

## CHAPTER LIX. DEFENSE.

One surprise followed another, after I had encountered Eunece at the door.

When my fondness had excused her for setting the well-meant advice in my letter at defiance, I was conscious of expecting to see her in tears; eager, distressingly eager, to hear what hope there might be of Philip's recovery. I saw no tears, I heard no inquiries. She was pale, and quiet, and silent. Not a word fell from her when we met, not a word when she kissed me, not a word when she led the way into the nearest room--the dining-room. It was only when we were shut in together that she spoke.

"Which is Philip's room?" she asked.

Instead of wanting to know how he was, she desired to know where he was! I pointed toward the back dining-room, which had been made into a bedroom for Philip. He had chosen it himself, when he first came to stay with us, because the window opened into the garden, and he could slip out and smoke at any hour of the day or night, when he pleased.

"Who is with him now?" was the next strange thing this sadly-changed girl said to me.

"Maria is taking her turn," I answered; "she assists in nursing Philip."

"Where is--?" Eunece got no further than that. Her breath quickened, her color faded away. I had seen people look as she was looking now, when they suffered under some sudden pain. Before I could offer to help her, she rallied, and went on: "Where," she began again, "is the other nurse?"

"You mean Helena?" I said.

"I mean the Poisoner."

When I remind you, dear Mr. Governor, that my letter had carefully concealed from her the horrible discovery made by the doctor, your imagination will picture my state of mind. She saw that I was overpowered. Her sweet nature, so strangely frozen up thus far, melted at last. "You don't know what I have heard," she said, "you don't know what thoughts have been roused in me." She left her chair, and sat on my knee with the familiarity of the dear old times, and took the letter that I had written to her

from her pocket.

"Look at it yourself," she said, "and tell me if anybody could read it, and not see that you were concealing something. My dear, I have driven round by the doctor's house--I have seen him--I have persuaded him, or perhaps I ought to say surprised him, into telling me the truth. But the kind old man is obstinate. He wouldn't believe me when I told him I was on my way here to save Philip's life. He said: 'My child, you will only put your own life in jeopardy. If I had not seen that danger, I should never have told you of the dreadful state of things at home. Go back to the good people at the farm, and leave the saving of Philip to me.'"

"He was right, Euneece, entirely right."

"No, dear, he was wrong. I begged him to come here, and judge for himself; and I ask you to do the same."

I was obstinate. "Go back!" I persisted. "Go back to the farm!"

"Can I see Philip?" she asked.

I have heard some insolent men say that women are like cats. If they mean that we do, figuratively speaking, scratch at times, I am afraid they are not altogether wrong. An irresistible impulse made me say to poor Euneece: "This is a change indeed, since you refused to receive Philip."

"Is there no change in the circumstances?" she asked sadly. "Isn't he ill and in danger?"

I begged her to forgive me; I said I meant no harm.

"I gave him up to my sister," she continued, "when I believed that his happiness depended, not on me, but on her. I take him back to myself, when he is at the mercy of a demon who threatens his life. Come, Selina, let us go to Philip."

She put her arm round me, and made me get up from my chair. I was so easily persuaded by her, that the fear of what Helena's jealousy and Helena's anger might do was scarcely present in my thoughts. The door of communication was locked on the side of the bedchamber. I went into the hall, to enter Philip's room by the other door. She followed, waiting behind me. I heard what passed between them when Maria went out to her.

"Where is Miss Gracedieu?"

"Resting upstairs, miss, in her room."

"Look at the clock, and tell me when you expect her to come down here."

"I am to call her, miss, in ten minutes more."

"Wait in the dining-room, Maria, till I come back to you."

She joined me. I held the door open for her to go into Philip's room. It was not out of curiosity; the feeling that urged me was sympathy, when I waited a moment to see their first meeting. She bent over the poor, pallid, trembling, suffering man, and raised him in her arms, and laid his head on her bosom. "My Philip!" She murmured those words in a kiss. I closed the door, I had a good cry; and, oh, how it comforted me!

There was only a minute to spare when she came out of the room. Maria was waiting for her. Eunece said, as quietly as ever: "Go and call Miss Gracedieu."

The girl looked at her, and saw--I don't know what. Maria became alarmed. But she went up the stairs, and returned in haste to tell us that her young mistress was coming down.

The faint rustling of Helena's dress as she left her room reached us in the silence. I remained at the open door of the dining-room, and Maria approached and stood near me. We were both frightened. Eunece stepped forward, and stood on the mat at the foot of the stairs, waiting. Her back was toward me; I could only see that she was as still as a statue. The rustling of the dress came nearer. Oh, heavens! what was going to happen? My teeth chattered in my head; I held by Maria's shoulder. Drops of perspiration showed themselves on the girl's forehead; she stared in vacant terror at the slim little figure, posted firm and still on the mat.

Helena turned the corner of the stairs, and waited a moment on the last landing, and saw her sister.

"You here?" she said. "What do you want?"

There was no reply. Helena descended, until she reached the last stair but one. There, she stopped. Her staring eyes grew large and wild; her hand shook as she stretched it out, feeling for the banister; she staggered as she

caught at it, and held herself up. The silence was still unbroken. Something in me, stronger than myself, drew my steps along the hall nearer and nearer to the stair, till I could see the face which had struck that murderous wretch with terror.

I looked.

No! it was not my sweet girl; it was a horrid transformation of her. I saw a fearful creature, with glittering eyes that threatened some unimaginable vengeance. Her lips were drawn back; they showed her clinched teeth. A burning red flush dyed her face. The hair of her head rose, little by little, slowly. And, most dreadful sight of all, she seemed, in the stillness of the house, to be listening to something. If I could have moved, I should have fled to the first place of refuge I could find. If I could have raised my voice, I should have cried for help. I could do neither the one nor the other. I could only look, look, look; held by the horror of it with a hand of iron.

Helena must have roused her courage, and resisted her terror. I heard her speak:

"Let me by!"

"No."

Slowly, steadily, in a whisper, Eunece made that reply.

Helena tried once more--still fighting against her own terror: I knew it by the trembling of her voice.

"Let me by," she repeated; "I am on my way to Philip's room."

"You will never enter Philip's room again."

"Who will stop me?"

"I will."

She had spoken in the same steady whisper throughout--but now she moved. I saw her set her foot on the first stair. I saw the horrid glitter in her eyes flash close into Helena's face. I heard her say:

"Poisoner, go back to your room."

Silent and shuddering, Helena shrank away from her--daunted by her glittering eyes; mastered by her lifted hand pointing up the stairs.

Helena slowly ascended till she reached the landing. She turned and looked down; she tried to speak. The pointing hand struck her dumb, and drove her up the next flight of stairs. She was lost to view. Only the small rustling sound of the dress was to be heard, growing fainter and fainter; then an interval of stillness; then the noise of a door opened and closed again; then no sound more--but a change to be seen: the transformed creature was crouching on her knees, still and silent, her face covered by her hands. I was afraid to approach her; I was afraid to speak to her. After a time, she rose. Suddenly, swiftly, with her head turned away from me, she opened the door of Philip's room--and was gone.

I looked round. There was only Maria in the lonely hall. Shall I try to tell you what my sensations were? It may sound strangely, but it is true--I felt like a sleeper, who has half-awakened from a dream.