

CHAPTER III. SWEDENBORG AND THE SIBYL.

MY narrative may move on again from the point at which it paused in the first chapter.

Mary and I (as you may remember) had left the bailiff alone at the decoy, and had set forth on our way together to Dermody's cottage.

As we approached the garden gate, I saw a servant from the house waiting there. He carried a message from my mother--a message for me.

"My mistress wishes you to go home, Master George, as soon as you can. A letter has come by the coach. My master means to take a post-chaise from London, and sends word that we may expect him in the course of the day."

Mary's attentive face saddened when she heard those words.

"Must you really go away, George," she whispered, "before you see what I have got waiting for you at home?"

I remembered Mary's promised "surprise," the secret of which was only to be revealed to me when we got to the cottage. How could I disappoint her? My poor little lady-love looked ready to cry at the bare prospect of it.

I dismissed the servant with a message of the temporizing sort. My love to my mother--and I would be back at the house in half an hour.

We entered the cottage.

Dame Dermody was sitting in the light of the window, as usual, with one of the mystic books of Emanuel Swedenborg open on her lap. She solemnly lifted her hand on our appearance, signing to us to occupy our customary corner without speaking to her. It was an act of domestic high treason to interrupt the Sibyl at her books. We crept quietly into our places. Mary waited until she saw her grandmother's gray head bend down, and her grandmother's bushy eyebrows contract attentively, over her reading. Then, and then only, the discreet child rose on tiptoe, disappeared noiselessly in the direction of her bedchamber, and came back to me carrying something carefully wrapped up in her best cambric handkerchief.

"Is that the surprise?" I whispered.

Mary whispered back: "Guess what it is?"

"Something for me?"

"Yes. Go on guessing. What is it?"

I guessed three times, and each guess was wrong. Mary decided on helping me by a hint.

"Say your letters," she suggested; "and go on till I stop you."

I began: "A, B, C, D, E, F--" There she stopped me.

"It's the name of a Thing," she said; "and it begins with F."

I guessed, "Fern," "Feather," "Fife." And here my resources failed me.

Mary sighed, and shook her head. "You don't take pains," she said. "You are three whole years older than I am. After all the trouble I have taken to please you, you may be too big to care for my present when you see it. Guess again."

"I can't guess."

"You must!"

"I give it up."

Mary refused to let me give it up. She helped me by another hint.

"What did you once say you wished you had in your boat?" she asked.

"Was it long ago?" I inquired, at a loss for an answer.

"Long, long ago! Before the winter. When the autumn leaves were falling, and you took me out one evening for a sail. Ah, George, you have forgotten!"

Too true, of me and of my brethren, old and young alike! It is always his love that forgets, and her love that remembers. We were only two children, and we were types of the man and the woman already.

Mary lost patience with me. Forgetting the terrible presence of her

grandmother, she jumped up, and snatched the concealed object out of her handkerchief.

"There!" she cried, briskly, "now do you know what it is?"

I remembered at last. The thing I had wished for in my boat, all those months ago, was a new flag. And here was the flag, made for me in secret by Mary's own hand! The ground was green silk, with a dove embroidered on it in white, carrying in its beak the typical olive-branch, wrought in gold thread. The work was the tremulous, uncertain work of a child's fingers. But how faithfully my little darling had remembered my wish! how patiently she had plied the needle over the traced lines of the pattern! how industriously she had labored through the dreary winter days! and all for my sake! What words could tell my pride, my gratitude, my happiness?

I too forgot the presence of the Sibyl bending over her book. I took the little workwoman in my arms, and kissed her till I was fairly out of breath and could kiss no longer.

"Mary!" I burst out, in the first heat of my enthusiasm, "my father is coming home to-day. I will speak to him to-night. And I will marry you to-morrow!"

"Boy!" said the awful voice at the other end of the room. "Come here."

Dame Dermody's mystic book was closed; Dame Dermody's weird black eyes were watching us in our corner. I approached her; and Mary followed me timidly, by a footstep at a time.

The Sibyl took me by the hand, with a caressing gentleness which was new in my experience of her.

"Do you prize that toy?" she inquired, looking at the flag. "Hide it!" she cried, before I could answer. "Hide it--or it may be taken from you!"

"Why should I hide it?" I asked. "I want to fly it at the mast of my boat."

"You will never fly it at the mast of your boat!" With that answer she took the flag from me and thrust it impatiently into the breast-pocket of my jacket.

"Don't crumple it, grandmother!" said Mary, piteously.

I repeated my question:

"Why shall I never fly it at the mast of my boat?"

Dame Dermody laid her hand on the closed volume of Swedenborg lying in her lap.

"Three times I have opened this book since the morning," she said. "Three times the words of the prophet warn me that there is trouble coming. Children, it is trouble that is coming to You. I look there," she went on, pointing to the place where a ray of sunlight poured slanting into the room, "and I see my husband in the heavenly light. He bows his head in grief, and he points his unerring hand at You. George and Mary, you are consecrated to each other! Be always worthy of your consecration; be always worthy of yourselves." She paused. Her voice faltered. She looked at us with softening eyes, as those look who know sadly that there is a parting at hand. "Kneel!" she said, in low tones of awe and grief. "It may be the last time I bless you--it may be the last time I pray over you, in this house. Kneel!"

We knelt close together at her feet. I could feel Mary's heart throbbing, as she pressed nearer and nearer to my side. I could feel my own heart quickening its beat, with a fear that was a mystery to me.

"God bless and keep George and Mary, here and hereafter! God prosper, in future days, the union which God's wisdom has willed! Amen. So be it. Amen."

As the last words fell from her lips the cottage door was thrust open. My father--followed by the bailiff--entered the room.

Dame Dermody got slowly on her feet, and looked at him with a stern scrutiny.

"It has come," she said to herself. "It looks with the eyes--it will speak with the voice--of that man."

My father broke the silence that followed, addressing himself to the bailiff.

"You see, Dermody," he said, "here is my son in your cottage--when he ought to be in my house." He turned, and looked at me as I stood with my arm round little Mary, patiently waiting for my opportunity to speak. "George," he said, with the hard smile which was peculiar to him, when he was angry and was trying to hide it, "you are making a fool of yourself there. Leave that child, and come to me."

Now, or never, was my time to declare myself. Judging by appearances, I was still a boy. Judging by my own sensations, I had developed into a man at a moment's notice.

"Papa," I said, "I am glad to see you home again. This is Mary Dermody. I am in love with her, and she is in love with me. I wish to marry her as soon as it is convenient to my mother and you."

My father burst out laughing. Before I could speak again, his humor changed. He had observed that Dermody, too, presumed to be amused. He seemed to become mad with anger, all in a moment.

"I have been told of this infernal tomfoolery," he said, "but I didn't believe it till now. Who has turned the boy's weak head? Who has encouraged him to stand there hugging that girl? If it's you, Dermody, it shall be the worst day's work you ever did in your life." He turned to me again, before the bailiff could defend himself. "Do you hear what I say? I tell you to leave Dermody's girl, and come home with me."

"Yes, papa," I answered. "But I must go back to Mary, if you please, after I have been with you."

Angry as he was, my father was positively staggered by my audacity.

"You young idiot, your insolence exceeds belief!" he burst out. "I tell you this: you will never darken these doors again! You have been taught to disobey me here. You have had things put into your head, here, which no boy of your age ought to know--I'll say more, which no decent people would have let you know."

"I beg your pardon, sir," Dermody interposed, very respectfully and very firmly at the same time. "There are many things which a master in a hot temper is privileged to say to the man who serves him. But you have gone beyond your privilege. You have shamed me, sir, in the presence of my mother, in the hearing of my child--"

My father checked him there.

"You may spare the rest of it," he said. "We are master and servant no longer. When my son came hanging about your cottage, and playing at sweethearts with your girl there, your duty was to close the door on him. You have failed in your duty. I trust you no longer. Take a month's notice, Dermody. You leave my service."

The bailiff steadily met my father on his ground. He was no longer the easy, sweet-tempered, modest man who was the man of my remembrance.

"I beg to decline taking your month's notice, sir," he answered. "You shall have no opportunity of repeating what you have just said to me. I will send in my accounts to-night. And I will leave your service to-morrow."

"We agree for once," retorted my father. "The sooner you go, the better."

He stepped across the room and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Listen to me," he said, making a last effort to control himself. "I don't want to quarrel with you before a discarded servant. There must be an end to this nonsense. Leave these people to pack up and go, and come back to the house with me."

His heavy hand, pressing on my shoulder, seemed to press the spirit of resistance out of me. I so far gave way as to try to melt him by entreaties.

"Oh, papa! papa!" I cried. "Don't part me from Mary! See how pretty and good she is! She has made me a flag for my boat. Let me come here and see her sometimes. I can't live without her."

I could say no more. My poor little Mary burst out crying. Her tears and my entreaties were alike wasted on my father.

"Take your choice," he said, "between coming away of your own accord, or obliging me to take you away by force. I mean to part you and Dermody's girl."

"Neither you nor any man can part them," interposed a voice, speaking behind us. "Rid your mind of that notion, master, before it is too late."

My father looked round quickly, and discovered Dame Dermody facing him in the full light of the window. She had stepped back, at the outset of the dispute, into the corner behind the fireplace. There she had remained, biding her time to speak, until my father's last threat brought her out of her place of retirement.

They looked at each other for a moment. My father seemed to think it beneath his dignity to answer her. He went on with what he had to say to me.

"I shall count three slowly," he resumed. "Before I get to the last number, make up your mind to do what I tell you, or submit to the disgrace of being taken away by force."

"Take him where you may," said Dame Dermody, "he will still be on his way to his marriage with my grandchild."

"And where shall I be, if you please?" asked my father, stung into speaking to her this time.

The answer followed instantly in these startling words:

"You will be on your way to your ruin and your death."

My father turned his back on the prophetess with a smile of contempt.

"One!" he said, beginning to count.

I set my teeth, and clasped both arms round Mary as he spoke. I had inherited some of his temper, and he was now to know it.

"Two!" proceeded my father, after waiting a little.

Mary put her trembling lips to my ear, and whispered: "Let me go, George! I can't bear to see it. Oh, look how he frowns! I know he'll hurt you."

My father lifted his forefinger as a preliminary warning before he counted Three.

"Stop!" cried Dame Dermody.

My father looked round at her again with sardonic astonishment.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am--have you anything particular to say to me?" he asked.

"Man!" returned the Sibyl, "you speak lightly. Have I spoken lightly to You? I warn you to bow your wicked will before a Will that is mightier than yours. The spirits of these children are kindred spirits. For time and for eternity they are united one to the other. Put land and sea between them--they will still be together; they will communicate in visions, they will be revealed to each other in dreams. Bind them by worldly ties; wed your son, in the time

to come, to another woman, and my grand-daughter to another man. In vain! I tell you, in vain! You may doom them to misery, you may drive them to sin--the day of their union on earth is still a day predestined in heaven. It will come! it will come! Submit, while the time for submission is yours. You are a doomed man. I see the shadow of disaster, I see the seal of death, on your face. Go; and leave these consecrated ones to walk the dark ways of the world together, in the strength of their innocence, in the light of their love. Go--and God forgive you!" In spite of himself, my father was struck by the irresistible strength of conviction which inspired those words. The bailiff's mother had impressed him as a tragic actress might have impressed him on the stage. She had checked the mocking answer on his lips, but she had not shaken his iron will. His face was as hard as ever when he turned my way once more.

"The last chance, George," he said, and counted the last number: "Three!"

I neither moved nor answered him.

"You will have it?" he said, as he fastened his hold on my arm.

I fastened my hold on Mary; I whispered to her, "I won't leave you!" She seemed not to hear me. She trembled from head to foot in my arms. A faint cry of terror fluttered from her lips. Dermody instantly stepped forward. Before my father could wrench me away from her, he had said in my ear, "You can give her to me, Master George," and had released his child from my embrace. She stretched her little frail hands out yearningly to me, as she lay in Dermody's arms. "Good-by, dear," she said, faintly. I saw her head sink on her father's bosom as I was dragged to the door. In my helpless rage and misery, I struggled against the cruel hands that had got me with all the strength I had left. I cried out to her, "I love you, Mary! I will come back to you, Mary! I will never marry any one but you!" Step by step, I was forced further and further away. The last I saw of her, my darling's head was still resting on Dermody's breast. Her grandmother stood near, and shook her withered hands at my father, and shrieked her terrible prophecy, in the hysteric frenzy that possessed her when she saw the separation accomplished. "Go!--you go to your ruin! you go to your death!" While her voice still rang in my ears, the cottage door was opened and closed again. It was all over. The modest world of my boyish love and my boyish joy disappeared like the vision of a dream. The empty outer wilderness, which was my father's world, opened before me void of love and void of joy. God forgive me--how I hated him at that moment!