

CHAPTER XLVIII. THE DECISION OF EUNICE.

Eunice ran out to meet us, and opened the gate. She was instantly folded in Miss Jillgall's arms. On her release, she came to me, eager for news of her father's health. When I had communicated all that I thought it right to tell her of the doctor's last report, she noticed Mrs. Tenbruggen. The appearance of a stranger seemed to embarrass her. I left Miss Jillgall to introduce them to each other.

"Darling Euneece, you remember Mrs. Tenbruggen's name, I am sure? Elizabeth, this is my sweet girl; I mentioned her in my letters to you."

"I hope she will be my sweet girl, when we know each other a little better. May I kiss you, dear? You have lovely eyes; but I am sorry to see that they don't look like happy eyes. You want Mamma Tenbruggen to cheer you. What a charming old house!"

She put her arm round Eunice's waist and led her to the house door. Her enjoyment of the creepers that twined their way up the pillars of the porch was simply perfection as a piece of acting. When the farmer's wife presented herself, Mrs. Tenbruggen was so irresistibly amiable, and took such flattering notice of the children, that the harmless British matron actually blushed with pleasure. "I'm sure, ma'am, you must have children of your own," she said. Mrs. Tenbruggen cast her eyes on the floor, and sighed with pathetic resignation. A sweet little family, and all cruelly swept away by death. If the performance meant anything, it did most assuredly mean that.

"What wonderful self-possession!" somebody whispered in my ear. The children in the room were healthy, well-behaved little creatures--but the name of the innocent one among them was Selina.

Before dinner we were shown over the farm.

The good woman of the house led the way, and Miss Jillgall and I accompanied her. The children ran on in front of us. Still keeping possession of Eunice, Mrs. Tenbruggen followed at some distance behind. I looked back, after no very long interval, and saw that a separation had taken place. Mrs. Tenbruggen passed me, not looking so pleasantly as usual, joined the children, and walked with two of them, hand in hand, a pattern of maternal amiability. I dropped back a little, and gave Eunice an opportunity of joining me; having purposely left her to form her own opinion,

without any adverse influence exercised on my part.

"Is that lady a friend of yours?" she asked. "No; only an acquaintance. What do you think of her?"

"I thought I should like her at first; she was so kind, and seemed to take such an interest in me. But she said such strange things--asked if I was reckoned like my mother, and which of us was the eldest, my sister or myself, and whether we were my father's only two children, and if one of us was more his favorite than the other. What I could tell her, I did tell. But when I said I didn't know which of us was the oldest, she gave me an impudent tap on the cheek, and said, 'I don't believe you, child,' and left me. How can Selina be so fond of her? Don't mention it to any one else; I hope I shall never see her again."

"I will keep your secret, Eunice; and you must keep mine. I entirely agree with you."

"You agree with me in disliking her?"

"Heartily."

We could say no more at that time. Our friends in advance were waiting for us. We joined them at once.

If I had felt any doubt of the purpose which had really induced Mrs. Tenbruggen to leave London, all further uncertainty on my part was at an end. She had some vile interest of her own to serve by identifying Mr. Gracedieu's adopted child--but what the nature of that interest might be, it was impossible to guess. The future, when I thought of it now, filled me with dismay. A more utterly helpless position than mine it was not easy to conceive. To warn the Minister, in his present critical state of health, was simply impossible. My relations with Helena forbade me even to approach her. And, as for Selina, she was little less than a mere tool in the hands of her well-beloved friend. What, in God's name, was I to do?

At dinner-time we found the master of the house waiting to bid us welcome.

Personally speaking, he presented a remarkable contrast to the typical British farmer. He was neither big nor burly; he spoke English as well as I did; and there was nothing in his dress which would have made him a fit subject for a picture of rustic life. When he spoke, he was able to talk on subjects unconnected with agricultural pursuits; nor did I hear him grumble

about the weather and the crops. It was pleasant to see that his wife was proud of him, and that he was, what all fathers ought to be, his children's best and dearest friend. Why do I dwell on these details, relating to a man whom I was not destined to see again? Only because I had reason to feel grateful to him. When my spirits were depressed by anxiety, he made my mind easy about Eunice, as long as she remained in his house.

The social arrangements, when our meal was over, fell of themselves into the right train.

Miss Jillgall went upstairs, with the mother and the children, to see the nursery and the bedrooms. Mrs. Tenbruggen discovered a bond of union between the farmer and herself; they were both skilled players at backgammon, and they sat down to try conclusions at their favorite game. Without any wearisome necessity for excuses or stratagems, Eunice took my arm and led me to the welcome retirement of her own sitting-room.

I could honestly congratulate her, when I heard that she was established at the farm as a member of the family. While she was governess to the children, she was safe from dangers that might have threatened her, if she had been compelled by circumstances to return to the Minister's house.

The entry in her Journal, which she was anxious that I should read, was placed before me next.

I followed the poor child's account of the fearful night that she had passed, with an interest that held me breathless to the end. A terrible dream, which had impressed a sense of its reality on the sleeper by reaching its climax in somnambulism--this was the obvious explanation, no doubt; and a rational mind would not hesitate to accept it. But a rational mind is not a universal gift, even in a country which prides itself on the idol-worship of Fact. Those good friends who are always better acquainted with our faults, failings, and weaknesses than we can pretend to be ourselves, had long since discovered that my nature was superstitious, and my imagination likely to mislead me in the presence of events which encouraged it. Well! I was weak enough to recoil from the purely rational view of all that Eunice had suffered, and heard, and seen, on the fateful night recorded in her Journal. Good and Evil walk the ways of this unintelligible world, on the same free conditions. If we cling, as many of us do, to the comforting belief that departed spirits can minister to earthly creatures for good--can be felt moving in us, in a train of thought, and seen as visible manifestations, in a dream--with what pretense of reason can we deny that the same freedom of supernatural influence which is conceded to the departed spirit, working for good, is also permitted

to the departed spirit, working for evil? If the grave cannot wholly part mother and child, when the mother's life has been good, does eternal annihilation separate them, when the mother's life has been wicked? No! If the departed spirit can bring with it a blessing, the departed spirit can bring with it a curse. I dared not confess to Eunice that the influence of her murderess-mother might, as I thought possible, have been supernaturally present when she heard temptation whispering in her ear; but I dared not deny it to myself. All that I could say to satisfy and sustain her, I did say. And when I declared--with my whole heart declared--that the noble passion which had elevated her whole being, and had triumphed over the sorest trials that desertion could inflict, would still triumph to the end, I saw hope, in that brave and true heart, showing its bright promise for the future in Eunice's eyes.

She closed and locked her Journal. By common consent we sought the relief of changing the subject. Eunice asked me if it was really necessary that I should return to London.

I shrank from telling her that I could be of no further use to her father, while he regarded me with an enmity which I had not deserved. But I saw no reason for concealing that it was my purpose to see Philip Dunboyne.

"You told me yesterday," I reminded her, "that I was to say you had forgiven him. Do you still wish me to do that?"

"Indeed I do!"

"Have you thought of it seriously? Are you sure of not having been hurried by a generous impulse into saying more than you mean?"

"I have been thinking of it," she said, "through the wakeful hours of last night--and many things are plain to me, which I was not sure of in the time when I was so happy. He has caused me the bitterest sorrow of my life, but he can't undo the good that I owe to him. He has made a better girl of me, in the time when his love was mine. I don't forget that. Miserably as it has ended, I don't forget that."

Her voice trembled; the tears rose in her eyes. It was impossible for me to conceal the distress that I felt. The noble creature saw it. "No," she said faintly; "I am not going to cry. Don't look so sorry for me." Her hand pressed my hand gently--she pitied me. When I saw how she struggled to control herself, and did control herself, I declare to God I could have gone down on my knees before her.

She asked to be allowed to speak of Philip again, and for the last time.

"When you meet with him in London, he may perhaps ask if you have seen Eunice."

"My child! he is sure to ask."

"Break it to him gently--but don't let him deceive himself. In this world, he must never hope to see me again."

I tried--very gently--to remonstrate. "At your age, and at his age," I said, "surely there is hope?"

"There is no hope." She pressed her hand on her heart. "I know it, I feel it, here."

"Oh, Eunice, it's hard for me to say that!"

"I will try to make it easier for you. Say that I have forgiven him--and say no more."