

CHAPTER XLV. THE FATAL PORTRAIT.

I knocked at the bedroom door.

"Who's there?"

Only two words--but the voice that uttered them, hoarse and peremptory, was altered almost beyond recognition. If I had not known whose room it was, I might have doubted whether the Minister had really spoken to me.

At the instant when I answered him, I was allowed to pass in. Having admitted me, he closed the door, and placed himself with his back against it. The customary pallor of his face had darkened to a deep red; there was an expression of ferocious mockery in his eyes. Helena's vengeance had hurt her unhappy father far more severely than it seemed likely to hurt me. The doctor had said he was on the verge of madness. To my thinking, he had already passed the boundary line.

He received me with a boisterous affectation of cordiality.

"My excellent friend! My admirable, honorable, welcome guest, you don't know how glad I am to see you. Stand a little nearer to the light; I want to admire you."

Remembering the doctor's advice, I obeyed him in silence.

"Ah, you were a handsome fellow when I first knew you," he said, "and you have some remains of it still left. Do you remember the time when you were a favorite with the ladies? Oh, don't pretend to be modest; don't turn your back, now you are old, on what you were in the prime of your life. Do you own that I am right?"

What his object might be in saying this--if, indeed, he had an object--it was impossible to guess. The doctor's advice left me no alternative; I hastened to own that he was right. As I made that answer, I observed that he held something in his hand which was half hidden up the sleeve of his dressing-gown. What the nature of the object was I failed to discover.

"And when I happened to speak of you somewhere," he went on, "I forget where--a member of my congregation--I don't recollect who it was--told me you were connected with the aristocracy. How were you connected?"

He surprised me; but, however he had got his information, he had not been deceived. I told him that I was connected, through my mother, with the family to which he had alluded.

"The aristocracy!" he repeated. "A race of people who are rich without earning their money, and noble because their great-grandfathers were noble before them. They live in idleness and luxury--profligates who gratify their passions without shame and without remorse. Deny, if you dare, that this is a true description of them."

It was really pitiable. Heartily sorry for him, I pacified him again.

"And don't suppose I forget that you are one of them. Do you hear me, my noble friend?"

There was no help for it--I made another conciliatory reply.

"So far," he resumed, "I don't complain of you. You have not attempted to deceive me--yet. Absolute silence is what I require next. Though you may not suspect it, my mind is in a ferment; I must try to think."

To some extent at least, his thoughts betrayed themselves in his actions. He put the object that I had half seen in his hand into the pocket of his dressing-gown, and moved to the toilet-table. Opening one of the drawers, he took from it a folded sheet of paper, and came back to me.

"A minister of the Gospel," he said, "is a sacred man, and has a horror of crime. You are safe, so far--provided you obey me. I have a solemn and terrible duty to perform. This is not the right place for it. Follow me downstairs."

He led the way out. The doctor, waiting in the passage, was not near the stairs, and so escaped notice. "What is it?" Mr. Wellwood whispered. In the same guarded way, I said: "He has not told me yet; I have been careful not to irritate him." When we descended the stairs, the doctor followed us at a safe distance. He mended his pace when the Minister opened the door of the study, and when he saw us both pass in. Before he could follow, the door was closed and locked in his face. Mr. Gracedieu took out the key and threw it through the open window, into the garden below.

Turning back into the room, he laid the folded sheet of paper on the table. That done, he spoke to me.

"I distrust my own weakness," he said. "A dreadful necessity confronts me--I might shrink from the horrid idea, and, if I could open the door, might try to get away. Escape is impossible now. We are prisoners together. But don't suppose that we are alone. There is a third person present, who will judge between you and me. Look there!"

He pointed solemnly to the portrait of his wife. It was a small picture, very simply framed; representing the face in a "three-quarter" view, and part of the figure only. As a work of art it was contemptible; but, as a likeness, it answered its purpose. My unhappy friend stood before it, in an attitude of dejection, covering his face with his hands.

In the interval of silence that followed, I was reminded that an unseen friend was keeping watch outside.

Alarmed by having heard the key turned in the lock, and realizing the embarrassment of the position in which I was placed, the doctor had discovered a discreet way of communicating with me. He slipped one of his visiting-cards under the door, with these words written on it: "How can I help you?"

I took the pencil from my pocketbook, and wrote on the blank side of the card: "He has thrown the key into the garden; look for it under the window." A glance at the Minister, before I returned my reply, showed that his attitude was unchanged. Without being seen or suspected, I, in my turn, slipped the card under the door.

The slow minutes followed each other--and still nothing happened.

My anxiety to see how the doctor's search for the key was succeeding, tempted me to approach the window. On my way to it, the tail of my coat threw down a little tray containing pens and pencils, which had been left close to the edge of the table. Slight as the noise of the fall was, it disturbed Mr. Gracedieu. He looked round vacantly.

"I have been comforted by prayer," he told me. "The weakness of poor humanity has found strength in the Lord." He pointed to the portrait once more: "My hands must not presume to touch it, while I am still in doubt. Take it down."

I removed the picture and placed it, by his directions, on a chair that stood midway between us. To my surprise his tones faltered; I saw tears rising in

his eyes. "You may think you see a picture there," he said. "You are wrong. You see my wife herself. Stand here, and look at my wife with me."

We stood together, with our eyes fixed on the portrait.

Without anything said or done on my part to irritate him, he suddenly turned to me in a state of furious rage. "Not a sign of sorrow!" he burst out. "Not a blush of shame! Wretch, you stand condemned by the atrocious composure that I see in your face!"

A first discovery of the odious suspicion of which I was the object, dawned on my mind at that moment. My capacity for restraining myself completely failed me. I spoke to him as if he had been an accountable being. "Once for all," I said, "tell me what I have a right to know. You suspect me of something. What is it?"

Instead of directly replying, he seized my arm and led me to the table. "Take up that paper," he said. "There is writing on it. Read--and let Her judge between us. Your life depends on how you answer me."

Was there a weapon concealed in the room? or had he got it in the pocket of his dressing-gown? I listened for the sound of the doctor's returning footsteps in the passage outside, and heard nothing. My life had once depended, years since, on my success in heading the arrest of an escaped prisoner. I was not conscious, then, of feeling my energies weakened by fear. But that man was not mad; and I was younger, in those days, by a good twenty years or more. At my later time of life, I could show my old friend that I was not afraid of him--but I was conscious of an effort in doing it.

I opened the paper. "Am I to read this to myself?" I asked. "Or am I to read it aloud?"

"Read it aloud!"

In these terms, his daughter addressed him:

"I have been so unfortunate, dearest father, as to displease you, and I dare not hope that you will consent to receive me. What it is my painful duty to tell you, must be told in writing.

"Grieved as I am to distress you, in your present state of health, I must not hesitate to reveal what it has been my misfortune--I may even say my misery, when I think of my mother--to discover.

"But let me make sure, in such a serious matter as this is, that I am not mistaken.

"In those happy past days, when I was still dear to my father, you said you thought of writing to invite a dearly-valued friend to pay a visit to this house. You had first known him, as I understood, when my mother was still living. Many interesting things you told me about this old friend, but you never mentioned that he knew, or that he had even seen, my mother. I was left to suppose that those two had remained strangers to each other to the day of her death.

"If there is any misinterpretation here of what you said, or perhaps of what you meant to say, pray destroy what I have written without turning to the next page; and forgive me for having innocently startled you by a false alarm."

Mr. Gracedieu interrupted me.

"Put it down!" he cried; "I won't wait till you have got to the end--I shall question you now. Give me the paper; it will help me to keep this mystery of iniquity clear in my own mind."

I gave him the paper.

He hesitated--and looked at the portrait once more. "Turn her away from me," he said; "I can't face my wife."

I placed the picture with its back to him.

He consulted the paper, reading it with but little of the confusion and hesitation which my experience of him had induced me to anticipate. Had the mad excitement that possessed him exercised an influence in clearing his mind, resembling in some degree the influence exercised by a storm in clearing the air? Whatever the right explanation may be, I can only report what I saw. I could hardly have mastered what his daughter had written more readily, if I had been reading it myself.

"Helena tells me," he began, "that you said you knew her by her likeness to her mother. Is that true?"

"Quite true."

"And you made an excuse for leaving her--see! here it is, written down. You made an excuse, and left her when she asked for an explanation."

"I did."

He consulted the paper again.

"My daughter says--No! I won't be hurried and I won't be interrupted--she says you were confused. Is that so?"

"It is so. Let your questions wait for a moment. I wish to tell you why I was confused."

"Haven't I said I won't be interrupted? Do you think you can shake my resolution?" He referred to the paper again. "I have lost the place. It's your fault--find it for me."

The evidence which was intended to convict me was the evidence which I was expected to find! I pointed it out to him.

His natural courtesy asserted itself in spite of his anger. He said "Thank you," and questioned me the moment after as fiercely as ever. "Go back to the time, sir, when we met in your rooms at the prison. Did you know my wife then?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you and she see each other--ha! I've got it now--did you see each other after I had left the town? No prevarication! You own to telling Helena that you knew her by her likeness to her mother. You must have seen her mother. Where?"

I made another effort to defend myself. He again refused furiously to hear me. It was useless to persist. Whatever the danger that threatened me might be, the sooner it showed itself the easier I should feel. I told him that Mrs. Gracedieu had called on me, after he and his wife had left the town.

"Do you mean to tell me," he cried, "that she came to you?"

"I do."

After that answer, he no longer required the paper to help him. He threw it from him on the floor.

"And you received her," he said, "without inquiring whether I knew of her visit or not? Guilty deception on your part--guilty deception on her part. Oh, the hideous wickedness of it!"

When his mad suspicion that I had been his wife's lover betrayed itself in this way, I made a last attempt, in the face of my own conviction that it was hopeless, to place my conduct and his wife's conduct before him in the true light.

"Mrs. Gracedieu's object was to consult me--" Before I could say the next words, I saw him put his hand into the pocket of his dressing-gown.

"An innocent man," he sternly declared, "would have told me that my wife had been to see him--you kept it a secret. An innocent woman would have given me a reason for wishing to go to you--she kept it a secret, when she left my house; she kept it a secret when she came back."

"Mr. Gracedieu, I insist on being heard! Your wife's motive--"

He drew from his pocket the thing that he had hidden from me. This time, there was no concealment; he let me see that he was opening a razor. It was no time for asserting my innocence; I had to think of preserving my life. When a man is without firearms, what defense can avail against a razor in the hands of a madman? A chair was at my side; it offered the one poor means of guarding myself that I could see. I laid my hand on it, and kept my eye on him.

He paused, looking backward and forward between the picture and me.

"Which of them shall I kill first?" he said to himself. "The man who was my trusted friend? Or the woman whom I believed to be an angel on earth?" He stopped once more, in a state of fierce self-concentration, debating what he should do. "The woman," he decided. "Wretch! Fiend! Harlot! How I loved her!!!"

With a yell of fury, he pounced on the picture--ripped the canvas out of the frame--and cut it malignantly into fragments. As they dropped from the razor on the floor, he stamped on them, and ground them under his foot. "Go, wife of my bosom," he cried, with a dreadful mockery of voice and look--"go, and burn everlastingly in the place of torment!" His eyes glared at me. "Your turn now," he said--and rushed at me with his weapon ready in his hand. I hurled the chair at his right arm. The razor dropped on the floor. I

caught him by the wrist. Like a wild animal he tried to bite me. With my free hand--if I had known how to defend myself in any other way, I would have taken that way--with my free hand I seized him by the throat; forced him back; and held him against the wall. My grasp on his throat kept him quiet. But the dread of seriously injuring him so completely overcame me, that I forgot I was a prisoner in the room, and was on the point of alarming the household by a cry for help.

I was still struggling to preserve my self-control, when the sound of footsteps broke the silence outside. I heard the key turn in the lock, and saw the doctor at the open door.