

## CHAPTER XLVI. THE CUMBERSOME LADIES.

I cannot prevail upon myself to dwell at any length on the events that followed.

We secured my unhappy friend, and carried him to his bed. It was necessary to have men in attendance who could perform the duty of watching him. The doctor sent for them, while I went downstairs to make the best I could of the miserable news which it was impossible entirely to conceal. All that I could do to spare Miss Jillgall, I did. I was obliged to acknowledge that there had been an outbreak of violence, and that the portrait of the Minister's wife had been destroyed by the Minister himself. Of Helena's revenge on me I said nothing. It had led to consequences which even her merciless malice could not have contemplated. There were no obstacles in the way of keeping secret the attempt on my life. But I was compelled to own that Mr. Gracedieu had taken a dislike to me, which rendered it necessary that my visit should be brought to an end. I hastened to add that I should go to the hotel, and should wait there until the next day, in the hope of hearing better news.

Of the multitude of questions with which poor Miss Jillgall overwhelmed me--of the wild words of sorrow and alarm that escaped her--of the desperate manner in which she held by my arm, and implored me not to go away, when I must see for myself that "she was a person entirely destitute of presence of mind"--I shall say nothing. The undeserved suffering that is inflicted on innocent persons by the sins of others demands silent sympathy; and, to that extent at least, I can say that I honestly felt for my quaint and pleasant little friend.

In the evening the doctor called on me at the hotel. The medical treatment of his patient had succeeded in calming the maddened brain under the influence of sleep. If the night passed quietly, better news might be hoped for in the morning.

On the next day I had arranged to drive to the farm, being resolved not to disappoint Eunice. But I shrank from the prospect of having to distress her as I had already distressed Miss Jillgall. The only alternative left was to repeat the sad story in writing, subject to the concealments which I had already observed. This I did, and sent the letter by messenger, overnight, so that Eunice might know when to expect me.

The medical report, in the morning, justified some hope. Mr. Gracedieu had

slept well, and there had been no reappearance of insane violence on his waking. But the doctor's opinion was far from encouraging when we spoke of the future. He did not anticipate the cruel necessity of placing the Minister under restraint--unless some new provocation led to a new outbreak. The misfortune to be feared was imbecility.

I was just leaving the hotel to keep my appointment with Eunice, when the waiter announced the arrival of a young lady who wished to speak with me. Before I could ask if she had mentioned her name, the young lady herself walked in--Helena Gracedieu.

She explained her object in calling on me, with the exasperating composure which was peculiarly her own. No parallel to it occurs to me in my official experience of shameless women.

"I don't wish to speak of what happened yesterday, so far as I know anything about it," she began. "It is quite enough for me that you have been obliged to leave the house and to take refuge in this hotel. I have come to say a word about the future. Are you honoring me with your attention?"

I signed to her to go on. If I had answered in words, I should have told her to leave the room.

"At first," she resumed, "I thought of writing; but it occurred to me that you might keep my letter, and show it to Philip, by way of lowering me in his good opinion, as you have lowered me in the good opinion of his father. My object in coming here is to give you a word of warning. If you attempt to make mischief next between Philip and myself, I shall hear of it--and you know what to expect, when you have me for an enemy. It is not worth while to say any more. We understand each other, I hope?"

She was determined to have a reply--and she got it.

"Not quite yet," I said. "I have been hitherto, as becomes a gentleman, always mindful of a woman's claims to forbearance. You will do well not to tempt me into forgetting that you are a woman, by prolonging your visit. Now, Miss Helena Gracedieu, we understand each other." She made me a low curtsey, and answered in her finest tone of irony: "I only desire to wish you a pleasant journey home."

I rang for the waiter. "Show this lady out," I said.

Even this failed to have the slightest effect on her. She sauntered to the

door, as perfectly at her ease as if the room had been hers--not mine.

I had thought of driving to the farm. Shall I confess it? My temper was so completely upset that active movement of some kind offered the one means of relief in which I could find refuge. The farm was not more than five miles distant, and I had been a good walker all my life. After making the needful inquiries, I set forth to visit Eunice on foot.

My way through the town led me past the Minister's house. I had left the door some fifty yards behind me, when I saw two ladies approaching. They were walking, in the friendliest manner, arm in arm. As they came nearer, I discovered Miss Jillgall. Her companion was the middle-aged lady who had declined to give her name, when we met accidentally at Mr. Gracedieu's door.

Hysterically impulsive, Miss Jillgall seized both my hands, and overwhelmed me with entreaties that I would go back with her to the house. I listened rather absently. The middle-aged lady happened to be nearer to me now than on either of the former occasions on which I had seen her. There was something in the expression of her eyes which seemed to be familiar to me. But the effort of my memory was not helped by what I observed in the other parts of her face. The iron-gray hair, the baggy lower eyelids, the fat cheeks, the coarse complexion, and the double chin, were features, and very disagreeable features, too, which I had never seen at any former time.

"Do pray come back with us," Miss Jillgall pleaded. "We were just talking of you. I and my friend--" There she stopped, evidently on the point of blurting out the name which she had been forbidden to utter in my hearing.

The lady smiled; her provokingly familiar eyes rested on me with a humorous enjoyment of the scene.

"My dear," she said to Miss Jillgall, "caution ceases to be a virtue when it ceases to be of any use. The Governor is beginning to remember me, and the inevitable recognition--with his quickness of perception--is likely to be a matter of minutes now." She turned to me. "In more ways than one, sir, women are hardly used by Nature. As they advance in years they lose more in personal appearance than the men do. You are white-haired, and (pray excuse me) you are too fat; and (allow me to take another liberty) you stoop at the shoulders--but you have not entirely lost your good looks. I am no longer recognizable. Allow me to prompt you, as they say on the stage. I am Mrs. Tenbruggen."

As a man of the world, I ought to have been capable of concealing my astonishment and dismay. She struck me dumb.

Mrs. Tenbruggen in the town! The one woman whose appearance Mr. Gracedieu had dreaded, and justly dreaded, stood before me--free, as a friend of his kinswoman, to enter his house, at the very time when he was a helpless man, guarded by watchers at his bedside. My first clear idea was to get away from both the women, and consider what was to be done next. I bowed--and begged to be excused--and said I was in a hurry, all in a breath.

Hearing this, the best of genial old maids was unable to restrain her curiosity. "Where are you going?" she asked.

Too confused to think of an excuse, I said I was going to the farm.

"To see my dear Euneece?" Miss Jillgall burst out. "Oh, we will go with you!" Mrs. Tenbruggen's politeness added immediately, "With the greatest pleasure."