

CHAPTER XLI. THE WHISPERING VOICE.

I looked at Eunice. She had risen, startled by her first suspicion of the person who was approaching us through the shrubbery; but she kept her place near me, only changing her position so as to avoid confronting Helena. Her quickened breathing was all that told me of the effort she was making to preserve her self-control. Entirely free from unbecoming signs of hurry and agitation, Helena opened her business with me by means of an apology.

"Pray excuse me for disturbing you. I am obliged to leave the house on one of my tiresome domestic errands. If you will kindly permit it, I wish to express, before I go, my very sincere regret for what I was rude enough to say, when I last had the honor of seeing you. May I hope to be forgiven? How-do-you-do, Eunice? Have you enjoyed your holiday in the country?"

Eunice neither moved nor answered. Having some doubt of what might happen if the two girls remained together, I proposed to Helena to leave the garden and to let me hear what she had to say, in the house.

"Quite needless," she replied; "I shall not detain you for more than a minute. Please look at this."

She offered to me the portfolio that she had been carrying, and pointed to a morsel of paper attached to it, which contained this inscription:

"Philip's Letters To Me. Private. Helena Gracedieu."

"I have a favor to ask," she said, "and a proof of confidence in you to offer. Will you be so good as to look over what you find in my portfolio? I am unwilling to give up the hopes that I had founded on our interview, when I asked for it. The letters will, I venture to think, plead my cause more convincingly than I was able to plead it for myself. I wish to forget what passed between us, to the last word. To the last word," she repeated emphatically--with a look which sufficiently informed me that I had not been betrayed to her father yet. "Will you indulge me?" she asked, and offered her portfolio for the second time.

A more impudent bargain could not well have been proposed to me.

I was to read, and to be favorably impressed by, Mr. Philip Dunboyne's letters; and Miss Helena was to say nothing of that unlucky slip of the

tongue, relating to her mother, which she had discovered to be a serious act of self-betrayal--thanks to my confusion at the time. If I had not thought of Eunice, and of the desolate and loveless life to which the poor girl was so patiently resigned, I should have refused to read Miss Gracedieu's love-letters.

But, as things were, I was influenced by the hope (innocently encouraged by Eunice herself) that Philip Dunboyme might not be so wholly unworthy of the sweet girl whom he had injured as I had hitherto been too hastily disposed to believe. To act on this view with the purpose of promoting a reconciliation was impossible, unless I had the means of forming a correct estimate of the man's character. It seemed to me that I had found the means. A fair chance of putting his sincerity to a trustworthy test, was surely offered by the letters (the confidential letters) which I had been requested to read. To feel this as strongly as I felt it, brought me at once to a decision. I consented to take the portfolio--on my own conditions.

"Understand, Miss Helena," I said, "that I make no promises. I reserve my own opinion, and my own right of action."

"I am not afraid of your opinions or your actions," she answered confidently, "if you will only read the letters. In the meantime, let me relieve my sister, there, of my presence. I hope you will soon recover, Eunice, in the country air."

If the object of the wretch was to exasperate her victim, she had completely failed. Eunice remained as still as a statue. To all appearance, she had not even heard what had been said to her. Helena looked at me, and touched her forehead with a significant smile. "Sad, isn't it?" she said--and bowed, and went briskly away on her household errand.

We were alone again.

Still, Eunice never moved. I spoke to her, and produced no impression. Beginning to feel alarmed, I tried the effect of touching her. With a wild cry, she started into a state of animation. Almost at the same moment, she weakly swayed to and fro as if the pleasant breeze in the garden moved her at its will, like the flowers. I held her up, and led her to the seat.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," I said. "She has gone."

Eunice's eyes rested on me in vacant surprise. "How do you know?" she asked. "I hear her; but I never see her. Do you see her?"

"My dear child! of what person are you speaking?"

She answered: "Of no person. I am speaking of a Voice that whispers and tempts me, when Helena is near."

"What voice, Eunice?"

"The whispering Voice. It said to me, 'I am your mother;' it called me Daughter when I first heard it. My father speaks of my mother, the angel. That good spirit has never come to me from the better world. It is a mock-mother who comes to me--some spirit of evil. Listen to this. I was awake in my bed. In the dark I heard the mock-mother whispering, close at my ear. Shall I tell you how she answered me, when I longed for light to see her by, when I prayed to her to show herself to me? She said: 'My face was hidden when I passed from life to death; my face no mortal creature may see.' I have never seen her--how can you have seen her? But I heard her again, just now. She whispered to me when Helena was standing there--where you are standing. She freezes the life in me. Did she freeze the life in you? Did you hear her tempting me? Don't speak of it, if you did. Oh, not a word! not a word!"

A man who has governed a prison may say with Macbeth, "I have supped full with horrors." Hardened as I was--or ought to have been--the effect of what I had just heard turned me cold. If I had not known it to be absolutely impossible, I might have believed that the crime and the death of the murderess were known to Eunice, as being the crime and the death of her mother, and that the horrid discovery had turned her brain. This was simply impossible. What did it mean? Good God! what did it mean?

My sense of my own helplessness was the first sense in me that recovered. I thought of Eunice's devoted little friend. A woman's sympathy seemed to be needed now. I rose to lead the way out of the garden.

"Selina will think we are lost," I said. "Let us go and find Selina."

"Not for the world," she cried.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't feel sure of myself. I might tell Selina something which she must never know; I should be so sorry to frighten her. Let me stop here with you."

I resumed my place at her side.

"Let me take your hand."

I gave her my hand. What composing influence this simple act may, or may not, have exercised, it is impossible to say. She was quiet, she was silent. After an interval, I heard her breathe a long-drawn sigh of relief.

"I am afraid I have surprised you," she said. "Helena brings the dreadful time back to me--" She stopped and shuddered.

"Don't speak of Helena, my dear."

"But I am afraid you will think--because I have said strange things--that I have been talking at random," she insisted. "The doctor will say that, if you meet with him. He believes I am deluded by a dream. I tried to think so myself. It was of no use; I am quite sure he is wrong."

I privately determined to watch for the doctor's arrival, and to consult with him. Eunice went on:

"I have the story of a terrible night to tell you; but I haven't the courage to tell it now. Why shouldn't you come back with me to the place that I am staying at? A pleasant farm-house, and such kind people. You might read the account of that night in my journal. I shall not regret the misery of having written it, if it helps you to find out how this hateful second self of mine has come to me. Hush! I want to ask you something. Do you think Helena is in the house?"

"No--she has gone out."

"Did she say that herself? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

She decided on going back to the farm, while Helena was out of the way. We left the garden together. For the first time, my companion noticed the portfolio. I happened to be carrying it in the hand that was nearest to her, as she walked by my side.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

It was needless to reply in words. My hesitation spoke for me.

"Carry it in your other hand," she said--"the hand that's furthest away from me. I don't want to see it! Do you mind waiting a moment while I find Selina? You will go to the farm with us, won't you?"

I had to look over the letters, in Eunice's own interests; and I begged her to let me defer my visit to the farm until the next day. She consented, after making me promise to keep my appointment. It was of some importance to her, she told me, that I should make acquaintance with the farmer and his wife and children, and tell her how I liked them. Her plans for the future depended on what those good people might be willing to do. When she had recovered her health, it was impossible for her to go home again while Helena remained in the house. She had resolved to earn her own living, if she could get employment as a governess. The farmer's children liked her; she had already helped their mother in teaching them; and there was reason to hope that their father would see his way to employing her permanently. His house offered the great advantage of being near enough to the town to enable her to hear news of the Minister's progress toward recovery, and to see him herself when safe opportunities offered, from time to time. As for her salary, what did she care about money? Anything would be acceptable, if the good man would only realize her hopes for the future.

It was disheartening to hear that hope, at her age, began and ended within such narrow limits as these. No prudent man would have tried to persuade her, as I now did, that the idea of reconciliation offered the better hope of the two.

"Suppose I see Mr. Philip Dunboyne when I go back to London," I began, "what shall I say to him?"

"Say I have forgiven him."

"And suppose," I went on, "that the blame really rests, where you all believe it to rest, with Helena. If that young man returns to you, truly ashamed of himself, truly penitent, will you--?"

She resolutely interrupted me: "No!"

"Oh, Eunice, you surely mean Yes?"

"I mean No!"

"Why?"

"Don't ask me! Good-by till to-morrow."