

Chapter XLIII. Know Your Own Mind.

The garden of the hotel at Sydenham had originally belonged to a private house. Of great extent, it had been laid out in excellent taste. Flower-beds and lawns, a handsome fountain, seats shaded by groups of fine trees at their full growth, completed the pastoral charm of the place. A winding path led across the garden from the back of the house. It had been continued by the speculator who purchased the property, until it reached a road at the extremity of the grounds which communicated with the Crystal Palace. Visitors to the hotel had such pleasant associations with the garden that many of them returned at future opportunities instead of trying the attraction of some other place. Various tastes and different ages found their wishes equally consulted here. Children rejoiced in the finest playground they had ever seen. Remote walks, secluded among shrubberies, invited persons of reserved disposition who came as strangers, and as strangers desired to remain. The fountain and the lawn collected sociable visitors, who were always ready to make acquaintance with each other. Even the amateur artist could take liberties with Nature, and find the accommodating limits of the garden sufficient for his purpose. Trees in the foreground sat to him for likenesses that were never recognized; and hills submitted to unprovoked familiarities, on behalf of brushes which were not daunted by distance.

On the day after the dinner which had so deplorably failed, in respect of one of the guests invited, to fulfill Catherine's anticipations, there was a festival at the Palace. It had proved so generally attractive to the guests at the hotel that the grounds were almost deserted.

As the sun declined, on a lovely summer evening, the few invalids feebly wandering about the flower-beds, or resting under the trees, began to return to the house in dread of the dew. Catherine and her child, with the nursemaid in attendance, were left alone in the garden. Kitty found her mother, as she openly declared, "not such good company as usual." Since the day when her grandmother had said the fatal words which checked all further allusion to her father, the child had shown a disposition to complain, if she was not constantly amused. She complained of Mrs. Presty now.

"I think grandmamma might have taken me to the Crystal Palace," she said.

"My dear, your grandmamma has friends with her--ladies and gentlemen who don't care to be troubled with a child."

Kitty received this information in a very unamiable spirit. "I hate ladies and gentlemen!" she said.

"Even Captain Bennydeck?" her mother asked.

"No; I like my nice Captain. And I like the waiters. They would take me to the Crystal Palace--only they're always busy. I wish it was bedtime; I don't know what to do with myself."

"Take a little walk with Susan."

"Where shall I go?"

Catherine looked toward the gate which opened on the road, and proposed a visit to the old man who kept the lodge.

Kitty shook her head. There was an objection to the old man. "He asks questions; he wants to know how I get on with my sums. He's proud of his summing; and he finds me out when I'm wrong. I don't like the lodge-keeper."

Catherine looked the other way, toward the house. The pleasant fall of water in the basin of the distant fountain was just audible. "Go and feed the gold-fishes," she suggested.

This was a prospect of amusement which at once raised Kitty's spirits. "That's the thing!" she cried, and ran off to the fountain, with the nursemaid after her.

Catherine seated herself under the trees, and watched in solitude the decline of the sun in a cloudless sky. The memory of the happy years of her marriage had never been so sadly and persistently present to her mind as at this time, when the choice of another married life waited her decision to become an accomplished fact. Remembrances of the past, which she had such bitter reason to regret, and forebodings of the future, in which she was more than half inclined to believe, oppressed her at one and the same moment. She thought of the different circumstances, so widely separated by time, under which Herbert (years ago) and Bennydeck (twenty-four hours since) had each owned his love, and pleaded for an indulgent hearing. Her mind contrasted the dissimilar results.

Pressed by the faithless man who had so cruelly wronged her in after-years,

she only wondered why he had waited so long before he asked her to marry him. Addressed with equal ardor by that other man, whose age, whose character, whose modest devotion offered her every assurance of happiness that a woman could desire, she had struggled against herself, and had begged him to give her a day to consider. That day was now drawing to an end. As she watched the setting sun, the phantom of her guilty husband darkened the heavenly light; imbittered the distrust of herself which made her afraid to say Yes; and left her helpless before the hesitation which prevented her from saying No.

The figure of a man appeared on the lonely path that led to the lodge gate.

Impulsively she rose from her seat as he advanced. She sat down again. After that first act of indecision, the flutter of her spirits abated; she was able to think.

To avoid him, after he had spared her at her own request, would have been an act of ingratitude: to receive him was to place herself once more in the false position of a woman too undecided to know her own mind. Forced to choose between these alternatives, her true regard for Bennydeck forbade her to think of herself, and encouraged her to wait for him. As he came nearer, she saw anxiety in his face and observed an open letter in his hand. He smiled as he approached her, and asked leave to take a chair at her side. At the same time, when he perceived that she had noticed his letter, he put it away hurriedly in his pocket.

"I hope nothing has happened to annoy you," she said.

He smiled again; and asked if she was thinking of his letter. "It is only a report," he added, "from my second in command, whom I have left in charge of my Home. He is an excellent man; but I am afraid his temper is not proof against the ingratitude which we sometimes meet with. He doesn't yet make allowances for what even the best natures suffer, under the deteriorating influence of self-distrust and despair. No, I am not anxious about the results of this case. I forget all my anxieties (except one) when I am with you."

His eyes told her that he was about to return to the one subject that she dreaded. She tried--as women will try, in the little emergencies of their lives--to gain time.

"I am interested about your Home," she said: "I want to know what sort of place it is. Is the discipline very severe?"

"There is no discipline," he answered warmly. "My one object is to be a friend to my friendless fellow-creatures; and my one way of governing them is to follow the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Whatever else I may remind them of, when they come to me, I am determined not to remind them of a prison. For this reason--though I pity the hardened wanderers of the streets, I don't open my doors to them. Many a refuge, in which discipline is inevitable, is open to these poor sinners already. My welcome is offered to penitents and sufferers of another kind--who have fallen from positions in life, in which the sense of honor has been cultivated; whose despair is associated with remembrances which I may so encourage, with the New Testament to help me, as to lead them back to the religious influences under which their purer and happier lives may have been passed. Here and there I meet with disappointments. But I persist in my system of trusting them as freely as if they were my own children; and, for the most part, they justify my confidence in them. On the day--if it ever comes--when I find discipline necessary, I shall suffer my disappointment and close my doors."

"Is your house open," Catherine asked, "to men and women alike?"

He was eager to speak with her on a subject more interesting to him even than his Home. Answering her question, in this frame of mind, his thoughts wandered; he drew lines absently with his walking-stick on the soft earth under the trees.

"The means at my disposal," he said, "are limited. I have been obliged to choose between the men and the women."

"And you have chosen women?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because a lost woman is a more friendless creature than a lost man."

"Do they come to you? or do you look for them?"

"They mostly come to me. There is one young woman, however, now waiting to see me, whom I have been looking for. I am deeply interested in her."

"Is it her beauty that interests you?"

"I have not seen her since she was a child. She is the daughter of an old

friend of mine, who died many years ago."

"And with that claim on you, you keep her waiting?"

"Yes."

He let his stick drop on the ground and looked at Catherine; but he offered no explanation of his strange conduct. She was a little disappointed. "You have been some time away from your Home," she said; still searching for his reasons. "When do you go back?"

"I go back," he answered, "when I know whether I may thank God for being the happiest man living."

They were both silent.