

## CHAPTER XLVII. THE JOURNEY TO THE FARM.

My first ungrateful impulse was to get rid of the two cumbersome ladies who had offered to be my companions. It was needless to call upon my invention for an excuse; the truth, as I gladly perceived, would serve my purpose. I had only to tell them that I had arranged to walk to the farm.

Lean, wiry, and impetuous, Miss Jillgall received my excuse with the sincerest approval of it, as a new idea. "Nothing could be more agreeable to me," she declared; "I have been a wonderful walker all my life." She turned to her friend. "We will go with him, my dear, won't we?"

Mrs. Tenbruggen's reception of this proposal inspired me with hope; she asked how far it was to the farm. "Five miles!" she repeated. "And five miles back again, unless the farmer lends us a cart. My dear Selina, you might as well ask me to walk to the North Pole. You have got rid of one of us, Mr. Governor," she added, pleasantly; "and the other, if you only walk fast enough, you will leave behind you on the road. If I believed in luck--which I don't--I should call you a fortunate man."

But companionable Selina would not hear of a separation. She asked, in her most irresistible manner, if I objected to driving instead of walking. Her heart's dearest wish, she said, was to make her bosom friend and myself better acquainted with each other. To conclude, she reminded me that there was a cab-stand in the next street.

Perhaps I might have been influenced by my distrust of Mrs. Tenbruggen, or perhaps by my anxiety to protect Eunice. It struck me that I might warn the defenseless girl to be on her guard with Mrs. Tenbruggen to better purpose, if Eunice was in a position to recognize her in any future emergency that might occur. To my mind, this dangerous woman was doubly formidable--and for a good reason; she was the bosom friend of that innocent and unwary person, Miss Jillgall. So I amiably consented to forego my walk, yielding to the superior attraction of Mrs. Tenbruggen's company. On that day the sunshine was tempered by a delightful breeze. If we had been in the biggest and worst-governed city on the civilised earth, we should have found no public vehicle, open to the air, which could offer accommodation to three people. Being only in a country town, we had a light four-wheeled chaise at our disposal, as a matter of course.

No wise man expects to be mercifully treated, when he is shut into a

carriage with a mature single lady, inflamed by curiosity. I was not unprepared for Miss Jillgall when she alluded, for the second time, to the sad events which had happened in the house on the previous day--and especially to the destruction by Mr. Gracedieu of the portrait of his wife.

"Why didn't he destroy something else?" she pleaded, piteously. "It is such a disappointment to me. I never liked that picture myself. Of course I ought to have admired the portrait of the wife of my benefactor. But no--that disagreeable painted face was too much for me. I should have felt inexpressibly relieved, if I could have shown it to Elizabeth, and heard her say that she agreed with me."

"Perhaps I saw it when I called on you," Mrs. Tenbruggen suggested. "Where did the picture hang?"

"My dear! I received you in the dining-room, and the portrait hung in Mr. Gracedieu's study."

What they said to each other next escaped my attention. Quite unconsciously, Miss Jillgall had revealed to me a danger which neither the Minister nor I had discovered, though it had conspicuously threatened us both on the wall of the study. The act of mad destruction which, if I had possessed the means of safely interfering, I should certainly have endeavored to prevent, now assumed a new and startling aspect. If Mrs. Tenbruggen really had some motive of her own for endeavoring to identify the adopted child, the preservation of the picture must have led her straight to the end in view. The most casual opportunity of comparing Helena with the portrait of Mrs. Gracedieu would have revealed the likeness between mother and daughter--and, that result attained, the identification of Eunice with the infant whom the "Miss Chance" of those days had brought to the prison must inevitably have followed. It was perhaps natural that Mr. Gracedieu's infatuated devotion to the memory of his wife should have blinded him to the betrayal of Helena's parentage, which met his eyes every time he entered his study. But that I should have been too stupid to discover what he had failed to see, was a wound dealt to my self-esteem which I was vain enough to feel acutely.

Mrs. Tenbruggen's voice, cheery and humorous, broke in on my reflections, with an odd question:

"Mr. Governor, do you ever condescend to read novels?"

"It's not easy to say, Mrs. Tenbruggen, how grateful I am to the writers of

novels."

"Ah! I read novels, too. But I blush to confess--do I blush?--that I never thought of feeling grateful till you mentioned it. Selina and I don't complain of your preferring your own reflections to our company. On the contrary, you have reminded us agreeably of the heroes of fiction, when the author describes them as being 'absorbed in thought.' For some minutes, Mr. Governor, you have been a hero; absorbed, as I venture to guess, in unpleasant remembrances of the time when I was a single lady. You have not forgotten how badly I behaved, and what shocking things I said, in those bygone days. Am I right?"

"You are entirely wrong."

It is possible that I may have spoken a little too sharply. Anyway, faithful Selina interceded for her friend. "Oh, dear sir, don't be hard on Elizabeth! She always means well." Mrs. Tenbruggen, as facetious as ever, made a grateful return for a small compliment. She chuckled Miss Jillgall under the chin, with the air of an amorous old gentleman expressing his approval of a pretty servant-girl. It was impossible to look at the two, in their relative situations, without laughing. But Mrs. Tenbruggen failed to cheat me into altering my opinion of her. Innocent Miss Jillgall clapped her ugly hands, and said: "Isn't she good company?"

Mrs. Tenbruggen's social resources were not exhausted yet. She suddenly shifted to the serious side of her character.

"Perhaps I have improved a little," she said, "as I have advanced in years. The sorrows of an unhappy married life may have had a purifying influence on my nature. My husband and I began badly. Mr. Tenbruggen thought I had money; and I thought Mr. Tenbruggen had money. He was taken in by me; and I was taken in by him. When he repeated the words of the marriage service (most impressively read by your friend the Chaplain): 'With all my worldly goods I thee endow'--his eloquent voice suggested one of the largest incomes in Europe. When I promised and vowed, in my turn, the delightful prospect of squandering my rich husband's money made quite a new woman of me. I declare solemnly, when I said I would love, honor, and obey Mr. T., I looked as if I really meant it. Wherever he is now, poor dear, he is cheating somebody. Such a handsome, gentleman-like man, Selina! And, oh, Mr. Governor, such a blackguard!"

Having described her husband in those terms, she got tired of the subject. We were now favored with another view of this many-sided woman. She

appeared in her professional character.

"Ah, what a delicious breeze is blowing, out here in the country!" she said. "Will you excuse me if I take off my gloves? I want to air my hands." She held up her hands to the breeze; firm, muscular, deadly white hands. "In my professional occupation," she explained, "I am always rubbing, tickling, squeezing, tapping, kneading, rolling, striking the muscles of patients. Selina, do you know the movements of your own joints? Flexion, extension, abduction, adduction, rotation, circumduction, pronation, supination, and the lateral movements. Be proud of those accomplishments, my dear, but beware of attempting to become a Masseuse. There are drawbacks in that vocation--and I am conscious of one of them at this moment." She lifted her hands to her nose. "Pah! my hands smell of other people's flesh. The delicious country air will blow it away--the luxury of purification!" Her fingers twisted and quivered, and got crooked at one moment and straight again at another, and showed themselves in succession singly, and flew into each other fiercely interlaced, and then spread out again like the sticks of a fan, until it really made me giddy to look at them. As for Miss Jillgall, she lifted her poor little sunken eyes rapturously to the sky, as if she called the homiest sunlight to witness that this was the most lovable woman on the face of the earth.

But elderly female fascination offers its allurements in vain to the rough animal, man. Suspicion of Mrs. Tenbruggen's motives had established itself firmly in my mind. Why had the Popular Masseuse abandoned her brilliant career in London, and plunged into the obscurity of a country town? An opportunity of clearing up the doubt thus suggested seemed to have presented itself now. "Is it indiscreet to ask," I said, "if you are here in your professional capacity?"

Her cunning seized its advantage and put a sly question to me. "Do you wish to be one of my patients yourself?"

"That is, unfortunately, impossible," I replied "I have arranged to return to London."

"Immediately?"

"To-morrow at the latest."

Artful as she was, Mrs. Tenbruggen failed to conceal a momentary expression of relief which betrayed itself, partly in her manner, partly in her face. She had ascertained, to her own complete satisfaction, that my speedy

departure was an event which might be relied on.

"But I have not yet answered you," she resumed. "To tell the truth, I am eager to try my hands on you. Massage, as I practice it, would lighten your weight, and restore your figure; I may even say would lengthen your life. You will think of me, one of these days, won't you? In the meanwhile--yes! I am here in my professional capacity. Several interesting cases; and one very remarkable person, brought to death's door by the doctors; a rich man who is liberal in paying his fees. There is my quarrel with London and Londoners. Some of their papers, medical newspapers, of course, declare that my fees are exorbitant; and there is a tendency among the patients--I mean the patients who are rolling in riches--to follow the lead of the newspapers. I am no worm to be trodden on, in that way. The London people shall wait for me, until they miss me--and, when I do go back, they will find the fees increased. My fingers and thumbs, Mr. Governor, are not to be insulted with impunity."

Miss Jillgall nodded her head at me. It was an eloquent nod. "Admire my spirited friend," was the interpretation I put on it.

At the same time, my private sentiments suggested that Mrs. Tenbruggen's reply was too perfectly satisfactory, viewed as an explanation. My suspicions were by no means set at rest; and I was resolved not to let the subject drop yet. "Speaking of Mr. Gracedieu, and of the chances of his partial recovery," I said, "do you think the Minister would benefit by Massage?"

"I haven't a doubt of it, if you can get rid of the doctor."

"You think he would be an obstacle in the way?"

"There are some medical men who are honorable exceptions to the general rule; and he may be one of them," Mrs. Tenbruggen admitted. "Don't be too hopeful. As a doctor, he belongs to the most tyrannical trades-union in existence. May I make a personal remark?"

"Certainly."

"I find something in your manner--pray don't suppose that I am angry--which looks like distrust; I mean, distrust of me."

Miss Jillgall's ever ready kindness interfered in my defense: "Oh, no, Elizabeth! You are not often mistaken; but indeed you are wrong now. Look at my distinguished friend. I remember my copy book, when I was a small

creature learning to write, in England. There were first lines that we copied, in big letters, and one of them said, 'Distrust Is Mean.' I know a young person, whose name begins with H, who is one mass of meanness. But"--excellent Selina paused, and pointed to me with a gesture of triumph--"no meanness there!"

Mrs. Tenbruggen waited to hear what I had to say, scornfully insensible to Miss Jillgall's well-meant interruption.

"You are not altogether mistaken," I told her. "I can't say that my mind is in a state of distrust, but I own that you puzzle me."

"How, if you please?"

"May I presume that you remember the occasion when we met at Mr. Gracedieu's house-door? You saw that I failed to recognize you, and you refused to give your name when the servant asked for it. A few days afterward, I heard you (quite accidentally) forbid Miss Jillgall to mention your name in my hearing. I am at a loss to understand it."

Before she could answer me, the chaise drew up at the gate of the farmhouse. Mrs. Tenbruggen carefully promised to explain what had puzzled me, at the first opportunity. "If it escapes my memory," she said, "pray remind me of it."

I determined to remind her of it. Whether I could depend on her to tell me the truth, might be quite another thing.