

CHAPTER LXIV. THE TRUTH TRIUMPHANT.

The marriage was deferred, at Eunice's request, as an expression of respect to the memory of Philip's father.

When the time of delay had passed, it was arranged that the wedding ceremony should be held--after due publication of Banns--at the parish church of the London suburb in which my house was situated. Miss Jillgall was bridesmaid, and I gave away the bride. Before we set out for the church, Eunice asked leave to speak with me for a moment in private.

"Don't think," she said, "that I am forgetting my promise to be content with what you have told me about myself. I am not so ungrateful as that. But I do want, before I consent to be Philip's wife, to feel sure that I am not quite unworthy of him. Is it because I am of mean birth that you told me I was Mr. Gracedieu's adopted child--and told me no more?"

I could honestly satisfy her, so far. "Certainly not!" I said.

She put her arms round my neck. "Do you say that," she asked, "to make my mind easy? or do you say it on your word of honor?"

"On my word of honor."

We arrived at the church. Let Miss Jillgall describe the marriage, in her own inimitable way.

"No wedding breakfast, when you don't want to eat it. No wedding speeches, when nobody wants to make them, and nobody wants to hear them. And no false sentiment, shedding tears and reddening noses, on the happiest day in the whole year. A model marriage! I could desire nothing better, if I had any prospect of being a bride myself."

They went away for their honeymoon to a quiet place by the seaside, not very far from the town in which Eunice had passed some of the happiest and the wretchedest days in her life. She persisted in thinking it possible that Mr. Gracedieu might recover the use of his faculties, at the last, and might wish to see her on his death-bed. "His adopted daughter," she gently reminded me, "is his only daughter now." The doctor shook his head when I told him what Eunice had said to me--and, the sad truth must be told, the doctor was right.

Miss Jillgall returned, on the wedding-day, to take care of the good man who had befriended her in her hour of need.

Before the end of the week, I heard from her, and was disagreeably reminded of an incident which we had both forgotten, absorbed as we were in other and greater interests, at the time.

Mrs. Tenbruggen had again appeared on the scene! She had written to Miss Jillgall, from Paris, to say that she had heard of old Mr. Dunboyne's death, and that she wished to have the letter returned, which she had left for delivery to Philip's father on the day when Philip and Eunice were married. I had my own suspicions of what that letter might contain; and I regretted that Miss Jillgall had sent it back without first waiting to consult me. My misgivings, thus excited, were increased by more news of no very welcome kind. Mrs. Tenbruggen had decided on returning to her professional pursuits in England. Massage, now the fashion everywhere, had put money into her pocket among the foreigners; and her husband, finding that she persisted in keeping out of his reach, had consented to a compromise. He was ready to submit to a judicial separation; in consideration of a little income which his wife had consented to settle on him, under the advice of her lawyer.

Some days later, I received a delightful letter from Philip and Eunice; reminding me that I had engaged to pay them a visit at the seaside. My room was ready for me, and I was left to choose my own day. I had just begun to write my reply, gladly accepting the invitation, when an ominous circumstance occurred. My servant announced "a lady"; and I found myself face to face with--Mrs. Tenbruggen!

She was as cheerful as ever, and as eminently agreeable as ever.

"I have heard it all from Selina," she said. "Philip's marriage to Eunice (I shall go and congratulate them, of course), and the catastrophe (how dramatic!) of Helena Gracedieu. I warned Selina that Miss Helena would end badly. To tell the truth, she frightened me. I don't deny that I am a mischievous woman when I find myself affronted, quite capable of taking my revenge in my own small spiteful way. But poison and murder--ah, the frightful subject! let us drop it, and talk of something that doesn't make my hair (it's really my own hair) stand on end. Has Selina told you that I have got rid of my charming husband, on easy pecuniary terms? Oh, you know that? Very well. I will tell you something that you don't know. Mr. Governor, I have found you out."

"May I venture to ask how?"

"When I guessed which was which of those two girls," she answered, "and guessed wrong, you deliberately encouraged the mistake. Very clever, but you overdid it. From that moment, though I kept it to myself, I began to fear I might be wrong. Do you remember Low Lanes, my dear sir? A charming old church. I have had another consultation with my lawyer. His questions led me into mentioning how it happened that I heard of Low Lanes. After looking again at his memorandum of the birth advertised in the newspaper without naming the place--he proposed trying the church register at Low Lanes. Need I tell you the result? I know, as well as you do, that Philip has married the adopted child. He has had a mother-in-law who was hanged, and, what is more, he has the honor, through his late father, of being otherwise connected with the murderess by marriage--as his aunt!"

Bewilderment and dismay deprived me of my presence of mind. "How did you discover that?" I was foolish enough to ask.

"Do you remember when I brought the baby to the prison?" she said. "The father--as I mentioned at the time--had been a dear and valued friend of mine. No person could be better qualified to tell me who had married his wife's sister. If that lady had been living, I should never have been troubled with the charge of the child. Any more questions?"

"Only one. Is Philip to hear of this?"

"Oh, for shame! I don't deny that Philip insulted me grossly, in one way; and that Philip's late father insulted me grossly, in another way. But Mamma Tenbruggen is a Christian. She returns good for evil, and wouldn't for the world disturb the connubial felicity of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Dunboyme."

The moment the woman was out of my house, I sent a telegram to Philip to say that he might expect to see me that night. I caught the last train in the evening; and I sat down to supper with those two harmless young creatures, knowing I must prepare the husband for what threatened them, and weakly deferring it, when I found myself in their presence, until the next day. Eunice was, in some degree, answerable for this hesitation on my part. No one could look at her husband, and fail to see that he was a supremely happy man. But I detected signs of care in the wife's face.

Before breakfast the next morning I was out on the beach, trying to decide how the inevitable disclosure might be made. Eunice joined me. Now, when

we were alone, I asked if she was really and completely happy. Quietly and sadly she answered: "Not yet."

I hardly knew what to say. My face must have expressed disappointment and surprise.

"I shall never be quite happy," she resumed, "till I know what it is that you kept from me on that memorable day. I don't like having a secret from my husband--though it is not my secret."

"Remember your promise," I said

"I don't forget it," she answered. "I can only wish that my promise would keep back the thoughts that come to me in spite of myself."

"What thoughts?"

"There is something, as I fear, in the story of my parents which you are afraid to confide to me. Why did Mr. Gracedieu allow me to believe and leave everybody to believe, that I was his own child?"

"My dear, I relieved your mind of those doubts on the morning of your marriage."

"No. I was only thinking of myself at that time. My mother--the doubt of her is the doubt that torments me now."

"What do you mean?"

She put her arm in mine, and held by it with both hands.

"The mock-mother!" she whispered. "Do you remember that dreadful Vision, that horrid whispering temptation in the dead of night? Was it a mock-mother? Oh, pity me! I don't know who my mother was. One horrid thought about her is a burden on my mind. If she was a good woman, you who love me would surely have made me happy by speaking of her?"

Those words decided me at last. Could she suffer more than she had suffered already, if I trusted her with the truth? I ran the risk. There was a time of silence that filled me with terror. The interval passed. She took my hand, and put it to her heart. "Does it beat as if I was frightened?" she asked.

No! It was beating calmly.

"Does it relieve your anxiety?"

It told me that I had not surprised her. That unforgotten Vision of the night had prepared her for the worst, after the time when I had told her that she was an adopted child. "I know," I said, "that those whispered temptations overpowered you again, when you and Helena met on the stairs, and you forbade her to enter Philip's room. And I know that love had conquered once more, when you were next seen sitting by Philip's bedside. Tell me--have you any misgivings now? Is there fear in your heart of the return of that tempting spirit in you, in the time to come?"

"Not while Philip lives!"

There, where her love was--there her safety was. And she knew it! She suddenly left me. I asked where she was going.

"To tell Philip," was the reply.

She was waiting for me at the door, when I followed her to the house.

"Is it done?" I said.

"It is done," she answered.

"What did he say?"

"He said: 'My darling, if I could be fonder of you than ever, I should be fonder of you now.'"

I have been blamed for being too ready to confide to Philip the precious trust of Eunice's happiness. If that reply does not justify me, where is justification to be found?

POSTSCRIPT.

Later in the day, Mrs. Tenbruggen arrived to offer her congratulations. She asked for a few minutes with Philip alone. As a cat elaborates her preparations for killing a mouse, so the human cat elaborated her preparations for killing Philip's happiness, he remained uninjured by her teeth and her claws. "Somebody," she said, "has told you of it already?" And Philip answered: "Yes; my wife."

For some months longer, Mr. Gracedieu lingered. One morning, he said to Eunice: "I want to teach you to knit. Sit by me, and see me do it." His hands fell softly on his lap; his head sank little by little on her shoulder. She could just hear him whisper: "How pleasant it is to sleep!" Never was Death's dreadful work more gently done.

Our married pair live now on the paternal estate in Ireland; and Miss Jillgall reigns queen of domestic affairs. I am still strong enough to pass my autumn holidays in that pleasant house.

At times, my memory reverts to Helena Gracedieu, and to what I discovered when I had seen her diary.

How little I knew of that terrible creature when I first met with her, and fancied that she had inherited her mother's character! It was weak indeed to compare the mean vices of Mrs. Gracedieu with the diabolical depravity of her daughter. Here the doctrine of hereditary transmission of moral qualities must own that it has overlooked the fertility (for growth of good and for growth of evil equally) which is inherent in human nature. There are virtues that exalt us, and vices that degrade us, whose mysterious origin is, not in our parents, but in ourselves. When I think of Helena, I ask myself, where is the trace which reveals that the first murder in the world was the product of inherited crime?

The criminal left the prison, on the expiration of her sentence, so secretly that it was impossible to trace her. Some months later, Miss Jillgall received an illustrated newspaper published in the United States. She showed me one of the portraits in it.

"Do you recognize the illustrious original?" she asked, with indignant emphasis on the last two words. I recognized Helena. "Now read her new title," Miss Jillgall continued.

I read: "The Reverend Miss Gracedieu."

The biographical notice followed. Here is an extract: "This eminent lady, the victim of a shocking miscarriage of justice in England, is now the distinguished leader of a new community in the United States. We hail in her the great intellect which asserts the superiority of woman over man. In the first French Revolution, the attempt made by men to found a rational religion met with only temporary success. It was reserved for the mightier spirit of woman to lay the foundations more firmly, and to dedicate one of the noblest edifices in this city to the Worship of Pure Reason. Readers who wish for further information will do well to provide themselves with the Reverend Miss Gracedieu's Orations--the tenth edition of which is advertised in our columns."

"I once asked you," Miss Jillgall reminded me, "what Helena would do when she came out of prison, and you said she would do very well. Oh, Mr. Governor, Solomon was nothing to You!"