

## CONCERNING A CERTAIN LADY

This lady wears a blue serge suit and a black hat, without flippancy; she is a powerfully built lady and generally more or less flushed, and she is aunt, apparently, to a great number of objectionable-looking people. I go in terror of her. Yet the worm will turn at last, and so will the mild, pacific literary man. Her last outrage was too much even for my patience. It was committed at Gloucester Road Station the other afternoon. I was about to get into a train for Wimbledon,--and there are only two of them to the hour,--and, so far as I could see, the whole world was at peace with me. I felt perfectly secure. The ægis of the pax Britannica--if you will pardon the expression--was over me. For the moment the thought of the lady in the blue serge was quite out of my mind. I had just bought a newspaper, and had my hand on the carriage door. The guard was fluttering his flag.

Then suddenly she swooped out of space, out of the infinite unknown, and hit me. She always hits me when she comes near me, and I infer she hits everyone she comes across. She hit me this time in the chest with her elbow and knocked me away from the door-handle. She hit me very hard; indeed, she was as fierce as I have ever known her. With her there were two nieces and a nephew, and the nephew hit me too. He was a horrid little boy in an Eton suit of the kind that they do not wear at Eton, and he hit me with his head and pushed at me with his little pink hands. The nieces might have been about twenty-two and thirteen respectively,

and I infer that they were apprenticed to her. All four people seemed madly excited. "It's just starting!" they screamed, and the train was, indeed, slowly moving. Their object--so far as they had an object and were not animated by mere fury--appeared to be to assault me and then escape in the train. The lady in blue got in and then came backwards out again, sweeping the smaller girl behind her upon the two others, who were engaged in hustling me. "It's 'smoking!'" she cried. I could have told her that, if she had asked instead of hitting me. The elder girl, by backing dexterously upon me, knocked my umbrella out of my hand, and when I stooped to pick it up the little boy knocked my hat off. I will confess they demoralised me with their archaic violence. I had some thought of joining in their wild amuck, whooping, kicking out madly, perhaps assaulting a porter,--I think the lady in blue would have been surprised to find what an effective addition to her staff she had picked up,--but before I could collect my thoughts sufficiently to do any definite thing the whole affair was over. A porter was slamming doors on them, the train was running fast out of the station, and I was left alone with an unmannerly newsboy and an unmannerly porter on the platform. I waited until the porter was out of the way, and then I hit the newsboy for laughing at me, but even with that altercation it was a tedious wait for the next train to Wimbledon.

This is the latest of my encounters with this lady, but it has decided me to keep silence no longer. She has been persecuting me now for years in all parts of London. It may be I am her only victim, but, on the other hand, she may be in the habit of annoying the entire class of

slender and inoffensive young men. If so, and they will communicate with me through the publishers of this little volume, we might do something towards suppressing her, found an Anti-Energetic-Lady-League, or something of that sort. For if there was ever a crying wrong that clamoured for suppression it is this violent woman.

She is, even now, flagrantly illegal. She might be given in charge for hitting people at any time, and be warned, or fined, or given a week. But somehow it is only when she is overpast and I am recovering my wits that I recollect that she might be dealt with in this way. She is the chartered libertine of British matrons, and assaulteth where she listeth. The blows I have endured from her? She fights people who are getting into 'buses. It is no mere accidental jostling, but a deliberate shouldering, poking with umbrellas, and clawing. It is her delight to go to the Regent Circus corner of Piccadilly, about half-past seven in the evening, accompanied by a genteel rout of daughters, and fill up whole omnibuses with them. At that hour there are work-girls and tired clerks, and the like worn-out anæmic humanity trying to get home for an hour or so of rest before bed, and they crowd round the 'buses very eagerly. They are little able to cope with her exuberant vitality, being ill-nourished and tired from the day's work, and she simply mows through them and fills up every vacant place they covet before their eyes. Then, I can never count change even when my mind is tranquil, and she knows that, and swoops threateningly upon me in booking offices and stationers' shops. When I am dodging cabs at crossings she will appear from behind an omnibus or carriage and butt into me furiously. She holds

her umbrella in her folded arms just as the Punch puppet does his staff, and with as deadly effect. Sometimes she discards her customary navy blue and puts on a glittering bonnet with bead trimmings, and goes and hurts people who are waiting to enter the pit at theatres, and especially to hurt me. She is fond of public shows, because they afford such possibilities of hurting me. Once I saw her standing partly on a seat and partly on another lady in the church of St. George's, Hanover Square, partly, indeed, watching a bride cry, but chiefly, I expect, scheming how she could get round to me and hurt me. Then there was an occasion at the Academy when she was peculiarly aggressive. I was sitting next my lame friend when she marked me. Of course she came at once and sat right upon us. "Come along, Jane," I heard her say, as I struggled to draw my flattened remains from under her; "this gentleman will make room."

My friend was not so entangled and had escaped on the other side. She noticed his walk. "Oh, don't you get up," she said. "This gentleman," she indicated my convulsive struggles to free myself, "will do that. I did not see that you were a cripple."

It may be some of my readers will recognise the lady now. It can be--for the honour of womankind--only one woman. She is an atavism, a survival of the age of violence, a Palæolithic squaw in petticoats. I do not know her name and address or I would publish it. I do not care if she kills me the next time she meets me, for the limits of endurance have been passed. If she kills me I shall die a martyr in the cause of the Queen's

peace. And if it is only one woman, then it was the same lady, more than half intoxicated, that I saw in the Whitechapel Road cruelly ill-treating a little costermonger. If it was not she it was certainly her sister, and I do not care who knows it.

What to do with her I do not know. A League, after all, seems ineffectual; she would break up any League. I have thought of giving her in charge for assault, but I shrink from the invidious publicity of that. Still, I am in grim earnest to do something. I think at times that the compulsory adoption of a narrow doorway for churches and places of public entertainment might be some protection for quiet, inoffensive people. How she would rage outside to be sure! Yet that seems a great undertaking.

But this little paper is not so much a plan of campaign as a preliminary defiance. Life is a doubtful boon while one is never safe from assault, from hitting and shoving, from poking with umbrellas, being sat upon, and used as a target for projectile nephews and nieces. I warn her--possibly with a certain quaver in my voice--that I am in revolt. If she hits me again---I will not say the precise thing I will do, but I warn her, very solemnly and deliberately, that she had better not hit me again.

And so for the present the matter remains.