

CHAPTER LI. THE TRIUMPH OF MRS. TENBRUGGEN.

Miss Jillgall appears again, after an interval, on the field of my extracts. My pleasant friend deserves this time a serious reception. She informs me that Mrs. Tenbruggen has begun the inquiries which I have the best reason to dread--for I alone know the end which they are designed to reach.

The arrival of this news affected me in two different ways.

It was discouraging to find that circumstances had not justified my reliance on Helena's enmity as a counter-influence to Mrs. Tenbruggen. On the other hand, it was a relief to be assured that my return to London would serve, rather than compromise, the interests which it was my chief anxiety to defend. I had foreseen that Mrs. Tenbruggen would wait to set her enterprise on foot, until I was out of her way; and I had calculated on my absence as an event which would at least put an end to suspense by encouraging her to begin.

The first sentences in Miss Jillgall's letter explain the nature of her interest in the proceedings of her friend, and are, on that account, worth reading.

"Things are sadly changed for the worse" (Selina writes); "but I don't forget that Philip was once engaged to Euneece, and that Mr. Gracedieu's extraordinary conduct toward him puzzled us all. The mode of discovery which dear Elizabeth suggested by letter, at that time, appears to be the mode which she is following now. When I asked why, she said: 'Philip may return to Euneece; the Minister may recover--and will be all the more likely to do so if he tries Massage. In that case, he will probably repeat the conduct which surprised you; and your natural curiosity will ask me again to find out what it means. Am I your friend, Selina, or am I not?' This was so delightfully kind, and so irresistibly conclusive, that I kissed her in a transport of gratitude. With what breathless interest I have watched her progress toward penetrating the mystery of the girls' ages, it is quite needless to tell you."

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Mrs. Tenbruggen's method of keeping Miss Jillgall in ignorance of what she was really about, and Miss Jillgall's admirable confidence in the integrity of Mrs. Tenbruggen, being now set forth on the best authority, an exact presentation of the state of affairs will be completed if I add a word more,

relating to the positions actually occupied toward Mrs. Tenbruggen's enterprise, by my correspondent and myself.

On her side, Miss Jillgall was entirely ignorant that one of the two girls was not Mr. Gracedieu's daughter, but his adopted child. On my side, I was entirely ignorant of Mrs. Tenbruggen's purpose in endeavoring to identify the daughter of the murderess. Speaking of myself, individually, let me add that I only waited the event to protect the helpless ones--my poor demented friend, and the orphan whom his mercy received into his heart and his home.

Miss Jillgall goes on with her curious story, as follows:

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"Always desirous of making myself useful, I thought I would give my dear Elizabeth a hint which might save time and trouble. 'Why not begin,' I suggested, 'by asking the Governor to help you?' That wonderful woman never forgets anything. She had already applied to you, without success.

"In my next attempt to be useful, I did violence to my most cherished convictions, by presenting the wretch Helena to the admirable Elizabeth. That the former would be cold as ice, in her reception of any friend of mine, was nothing wonderful. Mrs. Tenbruggen passed it over with the graceful composure of a woman of the world. In the course of conversation with Helena, she slipped in a question: 'Might I ask if you are older than your sister?' The answer was, of course: 'I don't know.' And here, for once, the most deceitful girl in existence spoke the truth.

"When we were alone again, Elizabeth made a remark: 'If personal appearance could decide the question,' she said, 'the disagreeable young woman is the oldest of the two. The next thing to be done is to discover if looks are to be trusted in this case.'

"My friend's lawyer received confidential instructions (not shown to me, which seems rather hard) to trace the two Miss Gracedieus' registers of birth. Elizabeth described this proceeding (not very intelligibly to my mind) as a means of finding out which of the girls could be identified by name as the elder of the two.

"The report arrived this morning. I was only informed that the result, in one case, had entirely defeated the inquiries. In the other case, Elizabeth had helped her agent by referring him to a Birth, advertised in the customary

columns of the Times newspaper. Even here, there was a fatal obstacle. The name of the place in which Mr. Gracedieu's daughter had been born was not added, as usual. I still tried to be useful. Had my friend known the Minister's wife? My friend had never even seen the Minister's wife. And, as if by a fatality, her portrait was no longer in existence. I could only mention that Helena was like her mother. But Elizabeth seemed to attach very little importance to my evidence, if I may call it by so grand a name. 'People have such strange ideas about likenesses,' she said, 'and arrive at such contradictory conclusions. One can only trust one's own eyes in a matter of that kind.'

"My friend next asked me about our domestic establishment. We had only a cook and a housemaid. If they were old servants who had known the girls as children, they might be made of some use. Our luck was as steadily against us as ever. They had both been engaged when Mr. Gracedieu assumed his new pastoral duties, after having resided with his wife at her native place.

"I asked Elizabeth what she proposed to do next.

"She deferred her answer, until I had first told her whether the visit of the doctor might be expected on that day. I could reply to this in the negative. Elizabeth, thereupon, made a startling request; she begged me to introduce her to Mr. Gracedieu.

"I said: 'Surely, you have forgotten the sad state of his mind?' No; she knew perfectly well that he was imbecile. 'I want to try,' she explained, 'if I can rouse him for a few minutes.'

"'By Massage?' I inquired.

"She burst out laughing. 'Massage, my dear, doesn't act in that way. It is an elaborate process, pursued patiently for weeks together. But my hands have more than one accomplishment at their finger-ends. Oh, make your mind easy! I shall do no harm, if I do no good. Take me, Selina, to the Minister.'

"We went to his room. Don't blame me for giving way; I am too fond of Elizabeth to be able to disappoint her.

"It was a sad sight when we went in. He was quite happy, playing like a child, at cup-and-ball. The attendant retired at my request. I introduced Mrs. Tenbruggen. He smiled and shook hands with her. He said: 'Are you a Christian or a Pagan? You are very pretty. How many times can you catch the ball in the cup?' The effort to talk to her ended there. He went on with

his game, and seemed to forget that there was anybody in the room. It made my heart ache to remember what he was--and to see him now.

"Elizabeth whispered: 'Leave me alone with him.'

"I don't know why I did such a rude thing--I hesitated.

"Elizabeth asked me if I had no confidence in her. I was ashamed of myself; I left them together.

"A long half-hour passed. Feeling a little uneasy, I went upstairs again and looked into the room. He was leaning back in his chair; his plaything was on the floor, and he was looking vacantly at the light that came in through the window. I found Mrs. Tenbruggen at the other end of the room, in the act of ringing the bell. Nothing in the least out of the ordinary way seemed to have happened. When the attendant had answered the bell, we left the room together. Mr. Gracedieu took no notice of us.

"Well,' I said, 'how has it ended?'

"Quite calmly my noble Elizabeth answered: 'In total failure.'

"What did you say to him after you sent me away?'

"I tried, in every possible way, to get him to tell me which of his two daughters was the oldest.'

"Did he refuse to answer?'

"He was only too ready to answer. First, he said Helena was the oldest--then he corrected himself, and declared that Eunice was the oldest--then he said they were twins--then he went back to Helena and Eunice. Now one was the oldest, and now the other. He rang the changes on those two names, I can't tell you how often, and seemed to think it a better game than cup-and-ball.'

"What is to be done?'

"Nothing is to be done, Selina.'

"What!' I cried, 'you give it up?'

"My heroic friend answered: 'I know when I am beaten, my dear--I give it up.' She looked at her watch; it was time to operate on the muscles of one of her

patients. Away she went, on her glorious mission of Massage, without a murmur of regret. What strength of mind! But, oh, dear, what a disappointment for poor little me! On one thing I am determined. If I find myself getting puzzled or frightened, I shall instantly write to you."

With that expression of confidence in me, Selina's narrative came to an end. I wish I could have believed, as she did, that the object of her admiration had been telling her the truth.

A few days later, Mrs. Tenbruggen honored me with a visit at my house in the neighborhood of London. Thanks to this circumstance, I am able to add a postscript which will complete the revelations in Miss Jillgall's letter.

The illustrious Masseuse, having much to conceal from her faithful Selina, was well aware that she had only one thing to keep hidden from me; namely, the advantage which she would have gained if her inquiries had met with success.

"I thought I might have got at what I wanted," she told me, "by mesmerizing our reverend friend. He is as weak as a woman; I threw him into hysterics, and had to give it up, and quiet him, or he would have alarmed the house. You look as if you don't believe in mesmerism."

"My looks, Mrs. Tenbruggen, exactly express my opinion. Mesmerism is a humbug!"

"You amusing old Tory! Shall I throw you into a state of trance? No! I'll give you a shock of another kind--a shock of surprise. I know as much as you do about Mr. Gracedieu's daughters. What do you think of that?"

"I think I should like to hear you tell me, which is the adopted child."

"Helena, to be sure!"

Her manner was defiant, her tone was positive; I doubted both. Under the surface of her assumed confidence, I saw something which told me that she was trying to read my thoughts in my face. Many other women had tried to do that. They succeeded when I was young. When I had reached the wrong side of fifty, my face had learned discretion, and they failed.

"How did you arrive at your discovery?" I asked. "I know of nobody who could have helped you."

"I helped myself, sir! I reasoned it out. A wonderful thing for a woman to do, isn't it? I wonder whether you could follow the process?"

My reply to this was made by a bow. I was sure of my command over my face; but perfect control of the voice is a rare power. Here and there, a great actor or a great criminal possesses it.

Mrs. Tenbruggen's vanity took me into her confidence. "In the first place," she said, "Helena is plainly the wicked one of the two. I was not prejudiced by what Selina had told me of her: I saw it, and felt it, before I had been five minutes in her company. If lying tongues ever provoke her as lying tongues provoked her mother, she will follow her mother's example. Very well. Now--in the second place--though it is very slight, there is a certain something in her hair and her complexion which reminds me of the murderess: there is no other resemblance, I admit. In the third place, the girls' names point to the same conclusion. Mr. Gracedieu is a Protestant and a Dissenter. Would he call a child of his own by the name of a Roman Catholic saint? No! he would prefer a name in the Bible; Eunice is his child. And Helena was once the baby whom I carried into the prison. Do you deny that?"

"I don't deny it."

Only four words! But they were deceitfully spoken, and the deceit--practiced in Eunice's interest, it is needless to say--succeeded. Mrs. Tenbruggen's object in visiting me was attained; I had confirmed her belief in the delusion that Helena was the adopted child.

She got up to take her leave. I asked if she proposed remaining in London. No; she was returning to her country patients that night.

As I attended her to the house-door, she turned to me with her mischievous smile. "I have taken some trouble in finding the clew to the Minister's mystery," she said. "Don't you wonder why?"

"If I did wonder," I answered, "would you tell me why?"

She laughed at the bare idea of it. "Another lesson," she said, "to assist a helpless man in studying the weaker sex. I have already shown you that a woman can reason. Learn next that a woman can keep a secret. Good-by. God bless you!"

Of the events which followed Mrs. Tenbruggen's visit it is not possible for me, I am thankful to say, to speak from personal experience. Ought I to

conclude with an expression of repentance for the act of deception to which I have already pleaded guilty? I don't know. Yes! the force of circumstances does really compel me to say it, and say it seriously--I declare, on my word of honor, I don't know.

Third period: 1876. HELENA'S DIARY RESUMED.