CHAPTER LXIII. THE OBSTACLE REMOVED.

When the subject of the trial was happily dismissed, my first inquiry related to Eunice. The reply was made with an ominous accompaniment of sighs and sad looks. Eunice had gone back to her duties as governess at the farm. Hearing this, I asked naturally what had become of Philip.

Melancholy news, again, was the news that I now heard.

Mr. Dunboyne the elder had died suddenly, at his house in Ireland, while Philip was on his way home. When the funeral ceremony had come to an end, the will was read. It had been made only a few days before the testator's death; and the clause which left all his property to his son was preceded by expressions of paternal affection, at a time when Philip was in sore need of consolation. After alluding to a letter, received from his son, the old man added: "I always loved him, without caring to confess it; I detest scenes of sentiment, kissings, embracings, tears, and that sort of thing. But Philip has yielded to my wishes, and has broken off a marriage which would have made him, as well as me, wretched for life. After this, I may speak my mind from my grave, and may tell my boy that I loved him. If the wish is likely to be of any use, I will add (on the chance)--God bless him."

"Does Philip submit to separation from Eunice?" I asked. "Does he stay in Ireland?"

"Not he, poor fellow! He will be here to-morrow or next day. When I last wrote," Miss Jillgall continued, "I told him I hoped to see you again soon. If you can't help us (I mean with Eunice) that unlucky young man will do some desperate thing. He will join those madmen at large who disturb poor savages in Africa, or go nowhere to find nothing in the Arctic regions.

"Whatever I can do, Miss Jillgall, shall be gladly done. Is it really possible that Eunice refuses to marry him, after having saved his life?"

"A little patience, please, Mr. Governor; let Philip tell his own story. If I try to do it, I shall only cry--and we have had tears enough lately, in this house."

Further consultation being thus deferred, I went upstairs to the Minister's room.

He was sitting by the window, in his favorite armchair, absorbed in knitting!

The person who attended on him, a good-natured, patient fellow, had been a sailor in his younger days, and had taught Mr. Gracedieu how to use the needles. "You see it amuses him," the man said, kindly. "Don't notice his mistakes, he thinks there isn't such another in the world for knitting as himself. You can see, sir, how he sticks to it." He was so absorbed over his employment that I had to speak to him twice, before I could induce him to look at me. The utter ruin of his intellect did not appear to have exercised any disastrous influence over his bodily health. On the contrary, he had grown fatter since I had last seen him; his complexion had lost the pallor that I remembered--there was color in his cheeks.

"Don't you remember your old friend?" I said. He smiled, and nodded, and repeated the words:

"Yes, yes, my old friend." It was only too plain that he had not the least recollection of me. "His memory is gone," the man said. "When he puts away his knitting, at night, I have to find it for him in the morning. But, there! he's happy--enjoys his victuals, likes sitting out in the garden and watching the birds. There's been a deal of trouble in the family, sir; and it has all passed over him like a wet sponge over a slate." The old sailor was right. If that wreck of a man had been capable of feeling and thinking, his daughter's disgrace would have broken his heart. In a world of sin and sorrow, is peaceable imbecility always to be pitied? I have known men who would have answered, without hesitation: "It is to be envied." And where (some persons might say) was the poor Minister's reward for the act of mercy which had saved Eunice in her infancy? Where it ought to be! A man who worthily performs a good action finds his reward in the action itself.

At breakfast, on the next day, the talk touched on those passages in Helena's diary, which had been produced in court as evidence against her.

I expressed a wish to see what revelation of a depraved nature the entries in the diary might present; and my curiosity was gratified. At a fitter time, I may find an opportunity of alluding to the impression produced on me by the diary. In the meanwhile, the event of Philip's return claims notice in the first place.

The poor fellow was so glad to see me that he shook hands as heartily as if we had known each other from the time when he was a boy.

"Do you remember how kindly you spoke to me when I called on you in London?" he asked. "If I have repeated those words once--but perhaps you don't remember them? You said: 'If I was as young as you are, I should not

despair.' Well! I have said that to myself over and over again, for a hundred times at least. Eunice will listen to you, sir, when she will listen to nobody else. This is the first happy moment I have had for weeks past."

I suppose I must have looked glad to hear that. Anyway, Philip shook hands with me again.

Miss Jillgall was present. The gentle-hearted old maid was so touched by our meeting that she abandoned herself to the genial impulse of the moment, and gave Philip a kiss. The outraged claims of propriety instantly seized on her. She blushed as if the long-lost days of her girlhood had been found again, and ran out of the room.

"Now, Mr. Philip," I said, "I have been waiting, at Miss Jillgall's suggestion, to get my information from you. There is something wrong between Eunice and yourself. What is it? And who is to blame?"

"Her vile sister is to blame," he answered. "That reptile was determined to sting us. And she has done it!" he cried, starting to his feet, and walking up and down the room, urged into action by his own unendurable sense of wrong. "I say, she has done it, after Eunice has saved me--done it, when Eunice was ready to be my wife."

"How has she done it?"

Between grief and indignation his reply was involved in a confusion of vehemently-spoken words, which I shall not attempt to reproduce. Eunice had reminded him that her sister had been publicly convicted of an infamous crime, and publicly punished for it by imprisonment. "If I consent to marry you," she said, "I stain you with my disgrace; that shall never be." With this resolution, she had left him. "I have tried to convince her," Philip said, "that she will not be associated with her sister's disgrace when she bears my name; I have promised to take her far away from England, among people who have never even heard of her sister. Miss Jillgall has used her influence to help me. All in vain! There is no hope for us but in you. I am not thinking selfishly only of myself. She tries to conceal it--but, oh, she is broken-hearted! Ask the farmer's wife, if you don't believe me. Judge for yourself, sir. Go--for God's sake, go to the farm."

I made him sit down and compose himself.

"You may depend on my going to the farm," I answered. "I shall write to Eunice to-day, and follow my letter to-morrow." He tried to thank me; but I

would not allow it. "Before I consent to accept the expression of your gratitude," I said, "I must know a little more of you than I know now. This is only the second occasion on which we have met. Let us look back a little, Mr. Philip Dunboyne. You were Eunice's affianced husband; and you broke faith with her. That was a rascally action. How do you defend it?"

His head sank. "I am ashamed to defend it," he answered.

I pressed him without mercy. "You own yourself," I said, "that it was a rascally action?"

"Use stronger language against me, even than that, sir--I deserve it."

"In plain words," I went on, "you can find no excuse for your conduct?"

"In the past time," he said, "I might have found excuses."

"But you can't find them now?"

"I must not even look for them now."

"Why not?"

"I owe it to Eunice to leave my conduct at its worst; with nothing said--by me--to defend it."

"What has Eunice done to have such a claim on you as that?"

"Eunice has forgiven me."

It was gratefully and delicately said. Ought I to have allowed this circumstance to weigh with me? I ask, in return, had I never committed any faults? As a fellow-mortal and fellow-sinner, had I any right to harden my heart against an expression of penitence which I felt to be sincere in its motive?

But I was bound to think of Eunice. I did think of her, before I ventured to accept the position--the critical position, as I shall presently show--of Philip's friend.

After more than an hour of questions put without reserve, and of answers given without prevarication, I had traveled over the whole ground laid out by the narratives which appear in these pages, and had arrived at my

conclusion--so far as Philip Dunboyne was concerned.

I found him to be a man with nothing absolutely wicked in him--but with a nature so perilously weak, in many respects, that it might drift into wickedness unless a stronger nature was at hand to bold it back. Married to a wife without force of character, the probabilities would point to him as likely to yield to examples which might make him a bad husband. Married to a wife with a will of her own, and with true love to sustain her--a wife who would know when to take the command and how to take the command--a wife who, finding him tempted to commit actions unworthy of his better self, would be far-sighted enough to perceive that her husband's sense of honor might sometimes lose its balance, without being on that account hopelessly depraved--then, and, in these cases only, the probabilities would point to Philip as a man likely to be the better and the happier for his situation, when the bonds of wedlock had got him.

But the serious question was not answered yet.

Could I feel justified in placing Eunice in the position toward Philip which I have just endeavored to describe? I dared not allow my mind to dwell on the generosity which had so nobly pardoned him, or on the force of character which had bravely endured the bitterest disappointment, the cruelest humiliation. The one consideration which I was bound to face, was the sacred consideration of her happiness in her life to come.

Leaving Philip, with a few words of sympathy which might help him to bear his suspense, I went to my room to think.

The time passed--and I could arrive at no positive conclusion. Either way--with or without Philip--the contemplation of Eunice's future harassed me with doubt. Even if I had conquered my own indecision, and had made up my mind to sanction the union of the two young people, the difficulties that now beset me would not have been dispersed. Knowing what I alone knew, I could certainly remove Eunice's one objection to the marriage. In other words, I had only to relate what had happened on the day when the Chaplain brought the Minister to the prison, and the obstacle of their union would be removed. But, without considering Philip, it was simply out of the question to do this, in mercy to Eunice herself. What was Helena's disgrace, compared with the infamy which stained the name of the poor girl's mother! The other alternative of telling her part of the truth only was before me, if I could persuade myself to adopt it. I failed to persuade myself; my morbid anxiety for her welfare made me hesitate again. Human patience could endure no more. Rashness prevailed and prudence yielded--I left my

decision to be influenced by the coming interview with Eunice.

The next day I drove to the farm. Philip's entreaties persuaded me to let him be my companion, on one condition--that he waited in the carriage while I went into the house.

I had carefully arranged my ideas, and had decided on proceeding with the greatest caution, before I ventured on saying the all-important words which, once spoken, were not to be recalled. The worst of those anxieties, under which the delicate health of Mr. Gracedieu had broken down, was my anxiety now. Could I reconcile it to my conscience to permit a man, innocent of all knowledge of the truth, to marry the daughter of a condemned murderess, without honestly telling him what he was about to do? Did I deserve to be pitied? did I deserve to be blamed?--my mind was still undecided when I entered the house.

She ran to meet me as if she had been my daughter; she kissed me as if she had been my daughter; she fondly looked up at me as if she had been my daughter. At the sight of that sweet young face, so sorrowful, and so patiently enduring sorrow, all my doubts and hesitations, everything artificial about me with which I had entered the room, vanished in an instant.

After she had thanked me for coming to see her, I saw her tremble a little. The uppermost interest in her heart was forcing its way outward to expression, try as she might to keep it back. "Have you seen Philip?" she asked. The tone in which she put that question decided me--I was resolved to let her marry him. Impulse! Yes, impulse, asserting itself inexcusably in a man at the end of his life. I ought to have known better than to have given way. Very likely. But am I the only mortal who ought to have known better--and did not?

When Eunice asked if I had seen Philip, I owned that he was outside in the carriage. Before she could reproach me, I went on with what I had to say: "My child, I know what a sacrifice you have made; and I should honor your scruples, if you had any reason for feeling them."

"Any reason for feeling them?" She turned pale as she repeated the words.

An idea came to me. I rang for the servant, and sent her to the carriage to tell Philip to come in. "My dear, I am not putting you to any unfair trial," I assured her; "I am going to prove that I love you as truly as if you were my own child."

When they were both present, I resolved that they should not suffer a moment of needless suspense. Standing between them, I took Eunice's hand, and laid my other hand on Philip's shoulder, and spoke out plainly.

"I am here to make you both happy," I said. "I can remove the only obstacle to your marriage, and I mean to do it. But I must insist on one condition. Give me your promise, Philip, that you will ask for no explanations, and that you will be satisfied with the one true statement which is all that I can offer to you."

He gave me his promise, without an instant's hesitation.

"Philip grants what I ask," I said to Eunice. "Do you grant it, too?"

Her hand turned cold in mine; but she spoke firmly when she said: "Yes."

I gave her into Philip's care. It was his privilege to console and support her. It was my duty to say the decisive words:

"Rouse your courage, dear Eunice; you are no more affected by Helena's disgrace than I am. You are not her sister. Her father is not your father; her mother was not your mother. I was present, in the time of your infancy, when Mr. Gracedieu's fatherly kindness received you as his adopted child. This, I declare to you both, on my word of honor, is the truth."

How she bore it I am not able to say. My foolish old eyes were filling with tears. I could just see plainly enough to find my way to the door, and leave them together.

In my reckless state of mind, I never asked myself if Time would be my accomplice, and keep the part of the secret which I had not revealed--or be my enemy, and betray me. The chances, either way, were perhaps equal. The deed was done.