

CHAPTER LXII. THE SENTENCE PRONOUNCED.

MARTYRS to gout know, by sad experience, that they suffer under one of the most capricious of maladies. An attack of this disease will shift, in the most unaccountable manner, from one part of the body to another; or, it will release the victim when there is every reason to fear that it is about to strengthen its hold on him; or, having shown the fairest promise of submitting to medical treatment, it will cruelly lay the patient prostrate again in a state of relapse. Adverse fortune, in my case, subjected me to this last and worst trial of endurance. Two months passed--months of pain aggravated by anxiety--before I was able to help Eunice and Miss Jillgall personally with my sympathy and advice.

During this interval, I heard regularly from the friendly and faithful Selina.

Terror and suspense, courageously endured day after day, seem to have broken down her resistance, poor soul, when Eunice's good name and Eunice's tranquillity were threatened by the most infamous of false accusations. From that time, Miss Jillgall's method of expressing herself betrayed a gradual deterioration. I shall avoid presenting at a disadvantage a correspondent who has claims on my gratitude, if I give the substance only of what she wrote--assisted by the newspaper which she sent to me, while the legal proceedings were in progress.

Honest indignation does sometimes counsel us wisely. When the doctor left Miss Jillgall, in anger and in haste, he had determined on taking the course from which, as a humane man and a faithful friend, he had hitherto recoiled. It was no time, now, to shrink from the prospect of an exposure. The one hope of successfully encountering the vindictive wickedness of Helena lay in the resolution to be beforehand with her, in the appeal to the magistrates with which she had threatened Eunice and Miss Jillgall. The doctor's sworn information stated the whole terrible case of the poisoning, ranging from his first suspicions and their confirmation, to Helena's atrocious attempt to accuse her innocent sister of her own guilt. So firmly were the magistrates convinced of the serious nature of the case thus stated, that they did not hesitate to issue their warrant. Among the witnesses whose attendance was immediately secured, by the legal adviser to whom the doctor applied, were the farmer and his wife.

Helena was arrested while she was dressing to go out. Her composure was not for a moment disturbed. "I was on my way," she said coolly, "to make a

statement before the justices. The sooner they hear what I have to say the better."

The attempt of this shameless wretch to "turn the tables" on poor Eunice--suggested, as I afterward discovered, by the record of family history which she had quoted in her journal--was defeated with ease. The farmer and his wife proved the date at which Eunice had left her place of residence under their roof. The doctor's evidence followed. He proved, by the production of his professional diary, that the discovery of the attempt to poison his patient had taken place before the day of Eunice's departure from the farm, and that the first improvement in Mr. Philip Dunboyme's state of health had shown itself after that young lady's arrival to perform the duties of a nurse. To the wise precautions which she had taken--perverted by Helena to the purpose of a false accusation--the doctor attributed the preservation of the young man's life.

Having produced the worst possible impression on the minds of the magistrates, Helena was remanded. Her legal adviser had predicted this result; but the vindictive obstinacy of his client had set both experience and remonstrance at defiance.

At the renewed examination, the line of defense adopted by the prisoner's lawyer proved to be--mistaken identity.

It was asserted that she had never entered the chemist's shop; also, that the assistant had wrongly identified some other lady as Miss Helena Gracedieu; also, that there was not an atom of evidence to connect her with the stealing of the doctor's prescription-paper and the forgery of his writing. Other assertions to the same purpose followed, on which it is needless to dwell. The case for the prosecution was, happily, in competent hands. With the exception of one witness, cross-examination afforded no material help to the evidence for the defense.

The chemist swore positively to the personal appearance of Helena, as being the personal appearance of the lady who had presented the prescription. His assistant, pressed on the question of identity, broke down under cross-examination--purposely, as it was whispered, serving the interests of the prisoner. But the victory, so far gained by the defense, was successfully contested by the statement of the next witness, a respectable tradesman in the town. He had seen the newspaper report of the first examination, and had volunteered to present himself as a witness. A member of Mr. Gracedieu's congregation, his pew in the chapel was so situated as to give him a view of the minister's daughters occupying their pew. He had seen the

prisoner on every Sunday, for years past; and he swore that he was passing the door of the chemist's shop, at the moment when she stepped out into the street, having a bottle covered with the customary white paper in her hand. The doctor and his servant were the next witnesses called. They were severely cross-examined. Some of their statements--questioned technically with success--received unexpected and powerful support, due to the discovery and production of the prisoner's diary. The entries, guardedly as some of them were written, revealed her motive for attempting to poison Philip Dunboyne; proved that she had purposely called on the doctor when she knew that he would be out, that she had entered the consulting-room, and examined the medical books, had found (to use her own written words) "a volume that interested her," and had used the prescription-papers for the purpose of making notes. The notes themselves were not to be found; they had doubtless been destroyed. Enough, and more than enough, remained to make the case for the prosecution complete. The magistrates committed Helena Gracedieu for trial at the next assizes.

I arrived in the town, as well as I can remember, about a week after the trial had taken place.

Found guilty, the prisoner had been recommended to mercy by the jury--partly in consideration of her youth; partly as an expression of sympathy and respect for her unhappy father. The judge (a father himself) passed a lenient sentence. She was condemned to imprisonment for two years. The careful matron of the jail had provided herself with a bottle of smelling-salts, in the fear that there might be need for it when Helena heard her sentence pronounced. Not the slightest sign of agitation appeared in her face or her manner. She lied to the last; asserting her innocence in a firm voice, and returning from the dock to the prison without requiring assistance from anybody.

Relating these particulars to me, in a state of ungovernable excitement, good Miss Jillgall ended with a little confession of her own, which operated as a relief to my overburdened mind after what I had just heard.

"I wouldn't own it," she said, "to anybody but a dear friend. One thing, in the dreadful disgrace that has fallen on us, I am quite at a loss to account for. Think of Mr. Gracedieu's daughter being one of those criminal creatures on whom it was once your terrible duty to turn the key! Why didn't she commit suicide?"

"My dear lady, no thoroughly wicked creature ever yet committed suicide. Self-destruction, when it is not an act of madness, implies some acuteness

of feeling--sensibility to remorse or to shame, or perhaps a distorted idea of making atonement. There is no such thing as remorse or shame, or hope of making atonement, in Helena's nature."

"But when she comes out of prison, what will she do?"

"Don't alarm yourself, my good friend. She will do very well."

"Oh, hush! hush! Poetical justice, Mr. Governor!"

"Poetical fiddlesticks, Miss Jillgall."