

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE LIVELY OLD MAID.

A perfect stranger to the interior of the house (seeing that my experience began and ended with the Minister's bedchamber), I descended the stairs, in the character of a guest in search of domestic information.

On my way down, I heard the door of a room on the ground floor opened, and a woman's voice below, speaking in a hurry: "My dear, I have not a moment to spare; my patients are waiting for me." This was followed by a confidential communication, judging by the tone. "Mind! not a word about me to that old gentleman!" Her patients were waiting for her--had I discovered a female doctor? And there was some old gentleman whom she was not willing to trust--surely I was not that much-injured man?

Reaching the hall just as the lady said her last words, I caught a glimpse of her face, and discovered the middle-aged stranger who had called on "Miss Jillgall," and had promised to repeat her visit. A second lady was at the door, with her back to me, taking leave of her friend. Having said good-by, she turned round--and we confronted each other.

I found her to be a little person, wiry and active; past the prime of life, and ugly enough to encourage prejudice, in persons who take a superficial view of their fellow-creatures. Looking impartially at the little sunken eyes which rested on me with a comical expression of embarrassment, I saw signs that said: There is some good here, under a disagreeable surface, if you can only find it.

She saluted me with a carefully-performed curtsy, and threw open the door of a room on the ground floor.

"Pray walk in, sir, and permit me to introduce myself. I am Mr. Gracedieu's cousin--Miss Jillgall. Proud indeed to make the acquaintance of a gentleman distinguished in the service of his country--or perhaps I ought to say, in the service of the Law. The Governor offers hospitality to prisoners. And who introduces prisoners to board and lodging with the Governor?--the Law. Beautiful weather for the time of year, is it not? May I ask--have you seen your room?"

The embarrassment which I had already noticed had extended by this time to her voice and her manner. She was evidently trying to talk herself into a state of confidence. It seemed but too probable that I was indeed the person

mentioned by her prudent friend at the door.

Having acknowledged that I had not seen my room yet, my politeness attempted to add that there was no hurry. The wiry little lady was of the contrary opinion; she jumped out of her chair as if she had been shot out of it. "Pray let me make myself useful. The dream of my life is to make myself useful to others; and to such a man as you--I consider myself honored. Besides, I do enjoy running up and down stairs. This way, dear sir; this way to your room."

She skipped up the stairs, and stopped on the first landing. "Do you know, I am a timid person, though I may not look like it. Sometimes, curiosity gets the better of me--and then I grow bold. Did you notice a lady who was taking leave of me just now at the house door?"

I replied that I had seen the lady for a moment, but not for the first time. "Just as I arrived here from the station," I said, "I found her paying a visit when you were not at home."

"Yes--and do tell me one thing more." My readiness in answering seemed to have inspired Miss Jillgall with confidence. I heard no more confessions of overpowering curiosity. "Am I right," she proceeded, "in supposing that Miss Helena accompanied you on your way here from the station?"

"Quite right."

"Did she say anything particular, when she saw the lady asking for me at the door?"

"Miss Helena thought," I said, "that the lady recognized me as a person whom she had seen before."

"And what did you think yourself?"

"I thought Miss Helena was wrong."

"Very extraordinary!" With that remark, Miss Jillgall dropped the subject. The meaning of her reiterated inquiries was now, as it seemed to me, clear enough. She was eager to discover how I could have inspired the distrust of me, expressed in the caution addressed to her by her friend.

When we reached the upper floor, she paused before the Minister's room.

"I believe many years have passed," she said, "since you last saw Mr. Gracedieu. I am afraid you have found him a sadly changed man? You won't be angry with me, I hope, for asking more questions? I owe Mr. Gracedieu a debt of gratitude which no devotion, on my part, can ever repay. You don't know what a favor I shall consider it, if you will tell me what you think of him. Did it seem to you that he was not quite himself? I don't mean in his looks, poor dear--I mean in his mind."

There was true sorrow and sympathy in her face. I believe I should hardly have thought her ugly, if we had first met at that moment. Thus far, she had only amused me. I began really to like Miss Jillgall now.

"I must not conceal from you," I replied, "that the state of Mr. Gracedieu's mind surprised and distressed me. But I ought also to tell you that I saw him perhaps at his worst. The subject on which he wished to speak with me would have agitated any man, in his state of health. He consulted me about his daughter's marriage."

Miss Jillgall suddenly turned pale.

"His daughter's marriage?" she repeated. "Oh, you frighten me!"

"Why should I frighten you?"

She seemed to find some difficulty in expressing herself. "I hardly know how to put it, sir. You will excuse me (won't you?) if I say what I feel. You have influence--not the sort of influence that finds places for people who don't deserve them, and gets mentioned in the newspapers--I only mean influence over Mr. Gracedieu. That's what frightens me. How do I know--? Oh, dear, I'm asking another question! Allow me, for once, to be plain and positive. I'm afraid, sir, you have encouraged the Minister to consent to Helena's marriage."

"Pardon me," I answered, "you mean Eunice's marriage."

"No, sir! Helena."

"No, madam! Eunice."

"What does he mean?" said Miss Jillgall to herself.

I heard her. "This is what I mean," I asserted, in my most positive manner. "The only subject on which the Minister has consulted me is Miss Eunice's

marriage."

My tone left her no alternative but to believe me. She looked not only bewildered, but alarmed. "Oh, poor man, has he lost himself in such a dreadful way as that?" she said to herself. "I daren't believe it!" She turned to me. "You have been talking with him for some time. Please try to remember. While Mr. Gracedieu was speaking of Eunece, did he say nothing of Helena's infamous conduct to her sister?"

Not the slightest hint of any such thing, I assured her, had reached my ears.

"Then," she cried, "I can tell you what he has forgotten! We kept as much of that miserable story to ourselves as we could, in mercy to him. Besides, he was always fondest of Eunece; she would live in his memory when he had forgotten the other--the wretch, the traitress, the plotter, the fiend!" Miss Jillgall's good manners slipped, as it were, from under her; she clinched her fists as a final means of expressing her sentiments. "The wretched English language isn't half strong enough for me," she declared with a look of fury.

I took a liberty. "May I ask what Miss Helena has done?" I said.

"May you ask? Oh, Heavens! you must ask, you shall ask. Mr. Governor, if your eyes are not opened to Helena's true character, I can tell you what she will do; she will deceive you into taking her part. Do you think she went to the station out of regard for the great man? Pooh! she went with an eye to her own interests; and she means to make the great man useful. Thank God, I can stop that!"

She checked herself there, and looked suspiciously at the door of Mr. Gracedieu's room.

"In the interest of our conversation," she whispered, "we have not given a thought to the place we have been talking in. Do you think the Minister has heard us?"

"Not if he is asleep--as I left him."

Miss Jillgall shook her head ominously. "The safe way is this way," she said. "Come with me."