

## CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE GIRLS' AGES.

Had the Minister's desire to see me been inspired by his daughter's betrayal of what I had unfortunately said to her? Although he would certainly not consent to receive her personally, she would be at liberty to adopt a written method of communication with him, and the letter might be addressed in such a manner as to pique his curiosity. If Helena's vindictive purpose had been already accomplished--and if Mr. Gracedieu left me no alternative but to present his unworthy wife in her true character--I can honestly say that I dreaded the consequences, not as they might affect myself, but as they might affect my unhappy friend in his enfeebled state of body and mind.

When I entered his room, he was still in bed.

The bed-curtains were so drawn, on the side nearest to the window, as to keep the light from falling too brightly on his weak eyes. In the shadow thus thrown on him, it was not possible to see his face plainly enough, from the open side of the bed, to arrive at any definite conclusion as to what might be passing in his mind. After having been awake for some hours during the earlier part of the night, he had enjoyed a long and undisturbed sleep. "I feel stronger this morning," he said, "and I wish to speak to you while my mind is clear."

If the quiet tone of his voice was not an assumed tone, he was surely ignorant of all that had passed between his daughter and myself.

"Eunice will be here soon," he proceeded, "and I ought to explain why I have sent for her to come and meet you. I have reasons, serious reasons, mind, for wishing you to compare her personal appearance with Helena's personal appearance, and then to tell me which of the two, on a fair comparison, looks the eldest. Pray bear in mind that I attach the greatest importance to the conclusion at which you may arrive."

He spoke more clearly and collectedly than I had heard him speak yet.

Here and there I detected hesitations and repetitions, which I have purposely passed over. The substance of what he said to me is all that I shall present in this place. Careful as I have been to keep my record of events within strict limits, I have written at a length which I was far indeed from contemplating when I accepted Mr. Gracedieu's invitation.

Having promised to comply with the strange request which he had addressed to me, I ventured to remind him of past occasions on which he had pointedly abstained, when the subject presented itself, from speaking of the girls' ages. "You have left it to my discretion," I added, "to decide a question in which you are seriously interested, relating to your daughters. Have I no excuse for regretting that I have not been admitted to your confidence a little more freely?"

"You have every excuse," he answered. "But you trouble me all the same. There was something else that I had to say to you--and your curiosity gets in the way."

He said this with a sullen emphasis. In my position, the worst of evils was suspense. I told him that my curiosity could wait; and I begged that he would relieve his mind of what was pressing on it at the moment.

"Let me think a little," he said.

I waited anxiously for the decision at which he might arrive. Nothing came of it to justify my misgivings. "Leave what I have in my mind to ripen in my mind," he said. "The mystery about the girls' ages seems to irritate you. If I put my good friend's temper to any further trial, he will be of no use to me. Never mind if my head swims; I'm used to that. Now listen!"

Strange as the preface was, the explanation that followed was stranger yet. I offer a shortened and simplified version, giving accurately the substance of what I heard.

The Minister entered without reserve on the mysterious subject of the ages. Eunice, he informed me, was nearly two years older than Helena. If she outwardly showed her superiority of age, any person acquainted with the circumstances under which the adopted infant had been received into Mr. Gracedieu's childless household, need only compare the so-called sisters in after-life, and would thereupon identify the eldest-looking young lady of the two as the offspring of the woman who had been hanged for murder. With such a misfortune as this presenting itself as a possible prospect, the Minister was bound to prevent the girls from ignorantly betraying each other by allusions to their ages and their birthdays. After much thought, he had devised a desperate means of meeting the difficulty--already made known, as I am told, for the information of strangers who may read the pages that have gone before mine. My friend's plan of proceeding had, by the nature of it, exposed him to injurious comment, to embarrassing questions, and to doubts and misconceptions, all patiently endured in consideration of the

security that had been attained. Proud of his explanation, Mr. Gracedieu's vanity called upon me to acknowledge that my curiosity had been satisfied, and my doubts completely set at rest.

No: my obstinate common sense was not reduced to submission, even yet. Looking back over a lapse of seventeen years, I asked what had happened, in that long interval, to justify the anxieties which still appeared to trouble my friend.

This time, my harmless curiosity could be gratified by a reply expressed in three words--nothing had happened.

Then what, in Heaven's name, was the Minister afraid of?

His voice dropped to a whisper. He said: "I am afraid of the women."

Who were the women?

Two of them actually proved to be the servants employed in Mr. Gracedieu's house, at the bygone time when he had brought the child home with him from the prison! To point out the absurdity of the reasons that he gave for fearing what female curiosity might yet attempt, if circumstances happened to encourage it, would have been a mere waste of words. Dismissing the subject, I next ascertained that the Minister's doubts extended even to the two female warders, who had been appointed to watch the murderess in turn, during her last days in prison. I easily relieved his mind in this case. One of the warders was dead. The other had married a farmer in Australia. Had we exhausted the list of suspected persons yet? No: there was one more left; and the Minister declared that he had first met with her in my official residence, at the time when I was Governor of the prison.

"She presented herself to me by name," he said; "and she spoke rudely. A Miss--" He paused to consult his memory, and this time (thanks perhaps to his night's rest) his memory answered the appeal. "I have got it!" he cried-- "Miss Chance."

My friend had interested me in his imaginary perils at last. It was just possible that he might have a formidable person to deal with now.

During my residence at Florence, the Chaplain and I had taken many a retrospective look (as old men will) at past events in our lives. My former colleague spoke of the time when he had performed clerical duty for his friend, the rector of a parish church in London. Neither he nor I had heard

again of the "Miss Chance" of our disagreeable prison experience, whom he had married to the dashing Dutch gentleman, Mr. Tenbruggen. We could only wonder what had become of that mysterious married pair.

Mr. Gracedieu being undoubtedly ignorant of the woman's marriage, it was not easy to say what the consequence might be, in his excitable state, if I informed him of it. He would, in all probability, conclude that I knew more of the woman than he did. I decided on keeping my own counsel, for the present at least.

Passing at once, therefore, to the one consideration of any importance, I endeavored to find out whether Mr. Gracedieu and Mrs. Tenbruggen had met, or had communicated with each other in any way, during the long period of separation that had taken place between the Minister and myself. If he had been so unlucky as to offend her, she was beyond all doubt an enemy to be dreaded. Apart, however, from a misfortune of this kind, she would rank, in my opinion, with the other harmless objects of Mr. Gracedieu's distrust.

In making my inquiries, I found that I had an obstacle to contend with.

While he felt the renovating influence of the repose that he enjoyed, the Minister had been able to think and to express himself with less difficulty than usual. But the reserves of strength, on which the useful exercise of his memory depended, began to fail him as the interview proceeded. He distinctly recollected that "something unpleasant had passed between that audacious woman and himself." But at what date--and whether by word of mouth or by correspondence--was more than his memory could now recall. He believed he was not mistaken in telling me that he "had been in two minds about her." At one time, he was satisfied that he had taken wise measures for his own security, if she attempted to annoy him. But there was another and a later time, when doubts and fears had laid hold of him again. If I wanted to know how this had happened, he fancied it was through a dream; and if I asked what the dream was, he could only beg and pray that I would spare his poor head.

Unwilling even yet to submit unconditionally to defeat, it occurred to me to try a last experiment on my friend, without calling for any mental effort on his own part. The "Miss Chance" of former days might, by a bare possibility, have written to him. I asked accordingly if he was in the habit of keeping his letters, and if he would allow me (when he had rested a little) to lay them open before him, so that he could look at the signatures. "You might find the lost recollection in that way," I suggested, "at the bottom of one of your

letters."

He was in that state of weariness, poor fellow, in which a man will do anything for the sake of peace. Pointing to a cabinet in his room, he gave me a key taken from a little basket on his bed. "Look for yourself," he said. After some hesitation--for I naturally recoiled from examining another man's correspondence--I decided on opening the cabinet, at any rate.

The letters--a large collection--were, to my relief, all neatly folded, and indorsed with the names of the writers. I could run harmlessly through bundle after bundle in search of the one name that I wanted, and still respect the privacy of the letters. My perseverance deserved a reward--and failed to get it. The name I wanted steadily eluded my search. Arriving at the upper shelf of the cabinet, I found it so high that I could barely reach it with my hand. Instead of getting more letters to look over, I pulled down two newspapers.

One of them was an old copy of the Times, dating back as far as the 13th December, 1858. It was carefully folded, longwise, with the title-page uppermost. On the first column, at the left-hand side of the sheet, appeared the customary announcements of Births. A mark with a blue pencil, against one of the advertisements, attracted my attention. I read these lines:

"On the 10th inst., the wife of the Rev. Abel Gracedieu, of a daughter."

The second newspaper bore a later date, and contained nothing that interested me. I naturally assumed that the advertisement in the Times had been inserted at the desire of Mrs. Gracedieu; and, after all that I had heard, there was little difficulty in attributing the curious omission of the place in which the child had been born to the caution of her husband. If Mrs. Tenbruggen (then Miss Chance) had happened to see the advertisement in the great London newspaper, Mr. Gracedieu might yet have good reason to congratulate himself on his prudent method of providing against mischievous curiosity.

I turned toward the bed and looked at him. His eyes were closed. Was he sleeping? Or was he trying to remember what he had desired to say to me, when the demands which I made on his memory had obliged him to wait for a later opportunity?

Either way, there was something that quickened my sympathies, in the spectacle of his helpless repose. It suggested to me personal reasons for his anxieties, which he had not mentioned, and which I had not thought of, up

to this time. If the discovery that he dreaded took place, his household would be broken up, and his position as pastor would suffer in the estimation of the flock. His own daughter would refuse to live under the same roof with the daughter of an infamous woman. Popular opinion, among his congregation, judging a man who had passed off the child of other parents as his own, would find that man guilty of an act of deliberate deceit.

Still oppressed by reflections which pointed to the future in this discouraging way, I was startled by a voice outside the door--a sweet, sad voice--saying, "May I come in?"

The Minister's eyes opened instantly: he raised himself in his bed.

"Eunice, at last!" he cried. "Let her in."