CHAPTER XL. THE BRUISED HEART.

When we stepped out on the landing, I observed that my companion paused. She looked at the two flights of stairs below us before she descended them. It occurred to me that there must be somebody in the house whom she was anxious to avoid.

Arrived at the lower hall, she paused again, and proposed in a whisper that we should go into the garden. As we advanced along the backward division of the hall, I saw her eyes turn distrustfully toward the door of the room in which Helena had received me. At last, my slow perceptions felt with her and understood her. Eunice's sensitive nature recoiled from a chance meeting with the wretch who had laid waste all that had once been happy and hopeful in that harmless young life.

"Will you come with me to the part of the garden that I am fondest of?" she asked.

I offered her my arm. She led me in silence to a rustic seat, placed under the shade of a mulberry tree. I saw a change in her face as we sat down--a tender and beautiful change. At that moment the girl's heart was far away from me. There was some association with this corner of the garden, on which I felt that I must not intrude.

"I was once very happy here," she said. "When the time of the heartache came soon after, I was afraid to look at the old tree and the bench under it. But that is all over now. I like to remember the hours that were once dear to me, and to see the place that recalls them. Do you know who I am thinking of? Don't be afraid of distressing me. I never cry now."

"My dear child, I have heard your sad story--but I can't trust myself to speak of it."

"Because you are so sorry for me?"

"No words can say how sorry I am!"

"But you are not angry with Philip?"

"Not angry! My poor dear, I am afraid to tell you how angry I am with him."

"Oh, no! You mustn't say that. If you wish to be kind to me--and I am sure you do wish it--don't think bitterly of Philip."

When I remember that the first feeling she roused in me was nothing worthier of a professing Christian than astonishment, I drop in my own estimation to the level of a savage. "Do you really mean," I was base enough to ask, "that you have forgiven him?"

She said, gently: "How could I help forgiving him?"

The man who could have been blessed with such love as this, and who could have cast it away from him, can have been nothing but an idiot. On that ground--though I dared not confess it to Eunice--I forgave him, too.

"Do I surprise you?" she asked simply. "Perhaps love will bear any humiliation. Or perhaps I am only a poor weak creature. You don't know what a comfort it was to me to keep the few letters that I received from Philip. When I heard that he had gone away, I gave his letters the kiss that bade him good-by. That was the time, I think, when my poor bruised heart got used to the pain; I began to feel that there was one consolation still left for me--I might end in forgiving him. Why do I tell you all this? I think you must have bewitched me. Is this really the first time I have seen you?"

She put her little trembling hand into mine; I lifted it to my lips, and kissed it. Sorely was I tempted to own that I had pitied and loved her in her infancy. It was almost on my lips to say: "I remember you an easily-pleased little creature, amusing yourself with the broken toys which were once the playthings of my own children." I believe I should have said it, if I could have trusted myself to speak composedly to her. This was not to be done. Old as I was, versed as I was in the hard knowledge of how to keep the mask on in the hour of need, this was not to be done.

Still trying to understand that I was little better than a stranger to her, and still bent on finding the secret of the sympathy that united us, Eunice put a strange question to me.

"When you were young yourself," she said, "did you know what it was to love, and to be loved--and then to lose it all?"

It is not given to many men to marry the woman who has been the object of their first love. My early life had been darkened by a sad story; never confided to any living creature; banished resolutely from my own thoughts. For forty years past, that part of my buried self had lain quiet in its grave--

and the chance touch of an innocent hand had raised the dead, and set us face to face again! Did I know what it was to love, and to be loved, and then to lose it all? "Too well, my child; too well!"

That was all I could say to her. In the last days of my life, I shrank from speaking of it. When I had first felt that calamity, and had felt it most keenly, I might have given an answer worthier of me, and worthier of her.

She dropped my hand, and sat by me in silence, thinking. Had I--without meaning it, God knows!--had I disappointed her?

"Did you expect me to tell my own sad story," I said, "as frankly and as trustfully as you have told yours?"

"Oh, don't think that! I know what an effort it was to you to answer me at all. Yes, indeed! I wonder whether I may ask something. The sorrow you have just told me of is not the only one--is it? You have had other troubles?"

"Many of them."

"There are times," she went on, "when one can't help thinking of one's own miserable self. I try to be cheerful, but those times come now and then."

She stopped, and looked at me with a pale fear confessing itself in her face.

"You know who Selina is?" she resumed. "My friend! The only friend I had, till you came here."

I guessed that she was speaking of the quaint, kindly little woman, whose ugly surname had been hitherto the only name known to me.

"Selina has, I daresay, told you that I have been ill," she continued, "and that I am staying in the country for the benefit of my health."

It was plain that she had something to say to me, far more important than this, and that she was dwelling on trifles to gain time and courage. Hoping to help her, I dwelt on trifles, too; asking commonplace questions about the part of the country in which she was staying. She answered absently--then, little by little, impatiently. The one poor proof of kindness that I could offer, now, was to say no more.

"Do you know what a strange creature I am?" she broke out. "Shall I make you angry with me? or shall I make you laugh at me? What I have shrunk

from confessing to Selina--what I dare not confess to my father--I must, and will, confess to You."

There was a look of horror in her face that alarmed me. I drew her to me so that she could rest her head on my shoulder. My own agitation threatened to get the better of me. For the first time since I had seen this sweet girl, I found myself thinking of the blood that ran in her veins, and of the nature of the mother who had borne her.

"Did you notice how I behaved upstairs?" she said. "I mean when we left my father, and came out on the landing."

It was easily recollected; I begged her to go on.

"Before I went downstairs," she proceeded, "you saw me look and listen. Did you think I was afraid of meeting some person? and did you guess who it was I wanted to avoid?"

"I guessed that--and I understood you."

"No! You are not wicked enough to understand me. Will you do me a favor? I want you to look at me."

It was said seriously. She lifted her head for a moment, so that I could examine her face.

"Do you see anything," she asked, "which makes you fear that I am not in my right mind?"

"Good God! how can you ask such a horrible question?"

She laid her head back on my shoulder with a sad little sigh of resignation. "I ought to have known better," she said; "there is no such easy way out of it as that. Tell me--is there one kind of wickedness more deceitful than another? Can it be hid in a person for years together, and show itself when a time of suffering--no; I mean when a sense of injury comes? Did you ever see that, when you were master in the prison?"

I had seen it--and, after a moment's doubt, I said I had seen it.

"Did you pity those poor wretches?"

"Certainly! They deserved pity."

"I am one of them!" she said. "Pity me. If Helena looks at me--if Helena speaks to me--if I only see Helena by accident--do you know what she does? She tempts me! Tempts me to do dreadful things! Tempts me--" The poor child threw her arms round my neck, and whispered the next fatal words in my ear.

The mother! Prepared as I was for the accursed discovery, the horror of it shook me.

She left me, and started to her feet. The inherited energy showed itself in furious protest against the inherited evil. "What does it mean?" she cried. "I'll submit to anything. I'll bear my hard lot patiently, if you will only tell me what it means. Where does this horrid transformation of me out of myself come from? Look at my good father. In all this world there is no man so perfect as he is. And oh, how he has taught me! there isn't a single good thing that I have not learned from him since I was a little child. Did you ever hear him speak of my mother? You must have heard him. My mother was an angel. I could never be worthy of her at my best--but I have tried! I have tried! The wickedest girl in the world doesn't have worse thoughts than the thoughts that have come to me. Since when? Since Helena--oh, how can I call her by her name as if I still loved her? Since my sister--can she be my sister, I ask myself sometimes! Since my enemy--there's the word for her--since my enemy took Philip away from me. What does it mean? I have asked in my prayers--and have got no answer. I ask you. What does it mean? You must tell me! You shall tell me! What does it mean?"

Why did I not try to calm her? I had vainly tried to calm her--I who knew who her mother was, and what her mother had been.

At last, she had forced the sense of my duty on me. The simplest way of calming her was to put her back in the place by my side that she had left. It was useless to reason with her, it was impossible to answer her. I had my own idea of the one way in which I might charm Eunice back to her sweeter self.

"Let us talk of Philip," I said.

The fierce flush on her face softened, the swelling trouble of her bosom began to subside, as that dearly-loved name passed my lips! But there was some influence left in her which resisted me.

"No," she said; "we had better not talk of him."

"Why not?"

"I have lost all my courage. If you speak of Philip, you will make me cry."

I drew her nearer to me. If she had been my own child, I don't think I could have felt for her more truly than I felt at that moment. I only looked at her; I only said:

"Cry!"

The love that was in her heart rose, and poured its tenderness into her eyes. I had longed to see the tears that would comfort her. The tears came.

There was silence between us for a while. It was possible for me to think.

In the absence of physical resemblance between parent and child, is an unfavorable influence exercised on the tendency to moral resemblance? Assuming the possibility of such a result as this, Eunice (entirely unlike her mother) must, as I concluded, have been possessed of qualities formed to resist, as well as of qualities doomed to undergo, the infection of evil. While, therefore, I resigned myself to recognize the existence of the hereditary maternal taint, I firmly believed in the counterbalancing influences for good which had been part of the girl's birthright. They had been derived, perhaps, from the better qualities in her father's nature; they had been certainly developed by the tender care, the religious vigilance, which had guarded the adopted child so lovingly in the Minister's household; and they had served their purpose until time brought with it the change, for which the tranquil domestic influences were not prepared. With the great, the vital transformation, which marks the ripening of the girl into the woman's maturity of thought and passion, a new power for Good, strong enough to resist the latent power for Evil, sprang into being, and sheltered Eunice under the supremacy of Love. Love ill-fated and ill-bestowed--but love that no profanation could stain, that no hereditary evil could conquer--the True Love that had been, and was, and would be, the guardian angel of Eunice's life.

If I am asked whether I have ventured to found this opinion on what I have observed in one instance only, I reply that I have had other opportunities of investigation, and that my conclusions are derived from experience which refers to more instances than one.

No man in his senses can doubt that physical qualities are transmitted from

parents to children. But inheritance of moral qualities is less easy to trace. Here, the exploring mind finds its progress beset by obstacles. That those obstacles have been sometimes overcome I do not deny. Moral resemblances have been traced between parents and children. While, however, I admit this, I doubt the conclusion which sees, in inheritance of moral qualities, a positive influence exercised on moral destiny. There are inherent emotional forces in humanity to which the inherited influences must submit; they are essentially influences under control--influences which can be encountered and forced back. That we, who inhabit this little planet, may be the doomed creatures of fatality, from the cradle to the grave, I am not prepared to dispute. But I absolutely refuse to believe that it is a fatality with no higher origin than can be found in our accidental obligation to our fathers and mothers.

Still absorbed in these speculations, I was disturbed by a touch on my arm.

I looked up. Eunice's eyes were fixed on a shrubbery, at some little distance from us, which closed the view of the garden on that side. I noticed that she was trembling. Nothing to alarm her was visible that I could discover. I asked what she had seen to startle her. She pointed to the shrubbery.

"Look again," she said.

This time I saw a woman's dress among the shrubs. The woman herself appeared in a moment more. It was Helena. She carried a small portfolio, and she approached us with a smile.