her proud and daring eyes. At that time, I was not aware of what I have learned since. The horrid hardening of her moral sense had been accomplished by herself. In her diary, there has been found the confession of a secret course of reading--

with supplementary reflections flowing from it, which need only to be described as worthy of their source.

A person capable of repentance and reform would, in her place, have seen that she had disgusted me. Not a suspicion of this occurred to Miss Helena. "I see you are embarrassed," she remarked, "and I am at no loss to account for it. You are too polite to acknowledge that I have not made a friend of you yet. Oh, I mean to do it!"

"No," I said, "I think not."

"We shall see," she replied. "Sooner or later, you will find yourself saying a kind word to my father for Philip and me." She rose, and took a turn in the room--and stopped, eying me attentively. "Are you thinking of Eunice?" she asked.

"Yes."

"She has your sympathy, I suppose?"

"My heart-felt sympathy."

"I needn't ask how I stand in your estimation, after that. Pray express yourself freely. Your looks confess it--you view me with a feeling of aversion."

"I view you with a feeling of horror."

The exasperating influences of her language, her looks, and her tones would, as I venture to think, have got to the end of another man's self-control before this. Anyway, she had at last irritated me into speaking as strongly as I felt. What I said had been so plainly (perhaps so rudely) expressed, that misinterpretation of it seemed to be impossible. She mistook me, nevertheless. The most merciless disclosure of the dreary side of human destiny is surely to be found in the failure of words, spoken or written, so to answer their purpose that we can trust them, in our attempts to communicate with each other. Even when he seems to be connected, by the nearest and dearest relations, with his fellow-mortals, what a solitary creature, tried by the test of sympathy, the human being really is in the teeming world that he inhabits! Affording one more example of the impotence of human language to speak for itself, my misinterpreted words had found their way to the one sensitive place in Helena Gracedieu's impenetrable nature. She betrayed it in the quivering and flushing of her hard face, and in the appeal to the looking-glass which escaped her eyes the

next moment. My hasty reply had roused the idea of a covert insult addressed to her handsome face. In other words, I had wounded her vanity. Driven by resentment, out came the secret distrust of me which had been lurking in that cold heart, from the moment when we first met.

"I inspire you with horror, and Eunice inspires you with compassion," she said. "That, Mr. Governor, is not natural."

"May I ask why?"

"You know why."

"No."

"You will have it?"

"I want an explanation, Miss Helena, if that is what you mean."

"Take your explanation, then! You are not the stranger you are said to be to my sister and to me. Your interest in Eunice is a personal interest of some kind. I don't pretend to guess what it is. As for myself, it is plain that somebody else has been setting you against me, before Miss Jillgall got possession of your private ear."

In alluding to Eunice, she had blundered, strangely enough, on something like the truth. But when she spoke of herself, the headlong malignity of her suspicions--making every allowance for the anger that had hurried her into them--seemed to call for some little protest against a false assertion. I told her that she was completely mistaken.

"I am completely right," she answered; "I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"Saw you pretending to be a stranger to me."

"When did I do that?"

"You did it when we met at the station."

The reply was too ridiculous for the preservation of any control over my own sense of humor. It was wrong; but it was inevitable--I laughed. She looked at me with a fury, revealing a concentration of evil passion in her which I had

not seen yet. I asked her pardon; I begged her to think a little before she persisted in taking a view of my conduct unworthy of her, and unjust to myself.

"Unjust to You!" she burst out. "Who are You? A man who has driven your trade has spies always at his command--yes! and knows how to use them. You were primed with private information--you had, for all I know, a stolen photograph of me in your pocket--before ever you came to our town. Do you still deny it? Oh, sir, why degrade yourself by telling a lie?"

No such outrage as this had ever been inflicted on me, at any time in my life. My forbearance must, I suppose, have been more severely tried than I was aware of myself. With or without excuse for me, I was weak enough to let a girl's spiteful tongue sting me, and, worse still, to let her see that I felt it.

"You shall have no second opportunity, Miss Gracedieu, of insulting me." With that foolish reply, I opened the door violently and went out.

She ran after me, triumphing in having roused the temper of a man old enough to have been her grandfather, and caught me by the arm. "Your own conduct has exposed you." (That was literally how she expressed herself.) "I saw it in your eyes when we met at the station. You, the stranger--you who allowed poor ignorant me to introduce myself--you knew me all the time, knew me by sight!"

I shook her hand off with an inconsiderable roughness, humiliating to remember. "It's false!" I cried. "I knew you by your likeness to your mother."

The moment the words had passed my lips, I came to my senses again; I remembered what fatal words they might prove to be, if they reached the Minister's ears.

Heard only by his daughter, my reply seemed to cool the heat of her anger in an instant.

"So you knew my mother?" she said. "My father never told us that, when he spoke of your being such a very old friend of his. Strange, to say the least of it."

I was wise enough--now when wisdom had come too late--not to attempt to explain myself, and not to give her an opportunity of saying more. "We are neither of us in a state of mind," I answered, "to allow this interview to

continue. I must try to recover my composure; and I leave you to do the same."

In the solitude of my room, I was able to look my position fairly in the face.

Mr. Gracedieu's wife had come to me, in the long-past time, without her husband's knowledge. Tempted to a cruel resolve by the maternal triumph of having an infant of her own, she had resolved to rid herself of the poor little rival in her husband's fatherly affection, by consigning the adopted child to the keeping of a charitable asylum. She had dared to ask me to help her. I had kept the secret of her shameful visit--I can honestly say, for the Minister's sake. And now, long after time had doomed those events to oblivion, they were revived--and revived by me. Thanks to my folly, Mr. Gracedieu's daughter knew what I had concealed from Mr. Gracedieu himself.

What course did respect for my friend, and respect for myself, counsel me to take?

I could only see before me a choice of two evils. To wait for events--with the too certain prospect of a vindictive betrayal of my indiscretion by Helena Gracedieu. Or to take the initiative into my own hands, and risk consequences which I might regret to the end of my life, by making my confession to the Minister.

Before I had decided, somebody knocked at the door. It was the maid-servant again. Was it possible she had been sent by Helena?

"Another message?"

"Yes, sir. My master wishes to see you."