Chapter XLIV. Think of Consequences.

Catherine listened to the fall of water in the basin of the fountain. She was conscious of a faint hope--a hope unworthy of her--that Kitty might get weary of the gold-fishes, and might interrupt them. No such thing happened; no stranger appeared on the path which wound through the garden. She was alone with him. The influences of the still and fragrant summer evening were influences which breathed of love.

"Have you thought of me since yesterday?" he asked gently.

She owned that she had thought of him.

"Is there no hope that your heart will ever incline toward me?"

"I daren't consult my heart. If I had only to consider my own feelings--" She stopped.

"What else have you to consider?"

"My past life--how I have suffered, and what I have to repent of."

"Has your married life not been a happy one?" he asked.

"Not a happy one--in the end," she answered.

"Through no fault of yours, I am sure?"

"Through no fault of mine, certainly."

"And yet you said just now that you had something to repent of?"

"I was not thinking of my husband, Captain Bennydeck, when I said that. If I have injured any person, the person is myself."

She was thinking of that fatal concession to the advice of her mother, and to the interests of her child, which placed her in a false position toward the honest man who loved her and trusted her. If he had been less innocent in the ways of the world, and not so devotedly fond of her, he might, little by little, have persuaded Catherine to run the risk of shocking him by a confession of the truth. As it was, his confidence in her raised him high

above the reach of suspicions which might have occurred to other men. He saw her turn pale; he saw distress in her face, which he interpreted as a silent reproach to him for the questions he had asked.

"I hope you will forgive me?" he said simply.

She was astonished. "What have I to forgive?"

"My want of delicacy."

"Oh, Captain Bennydeck, you speak of one of your great merits as if it were a fault! Over and over again I have noticed your delicacy, and admired it."

He was too deeply in earnest to abandon his doubts of himself.

"I have ignorantly led you to think of your sorrows," he said; "sorrows that I cannot console. I don't deserve to be forgiven. May I make the one excuse in my power? May I speak of myself?"

She told him by a gesture that he had made a needless request.

"The life I have led," he resumed, "accounts, perhaps, in some degree, for what is deficient in me. At school, I was not a popular boy; I only made one friend, and he has long since been numbered with the dead. Of my life at college, and afterward in London, I dare not speak to you; I look back at it with horror. My school-friend decided my choice of a profession; he went into the navy. After a while, not knowing what else to do, I followed his example. I liked the life--I may say the sea saved me. For years, I was never on shore for more than a few weeks at a time. I saw nothing of society; I was hardly ever in the company of ladies. The next change in my life associated me with an Arctic expedition. God forbid I should tell you of what men go through who are lost in the regions of eternal ice! Let me only say I was preserved--miraculously preserved--to profit by that dreadful experience. It made a new man of me; it altered me (I hope for the better) into what I am now. Oh, I feel that I ought to have kept my secret yesterday--I mean my daring to love you. I should have waited till you knew more of me; till my conduct pleased you perhaps, and spoke for me. You won't laugh, I am sure, if I confess (at my age!) that I am inexperienced. Never till I met you have I known what true love is--and this at forty years old. How some people would laugh! I own it seems melancholy to me."

"No; not melancholy."

Her voice trembled. Agitation, which it was not a pain but a luxury to feel, was gently taking possession of her. Where another man might have seen that her tenderness was getting the better of her discretion, and might have presumed on the discovery, this man, innocently blind to his own interests, never even attempted to take advantage of her. No more certain way could have been devised, by the most artful lover, of touching the heart of a generous woman, and making it his own. The influence exerted over Catherine by the virtues of Bennydeck's character--his unaffected kindness, his manly sympathy, his religious convictions so deeply felt, so modestly restrained from claiming notice--had been steadily increasing in the intimacy of daily intercourse. Catherine had never felt his ascendancy over her as strongly as she felt it now. By fine degrees, the warning remembrances which had hitherto made her hesitate lost their hold on her memory. Hardly conscious herself of what she was doing, she began to search his feelings in his own presence. Such love as his had been unknown in her experience; the luxury of looking into it, and sounding it to its inmost depths, was more than the woman's nature could resist.

"I think you hardly do yourself justice," she said. "Surely you don't regret having felt for me so truly, when I told you yesterday that my old friend had deserted me?"

"No, indeed!"

"Do you like to remember that you showed no jealous curiosity to know who my friend was?"

"I should have been ashamed of myself if I had asked the question."

"And did you believe that I had a good motive--a motive which you might yourself have appreciated--for not telling you the name of that friend?"

"Is he some one whom I know?"

"Ought you to ask me that, after what I have just said?"

"Pray forgive me! I spoke without thinking."

"I can hardly believe it, when I remember how you spoke to me yesterday. I could never have supposed, before we became acquainted with each other, that it was in the nature of a man to understand me so perfectly, to be so gentle and so considerate in feeling for my distress. You confused me a little, I must own, by what you said afterward. But I am not sure that ought to be

severe in blaming you. Sympathy--I mean such sympathy as yours--sometimes says more than discretion can always approve. Have you not found it so yourself?"

"I have found it so with you."

"And perhaps I have shown a little too plainly how dependent I am on you--how dreadful it would be to me if I lost you too as a friend?"

She blushed as she said it. When the words had escaped her, she felt that they might bear another meaning than the simple meaning which she had attached to them. He took her hand; his doubts of himself, his needless fear of offending her, restrained him no longer.

"You can never lose me," he said, "if you will only let me be the nearest friend that a woman can have. Bear with me, dearest! I ask for so much; I have so little to offer in return. I dream of a life with you which is perhaps too perfectly happy to be enjoyed on earth. And yet, I cannot resign my delusion. Must my poor heart always long for happiness which is beyond my reach? If an overruling Providence guides our course through this world, may we not sometimes hope for happier ends than our mortal eyes can see?"

He waited a moment--and sighed--and dropped her hand. She hid her face; she knew what it would tell him: she was ashamed to let him see it.

"I didn't mean to distress you," he said sadly.

She let him see her face. For a moment only, she looked at him--and then let silence tell him the rest.

His arms closed round her. Slowly, the glory of the sun faded from the heavens, and the soft summer twilight fell over the earth. "I can't speak," he whispered; "my happiness is too much for me."

"Are you sure of your happiness?" she asked.

"Could I think as I am thinking now, if I were not sure of it?"

"Are you thinking of me?"

"Of you--and of all that you will be to me in the future. Oh, my angel, if God grants us many years to come, what a perfect life I see!"

"Tell me--what do you see?"

"I see a husband and wife who are all in all to each other. If friends come to us, we are glad to bid them welcome; but we are always happiest by ourselves."

"Do we live in retirement?"

"We live where you like best to live. Shall it be in the country?"

"Yes! yes! You have spoken of the sea as you might have spoken of your best friend--we will be near the sea. But I must not keep you selfishly all to myself. I must remember how good you have been to poor creatures who don't feel our happiness, and who need your kindness. Perhaps I might help you? Do you doubt it?"

"I only doubt whether I ought to let you see what I have seen; I am only afraid of the risk of making you unhappy. You tempt me to run the risk. The help of a woman--and of such a woman as you are--is the one thing I have wanted. Your influence would succeed where my influence has often failed. How good, how thoughtful you would be!"

"I only want to be worthy of you," she said, humbly. "When may I see your Home?"

He drew her closer to him: tenderly and timidly he kissed her for the first time. "It rests with you," he answered. "When will you be my wife?"

She hesitated; he felt her trembling. "Is there any obstacle?" he asked.

Before she could reply, Kitty's voice was heard calling to her mother--Kitty ran up to them.

Catherine turned cold as the child caught her by the hand, eagerly claiming her attention. All that she should have remembered, all that she had forgotten in a few bright moments of illusion, rose in judgment against her, and struck her mind prostrate in an instant, when she felt Kitty's touch.

Bennydeck saw the change. Was it possible that the child's sudden appearance had startled her? Kitty had something to say, and said it before he could speak.

"Mamma, I want to go where the other children are going. Susan's gone to

her supper. You take me."

Her mother was not even listening. Kitty turned impatiently to Bennydeck. "Why won't mamma speak to me?" she asked. He quieted her by a word. "You shall go with me." His anxiety about Catherine was more than he could endure. "Pray let me take you back to the house," he said. "I am afraid you are not well."

"I shall be better directly. Do me a kindness--take the child!"

She spoke faintly and vacantly. Bennydeck hesitated. She lifted her trembling hands in entreaty. "I beg you will leave me!" Her voice, her manner, made it impossible to disobey. He turned resignedly to Kitty and asked which way she wanted to go. The child pointed down the path to one of the towers of the Crystal Palace, visible in the distance. "The governess has taken the others to see the company go away," she said; "I want to go too."

Bennydeck looked back before he lost sight of Catherine.

She remained seated, in the attitude in which he had left her. At the further end of the path which led to the hotel, he thought he saw a figure in the twilight, approaching from the house. There would be help near, if Catherine wanted it.

His uneasy mind was in some degree relieved, as he and Kitty left the garden together.