

CHAPTER XLIV. THE RESURRECTION OF THE PAST.

After having identified my handwriting, I waited with some curiosity to see whether Helena would let her anger honestly show itself, or whether she would keep it down. She kept it down.

"Allow me to return good for evil." (The evil was uppermost, nevertheless, when Miss Gracedieu expressed herself in these self-denying terms.) "You are no doubt anxious to know if Philip's father has been won over to serve your purpose. Here is Philip's own account of it: the last of his letters that I shall trouble you to read."

I looked it over. The memorandum follows which I made for my own use:

An eccentric philosopher is as capable as the most commonplace human being in existence of behaving like an honorable man. Mr. Dunboyne read the letter which bore the Minister's signature, and handed it to his son. "Can you answer that?" was all he said. Philip's silence confessed that he was unable to answer it--and Philip himself, I may add, rose accordingly in my estimation. His father pointed to the writing-desk. "I must spare my cramped hand," the philosopher resumed, "and I must answer Mr. Gracedieu's letter. Write, and leave a place for my signature." He began to dictate his reply. "Sir--My son Philip has seen your letter, and has no defense to make. In this respect he has set an example of candor which I propose to follow. There is no excuse for him. What I can do to show that I feel for you, and agree with you, shall be done. At the age which this young man has reached, the laws of England abolish the authority of his father. If he is sufficiently infatuated to place his honor and his happiness at the mercy of a lady, who has behaved to her sister as your daughter has behaved to Miss Eunice, I warn the married couple not to expect a farthing of my money, either during my lifetime or after my death. Your faithful servant, DUNBOYNE, SENIOR." Having performed his duty as secretary, Philip received his dismissal: "You may send my reply to the post," his father said; "and you may keep Mr. Gracedieu's letter. Morally speaking, I regard that last document as a species of mirror, in which a young gentleman like yourself may see how ugly he looks." This, Philip declared, was his father's form of farewell. I handed back the letter to Helena. Not a word passed between us. In sinister silence she opened the door and left me alone in the room.

That Mrs. Gracedieu and I had met in the bygone time, and--this was the

only serious part of it--had met in secret, would now be made known to the Minister. Was I to blame for having shrunk from distressing my good friend, by telling him that his wife had privately consulted me on the means of removing his adopted child from his house? And, even if I had been cruel enough to do this, would he have believed my statement against the positive denial with which the woman whom he loved and trusted would have certainly met it? No! let the consequences of the coming disclosure be what they might, I failed to see any valid reason for regretting my conduct in the past time.

I found Miss Jillgall waiting in the passage to see me come out.

Before I could tell her what had happened, there was a ring at the house-bell. The visitor proved to be Mr. Wellwood, the doctor. I was anxious to speak to him on the subject of Mr. Gracedieu's health. Miss Jillgall introduced me, as an old and dear friend of the Minister, and left us together in the dining-room.

"What do I think of Mr. Gracedieu?" he said, repeating the first question that I put. "Well, sir, I think badly of him."

Entering into details, after that ominous reply, Mr. Wellwood did not hesitate to say that his patient's nerves were completely shattered. Disease of the brain had, as he feared, been already set up. "As to the causes which have produced this lamentable break-down," the doctor continued, "Mr. Gracedieu has been in the habit of preaching extempore twice a day on Sundays, and sometimes in the week as well--and has uniformly refused to spare himself when he was in most urgent need of rest. If you have ever attended his chapel, you have seen a man in a state of fiery enthusiasm, feeling intensely every word that he utters. Think of such exhaustion as that implies going on for years together, and accumulating its wasting influences on a sensitively organized constitution. Add that he is tormented by personal anxieties, which he confesses to no one, not even to his own children and the sum of it all is that a worse case of its kind, I am grieved to say, has never occurred in my experience."

Before the doctor left me to go to his patient, I asked leave to occupy a minute more of his time. My object was, of course, to speak about Eunice.

The change of subject seemed to be agreeable to Mr. Wellwood. He smiled good-humoredly.

"You need feel no alarm about the health of that interesting girl," he said.

"When she complained to me--at her age!--of not being able to sleep, I should have taken it more seriously if I had been told that she too had her troubles, poor little soul. Love-troubles, most likely--but don't forget that my professional limits keep me in the dark! Have you heard that she took some composing medicine, which I had prescribed for her father? The effect (certain, in any case, to be injurious to a young girl) was considerably aggravated by the state of her mind at the time. A dream that frightened her, and something resembling delirium, seems to have followed. And she made matters worse, poor child, by writing in her diary about the visions and supernatural appearances that had terrified her. I was afraid of fever, on the day when they first sent for me. We escaped that complication, and I was at liberty to try the best of all remedies--quiet and change of air. I have no fears for Miss Eunice."

With that cheering reply he went up to the Minister's room.

All that I had found perplexing in Eunice was now made clear. I understood how her agony at the loss of her lover, and her keen sense of the wrong that she had suffered, had been strengthened in their disastrous influence by her experiment on the sleeping draught intended for her father. In mind and body, both, the poor girl was in the condition which offered its opportunity to the lurking hereditary taint. It was terrible to think of what might have happened, if the all-powerful counter-influence had not been present to save her.

Before I had been long alone the servant-maid came in, and said the doctor wanted to see me.

Mr. Wellwood was waiting in the passage, outside the Minister's bedchamber. He asked if he could speak to me without interruption, and without the fear of being overheard. I led him at once to the room which I occupied as a guest.

"At the very time when it is most important to keep Mr. Gracedieu quiet," he said, "something has happened to excite--I might almost say to infuriate him. He has left his bed, and is walking up and down the room; and, I don't scruple to say, he is on the verge of madness. He insists on seeing you. Being wholly unable to control him in any other way, I have consented to this. But I must not allow you to place yourself in what may be a disagreeable position, without a word of warning. Judging by his tones and his looks, he seems to have no very friendly motive for wishing to see you."

Knowing perfectly well what had happened, and being one of those

impatient people who can never endure suspense--I offered to go at once to Mr. Gracedieu's room. The doctor asked leave to say one word more.

"Pray be careful that you neither say nor do anything to thwart him," Mr. Wellwood resumed. "If he expresses an opinion, agree with him. If he is insolent and overbearing, don't answer him. In the state of his brain, the one hopeful course to take is to let him have his own way. Pray remember that. I will be within call, in case of your wanting me."