

CHAPTER XXXII. THE MIDDLE-AGED LADY.

In the year 1870 I found myself compelled to submit to the demands of two hard task-masters.

Advancing age and failing health reminded the Governor of the Prison of his duty to his successor, in one unanswerable word--Resign.

When they have employed us and interested us, for the greater part of our lives, we bid farewell to our duties--even to the gloomy duties of a prison--with a sense of regret. My view of the future presented a vacant prospect indeed, when I looked at my idle life to come, and wondered what I should do with it. Loose on the world--at my age!--I drifted into domestic refuge, under the care of my two dear and good sons. After a while (never mind how long a while) I began to grow restless under the heavy burden of idleness. Having nothing else to complain of, I complained of my health, and consulted a doctor. That sagacious man hit on the right way of getting rid of me--he recommended traveling.

This was unexpected advice. After some hesitation, I accepted it reluctantly.

The instincts of age recoil from making new acquaintances, contemplating new places, and adopting new habits. Besides, I hate railway traveling. However, I contrived to get as far as Italy, and stopped to rest at Florence. Here, I found pictures by the old masters that I could really enjoy, a public park that I could honestly admire, and an excellent friend and colleague of former days; once chaplain to the prison, now clergyman in charge of the English Church. We met in the gallery of the Pitti Palace; and he recognized me immediately. I was pleased to find that the lapse of years had made so little difference in my personal appearance.

The traveler who advances as far as Florence, and does not go on to Rome, must be regardless indeed of the opinions of his friends. Let me not attempt to conceal it--I am that insensible traveler. Over and over again, I said to myself: "Rome must be done"; and over and over again I put off doing it. To own the truth, the fascinations of Florence, aided by the society of my friend, laid so strong a hold on me that I believe I should have ended my days in the delightful Italian city, but for the dangerous illness of one of my sons. This misfortune hurried me back to England, in dread, every step of the way, of finding that I had arrived too late. The journey (thank God!) proved to have been taken without need. My son was no longer in danger,

when I reached London in the year 1875.

At that date I was near enough to the customary limit of human life to feel the necessity of rest and quiet. In other words, my days of travel had come to their end.

Having established myself in my own country, I did not forget to let old friends know where they might find me. Among those to whom I wrote was another colleague of past years, who still held his medical appointment in the prison. When I received the doctor's reply, it inclosed a letter directed to me at my old quarters in the Governor's rooms. Who could possibly have sent a letter to an address which I had left five years since? My correspondent proved to be no less a person than the Congregational Minister--the friend whom I had estranged from me by the tone in which I had written to him, on the long-past occasion of his wife's death.

It was a distressing letter to read. I beg permission to give only the substance of it in this place.

Entreating me, with touching expressions of humility and sorrow, to forgive his long silence, the writer appealed to my friendly remembrance of him. He was in sore need of counsel, under serious difficulties; and I was the only person to whom he could apply for help. In the disordered state of his health at that time, he ventured to hope that I would visit him at his present place of abode, and would let him have the happiness of seeing me as speedily as possible. He concluded with this extraordinary postscript:

"When you see my daughters, say nothing to either of them which relates, in any way, to the subject of their ages. You shall hear why when we meet."

The reading of this letter naturally reminded me of the claims which my friend's noble conduct had established on my admiration and respect, at the past time when we met in the prison. I could not hesitate to grant his request--strangely as it was expressed, and doubtful as the prospect appeared to be of my answering the expectations which he had founded on the renewal of our intercourse. Answering his letter by telegraph, I promised to be with him on the next day.

On arriving at the station, I found that I was the only traveler, by a first-class carriage, who left the train. A young lady, remarkable by her good looks and good dressing, seemed to have noticed this trifling circumstance. She approached me with a ready smile. "I believe I am speaking to my father's friend," she said; "my name is Helena Gracedieu."

Here was one of the Minister's two "daughters"; and that one of the two--as I discovered the moment I shook hands with her--who was my friend's own child. Miss Helena recalled to me her mother's face, infinitely improved by youth and health, and by a natural beauty which that cruel and deceitful woman could never have possessed. The slanting forehead and the shifting, flashing eyes, that I recollected in the parent, were reproduced (slightly reproduced, I ought to say) in the child. As for the other features, I had never seen a more beautiful nose and mouth, or a more delicately-shaped outline, than was presented by the lower part of the face. But Miss Helena somehow failed to charm me. I doubt if I should have fallen in love with her, even in the days when I was a foolish young man.

The first question that I put, as we drove from the station to the house, related naturally to her father.

"He is very ill," she began; "I am afraid you must prepare yourself to see a sad change. Nerves. The mischief first showed itself, the doctor tells us, in derangement of his nervous system. He has been, I regret to tell you, obstinate in refusing to give up his preaching and pastoral work. He ought to have tried rest at the seaside. Things have gone on from bad to worse. Last Sunday, at the beginning of his sermon, he broke down. Very, very sad, is it not? The doctor says that precious time has been lost, and he must make up his mind to resign his charge. He won't hear of it. You are his old friend. Please try to persuade him."

Fluently spoken; the words well chosen; the melodious voice reminding me of the late Mrs. Gracedieu's advantages in that respect; little sighs judiciously thrown in here and there, just at the right places; everything, let me own, that could present a dutiful daughter as a pattern of propriety--and nothing, let me add, that could produce an impression on my insensible temperament. If I had not been too discreet to rush at a hasty conclusion, I might have been inclined to say: her mother's child, every inch of her!

The interest which I was still able to feel in my friend's domestic affairs centered in the daughter whom he had adopted.

In her infancy I had seen the child, and liked her; I was the one person living (since the death of Mrs. Gracedieu) who knew how the Minister had concealed the sad secret of her parentage; and I wanted to discover if the hereditary taint had begun to show itself in the innocent offspring of the murderess. Just as I was considering how I might harmlessly speak of Miss Helena's "sister," Miss Helena herself introduced the subject.

"May I ask," she resumed, "if you were disappointed when you found nobody but me to meet you at our station?"

Here was an opportunity of paying her a compliment, if I had been a younger man, or if she had produced a favorable impression on me. As it was, I hit--if I may praise myself--on an ingenious compromise.

"What excuse could I have," I asked, "for feeling disappointed?"

"Well, I hear you are an official personage--I ought to say, perhaps, a retired official personage. We might have received you more respectfully, if both my father's daughters had been present at the station. It's not my fault that my sister was not with me."

The tone in which she said this strengthened my prejudice against her. It told me that the two girls were living together on no very friendly terms; and it suggested--justly or unjustly I could not then decide--that Miss Helena was to blame.

"My sister is away from home."

"Surely, Miss Helena, that is a good reason for her not coming to meet me?"

"I beg your pardon--it is a bad reason. She has been sent away for the recovery of her health--and the loss of her health is entirely her own fault."

What did this matter to me? I decided on dropping the subject. My memory reverted, however, to past occasions on which the loss of my health had been entirely my own fault. There was something in these personal recollections, which encouraged my perverse tendency to sympathize with a young lady to whom I had not yet been introduced. The young lady's sister appeared to be discouraged by my silence. She said: "I hope you don't think the worse of me for what I have just mentioned?"

"Certainly not."

"Perhaps you will fail to see any need of my speaking of my sister at all? Will you kindly listen, if I try to explain myself?"

"With pleasure."

She slyly set the best construction on my perfectly commonplace reply.

"Thank you," she said. "The fact is, my father (I can't imagine why) wishes you to see my sister as well as me. He has written to the farmhouse at which she is now staying, to tell her to come home to-morrow. It is possible--if your kindness offers me an opportunity--that I may ask to be guided by your experience, in a little matter which interests me. My sister is rash, and reckless, and has a terrible temper. I should be very sorry indeed if you were induced to form an unfavorable opinion of me, from anything you might notice if you see us together. You understand me, I hope?"

"I quite understand you."

To set me against her sister, in her own private interests--there, as I felt sure, was the motive under which she was acting. As hard as her mother, as selfish as her mother, and, judging from those two bad qualities, probably as cruel as her mother. That was how I understood Miss Helena Gracedieu, when our carriage drew up at her father's house.

A middle-aged lady was on the doorstep, when we arrived, just ringing the bell. She looked round at us both; being evidently as complete a stranger to my fair companion as she was to me. When the servant opened the door, she said:

"Is Miss Jillgall at home?"

At the sound of that odd name, Miss Helena tossed her head disdainfully. She took no sort of notice of the stranger-lady who was at the door of her father's house. This young person's contempt for Miss Jillgall appeared to extend to Miss Jillgall's friends.

In the meantime, the servant's answer was: "Not at home."

The middle aged lady said: "Do you expect her back soon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I will call again, later in the day."

"What name, if you please?"

The lady stole another look at me, before she replied.

"Never mind the name," she said--and walked away.