

CHAPTER XLIII. THE MASTERFUL MASSEUSE.

My next quotations will suffer a process of abridgment. I intend them to present the substance of three letters, reduced as follows:

Second Extract.

Weak as he may be, Mr. Philip Dunboyne shows (in his second letter) that he can feel resentment, and that he can express his feelings, in replying to Miss Helena. He protests against suspicions which he has not deserved. That he does sometimes think of Eunice he sees no reason to deny. He is conscious of errors and misdeeds, which--traceable as they are to Helena's irresistible fascinations--may perhaps be considered rather his misfortune than his fault. Be that as it may, he does indeed feel anxious to hear good accounts of Eunice's health. If this honest avowal excites her sister's jealousy, he will be disappointed in Helena for the first time.

His third letter shows that this exhibition of spirit has had its effect.

The imperious young lady regrets that she has hurt his feelings, and is rewarded for the apology by receiving news of the most gratifying kind. Faithful Philip has told his father that he is engaged to be married to Miss Helena Gracedieu, daughter of the celebrated Congregational preacher--and so on, and so on. Has Mr. Dunboyne the elder expressed any objection to the young lady? Certainly not! He knows nothing of the other engagement to Eunice; and he merely objects, on principle, to looking forward. "How do we know," says the philosopher, "what accidents may happen, or what doubts and hesitations may yet turn up? I am not to burden my mind in this matter, till I know that I must do it. Let me hear when she is ready to go to church, and I will be ready with the settlements. My compliments to Miss and her papa, and let us wait a little." Dearest Helena--isn't he funny?

The next letter has been already mentioned.

In this there occurs the first startling reference to Mrs. Tenbruggen, by name. She is in London, finding her way to lucrative celebrity by twisting, turning, and pinching the flesh of credulous persons, afflicted with nervous disorders; and she has already paid a few medical visits to old Mr. Dunboyne. He persists in poring over his books while Mrs. Tenbruggen operates, sometimes on his cramped right hand, sometimes (in the fear that his brain may have something to do with it) on the back of his neck. One of

them frowns over her rubbing, and the other frowns over his reading. It would be delightfully ridiculous, but for a drawback; Mr. Philip Dunboyne's first impressions of Mrs. Tenbruggen do not incline him to look at that lady from a humorous point of view.

Helena's remarks follow, as usual. She has seen Mrs. Tenbruggen's name on the address of a letter written by Miss Jillgall--which is quite enough to condemn Mrs. Tenbruggen. As for Philip himself, she feels not quite sure of him, even yet. No more do I. Third Extract.

The letter that follows must be permitted to speak for itself:

I have flown into a passion, dearest Helena; and I am afraid I shall make you fly into a passion, too. Blame Mrs. Tenbruggen; don't blame me.

On the first occasion when I found my father under the hands of the Medical Rubber, she took no notice of me. On the second occasion--when she had been in daily attendance on him for a week, at an exorbitant fee--she said in the coolest manner: "Who is this young gentleman?" My father laid down his book, for a moment only: "Don't interrupt me again, ma'am. The young gentleman is my son Philip." Mrs. Tenbruggen eyed me with an appearance of interest which I was at a loss to account for. I hate an impudent woman. My visit came suddenly to an end.

The next time I saw my father, he was alone.

I asked him how he got on with Mrs. Tenbruggen. As badly as possible, it appeared. "She takes liberties with my neck; she interrupts me in my reading; and she does me no good. I shall end, Philip, in applying a medical rubbing to Mrs. Tenbruggen."

A few days later, I found the masterful "Masseuse" torturing the poor old gentleman's muscles again. She had the audacity to say to me: "Well, Mr. Philip, when are you going to marry Miss Eunice Gracedieu?" My father looked up. "Eunice?" he repeated. "When my son told me he was engaged to Miss Gracedieu, he said 'Helena!' Philip, what does this mean?" Mrs. Tenbruggen was so obliging as to answer for me. "Some mistake, sir; it's Eunice he is engaged to." I confess I forgot myself. "How the devil do you know that?" I burst out. Mrs. Tenbruggen ignored me and my language. "I am sorry to see, sir, that your son's education has been neglected; he seems to be grossly ignorant of the laws of politeness." "Never mind the laws of politeness," says my father. "You appear to be better acquainted with my son's matrimonial prospects than he is himself. How is that?" Mrs.

Tenbruggen favored him with another ready reply: "My authority is a letter, addressed to me by a relative of Mr. Gracedieu--my dear and intimate friend, Miss Jillgall." My father's keen eyes traveled backward and forward between his female surgeon and his son. "Which am I to believe?" he inquired. "I am surprised at your asking the question," I said. Mrs. Tenbruggen pointed to me. "Look at Mr. Philip, sir--and you will allow him one merit. He is capable of showing it, when he knows he has disgraced himself." Without intending it, I am sure, my father infuriated me; he looked as if he believed her. Out came one of the smallest and strongest words in the English language before I could stop it: "Mrs. Tenbruggen, you lie!" The illustrious Rubber dropped my father's hand--she had been operating on him all the time--and showed us that she could assert her dignity when circumstances called for the exertion: "Either your son or I, sir, must leave the room. Which is it to be?" She met her match in my father. Walking quietly to the door, he opened it for Mrs. Tenbruggen with a low bow. She stopped on her way out, and delivered her parting words: "Messieurs Dunboyne, father and son, I keep my temper, and merely regard you as a couple of blackguards." With that pretty assertion of her opinion, she left us.

When we were alone, there was but one course to take; I made my confession. It is impossible to tell you how my father received it--for he sat down at his library table with his back to me. The first thing he did was to ask me to help his memory.

"Did you say that the father of these girls was a parson?"

"Yes--a Congregational Minister."

"What does the Minister think of you?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Find out."

That was all; not another word could I extract from him. I don't pretend to have discovered what he really has in his mind. I only venture on a suggestion. If there is any old friend in your town, who has some influence over your father, leave no means untried of getting that friend to say a kind word for us. And then ask your father to write to mine. This is, as I see it, our only chance.

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There the letter ends. Helena's notes on it show that her pride is fiercely interested in securing Philip as a husband. Her victory over poor Eunice will, as she plainly intimates, be only complete when she is married to young Dunboyne. For the rest, her desperate resolution to win her way to my good graces is sufficiently intelligible, now.

My own impressions vary. Philip rather gains upon me; he appears to have some capacity for feeling ashamed of himself. On the other hand, I regard the discovery of an intimate friendship existing between Mrs. Tenbruggen and Miss Jillgall with the gloomiest views. Is this formidable Masseuse likely to ply her trade in the country towns? And is it possible that she may come to this town? God forbid!

Of the other letters in the collection, I need take no special notice. I returned the whole correspondence to Helena, and waited to hear from her.

The one recent event in Mr. Gracedieu's family, worthy of record, is of a melancholy nature. After paying his visit to-day, the doctor has left word that nobody but the nurse is to go near the Minister. This seems to indicate, but too surely, a change for the worse.

Helena has been away all the evening at the Girls' School. She left a little note, informing me of her wishes: "I shall expect to be favored with your decision to-morrow morning, in my housekeeping room."

At breakfast time, the report of the poor Minister was still discouraging. I noticed that Helena was absent from the table. Miss Jillgall suspected that the cause was bad news from Mr. Philip Dunboyne, arriving by that morning's post. "If you will excuse the use of strong language by a lady," she said, "Helena looked perfectly devilish when she opened the letter. She rushed away, and locked herself up in her own shabby room. A serious obstacle, as I suspect, in the way of her marriage. Cheering, isn't it?" As usual, good Selina expressed her sentiments without reserve.

I had to keep my appointment; and the sooner Helena Gracedieu and I understood each other the better.

I knocked at the door. It was loudly unlocked, and violently thrown open. Helena's temper had risen to boiling heat; she stammered with rage when she spoke to me.

"I mean to come to the point at once," she said.

"I am glad to hear it, Miss Helena."

"May I count on your influence to help me? I want a positive answer."

I gave her what she wanted. I said: "Certainly not."

She took a crumpled letter from her pocket, opened it, and smoothed it out on the table with a blow of her open hand.

"Look at that," she said.

I looked. It was the letter addressed to Mr. Dunboyne the elder, which I had written for Mr. Gracedieu--with the one object of preventing Helena's marriage.

"Of course, I can depend on you to tell me the truth?" she continued.

"Without fear or favor," I answered, "you may depend on that."

"The signature to the letter, Mr. Governor, is written by my father. But the letter itself is in a different hand. Do you, by any chance, recognize the writing?"

"I do."

"Whose writing is it?"

"Mine."