

CHAPTER XXXIX. THE ADOPTED CHILD

I opened the door.

Eunice passed me with the suddenness almost of a flash of light. When I turned toward the bed, her arms were round her father's neck. "Oh, poor papa, how ill you look!" Commonplace expressions of fondness, and no more; but the tone gave them a charm that subdued me. Never had I felt so indulgent toward Mr. Gracedieu's unreasonable fears as when I saw him in the embrace of his adopted daughter. She had already reminded me of the bygone day when a bright little child had sat on my knee and listened to the ticking of my watch.

The Minister gently lifted her head from his breast. "My darling," he said, "you don't see my old friend. Love him, and look up to him, Eunice. He will be your friend, too, when I am gone."

She came to me and offered her cheek to be kissed. It was sadly pale, poor soul--and I could guess why. But her heart was now full of her father. "Do you think he is seriously ill?" she whispered. What I ought to have said I don't know. Her eyes, the sweetest, truest, loveliest eyes I ever saw in a human face, were pleading with me. Let my enemies make the worst of it, if they like--I did certainly lie. And if I deserved my punishment, I got it; the poor child believed me! "Now I am happier," she said, gratefully. "Only to hear your voice seems to encourage me. On our way here, Selina did nothing but talk of you. She told me I shouldn't have time to feel afraid of the great man; he would make me fond of him directly. I said, 'Are you fond of him?' She said, 'Madly in love with him, my dear.' My little friend really thinks you like her, and is very proud of it. There are some people who call her ugly. I hope you don't agree with them?"

I believe I should have lied again, if Mr. Gracedieu had not called me to the bedside.

"How does she strike you?" he whispered, eagerly. "Is it too soon to ask if she shows her age in her face?"

"Neither in her face nor her figure," I answered: "it astonishes me that you can ever have doubted it. No stranger, judging by personal appearance, could fail to make the mistake of thinking Helena the oldest of the two."

He looked fondly at Eunice. "Her figure seems to bear out what you say," he went on. "Almost childish, isn't it?"

I could not agree to that. Slim, supple, simply graceful in every movement, Eunice's figure, in the charm of first youth, only waited its perfect development. Most men, looking at her as she stood at the other end of the room with her back toward us, would have guessed her age to be sixteen.

Finding that I failed to agree with him, Mr. Gracedieu's misgivings returned. "You speak very confidently," he said, "considering that you have not seen the girls together. Think what a dreadful blow it would be to me if you made a mistake."

I declared, with perfect sincerity, that there was no fear of a mistake. The bare idea of making the proposed comparison was hateful to me. If Helena and I had happened to meet at that moment, I should have turned away from her by instinct--she would have disturbed my impressions of Eunice.

The Minister signed to me to move a little nearer to him. "I must say it," he whispered, "and I am afraid of her hearing me. Is there anything in her face that reminds you of her miserable mother?"

I had hardly patience to answer the question: it was simply preposterous. Her hair was by many shades darker than her mother's hair; her eyes were of a different color. There was an exquisite tenderness and sincerity in their expression--made additionally beautiful, to my mind, by a gentle, uncomplaining sadness. It was impossible even to think of the eyes of the murderess when I looked at her child. Eunice's lower features, again, had none of her mother's regularity of proportion. Her smile, simple and sweet, and soon passing away, was certainly not an inherited smile on the maternal side. Whether she resembled her father, I was unable to conjecture--having never seen him. The one thing certain was, that not the faintest trace, in feature or expression, of Eunice's mother was to be seen in Eunice herself. Of the two girls, Helena--judging by something in the color of her hair, and by something in the shade of her complexion--might possibly have suggested, in those particulars only, a purely accidental resemblance to my terrible prisoner of past times.

The revival of Mr. Gracedieu's spirits indicated a temporary change only, and was already beginning to pass away. The eyes which had looked lovingly at Eunice began to look languidly now: his head sank on the pillow with a sigh of weak content. "My pleasure has been almost too much for me," he said. "Leave me for a while to rest, and get used to it."

Eunice kissed his forehead--and we left the room.