

## CHAPTER VIII.

I WENT back to the fishing-place with a heavy heart, overcome by mournful thoughts, for the first time in my life. It was plain that she did not dislike me, and equally plain that there was some obstacle connected with her father, which forbade her to listen to my offer of marriage. From the time when she had accidentally looked toward the red-brick house, something in her manner which it is quite impossible to describe, had suggested to my mind that this obstacle was not only something she could not mention, but something that she was partly ashamed of, partly afraid of, and partly doubtful about. What could it be? How had she first known it? In what way was her father connected with it?

In the course of our walks she had told me nothing about herself which was not perfectly simple and unsuggestive.

Her childhood had been passed in England. After that, she had lived with her father and mother at Paris, where the doctor had many friends--for all of whom she remembered feeling more or less dislike, without being able to tell why. They had then come to England, and had lived in lodgings in London. For a time they had been miserably poor. But, after her mother's death--a sudden death from heart disease--there had come a change in their affairs, which she was quite unable to explain. They had removed to their present abode, to give the doctor full accommodation for the carrying on of his scientific pursuits. He often had occasion to

go to London; but never took her with him. The only woman at home now, beside herself, was an elderly person, who acted as cook and housekeeper, and who had been in their service for many years. It was very lonely sometimes not having a companion of her own age and sex; but she had got tolerably used to bear it, and to amuse herself with her books, and music, and flowers.

Thus far she chatted about herself quite freely; but when I tried, even in the vaguest manner, to lead her into discussing the causes of her strangely secluded life, she looked so distressed, and became so suddenly silent, that I naturally refrained from saying another word on that topic. One conclusion, however, I felt tolerably sure that I had drawn correctly from what she said: her father's conduct toward her, though not absolutely blamable or grossly neglectful on any point, had still never been of a nature to make her ardently fond of him. He performed the ordinary parental duties rigidly and respectably enough; but he had apparently not cared to win all the filial love which his daughter would have bestowed on a more affectionate man.

When, after reflecting on what Alicia had told me, I began to call to mind what I had been able to observe for myself, I found ample materials to excite my curiosity in relation to the doctor, if not my distrust.

I have already described how I heard the clang of the heavy door, on the occasion of my first visit to the red-brick house. The next day, when the doctor again took leave of me in the hall, I hit on a plan for

seeing the door as well as hearing it. I dawdled on my way out, till I heard the clang again; then pretended to remember some important message which I had forgotten to give to the doctor, and with a look of innocent hurry ran upstairs to overtake him. The disguised workman ran after me with a shout of "Stop!" I was conveniently deaf to him--reached the first floor landing--and arrived at a door which shut off the whole staircase higher up; an iron door, as solid as if it belonged to a banker's strong-room, and guarded millions of money. I returned to the hall, inattentive to the servant's not over-civil remonstrances, and, saying that I would wait till I saw the doctor again, left the house.

The next day two pale-looking men, in artisan costume, came up to the gate at the same time as I did, each carrying a long wooden box under his arm, strongly bound with iron. I tried to make them talk while we were waiting for admission, but neither of them would go beyond "Yes," or "No"; and both had, to my eyes, some unmistakably sinister lines in their faces. The next day the houskeeping cook came to the door--a buxom old woman with a look and a ready smile, and something in her manner which suggested that she had not begun life quite so respectably as she was now ending it. She seemed to be decidedly satisfied with my personal appearance; talked to me on indifferent matters with great glibness; but suddenly became silent and diplomatic the moment I looked toward the stair and asked innocently if she had to go up and down them often in the course of the day. As for the doctor himself he was unapproachable on the subject of the mysterious upper regions. If I introduced

chemistry in general into the conversation he begged me not to spoil his happy holiday hours with his daughter and me, by leading him back to his work-a-day thoughts. If I referred to his own experiments in particular he always made a joke about being afraid of my chemical knowledge, and of my wishing to anticipate him in his discoveries. In brief, after a week's run of the lower regions, the upper part of the red-brick house and the actual nature of its owner's occupations still remained impenetrable mysteries to me, pry, ponder, and question as I might.

Thinking of this on the river-bank, in connection with the distressing scene which I had just had with Alicia, I found that the mysterious obstacle at which she had hinted, the mysterious life led by her father, and the mysterious top of the house that had hitherto defied my curiosity, all three connected themselves in my mind as links of the same chain. The obstacle to my marrying Alicia was the thing that most troubled me. If I only found out what it was, and if I made light of it (which I was resolved beforehand to do, let it be what it might), I should most probably end by overcoming her scruples, and taking her away from the ominous red-brick house in the character of my wife. But how was I to make the all-important discovery?

Cudgeling my brains for an answer to this question, I fell at last into reasoning upon it, by a process of natural logic, something after this fashion: The mysterious top of the house is connected with the doctor, and the doctor is connected with the obstacle which has made wretchedness between Alicia and me. If I can only get to the top of the

house, I may get also to the root of the obstacle. It is a dangerous and an uncertain experiment; but, come what may of it, I will try and find out, if human ingenuity can compass the means, what Doctor Dulcifer's occupation really is, on the other side of that iron door.

Having come to this resolution (and deriving, let me add, parenthetically, great consolation from it), the next subject of consideration was the best method of getting safely into the top regions of the house.

Picking the lock of the iron door was out of the question, from the exposed nature of the situation which that mysterious iron barrier occupied. My only possible way to the second floor lay by the back of the house. I had looked up at it two or three times, while walking in the garden after dinner with Alicia. What had I brought away in my memory as the result of that casual inspection of my host's back premises? Several fragments of useful information.

In the first place, one of the most magnificent vines I had ever seen grew against the back wall of the house, trained carefully on a strong trellis-work. In the second place, the middle first-floor back window looked out on a little stone balcony, built on the top of the porch over the garden door. In the third place, the back windows of the second floor had been open, on each occasion when I had seen them--most probably to air the house, which could not be ventilated from the front during the hot summer weather, in consequence of the shut-up condition

of all the windows thereabouts. In the fourth place, hard by the coach-house in which Doctor Dulcifer's neat gig was put up, there was a tool-shed, in which the gardener kept his short pruning-ladder. In the fifth and last place, outside the stable in which Doctor Dulcifer's blood mare lived in luxurious solitude, was a dog-kennel with a large mastiff chained to it night and day. If I could only rid myself of the dog--a gaunt, half-starved brute, made savage and mangy by perpetual confinement--I did not see any reason to despair of getting in undiscovered at one of the second-floor windows--provided I waited until a sufficiently late hour, and succeeded in scaling the garden wall at the back of the house.

Life without Alicia being not worth having, I determined to risk the thing that very night.

Going back at once to the town of Barkingham, I provided myself with a short bit of rope, a little bull's-eye lantern, a small screwdriver, and a nice bit of beef chemically adapted for the soothing of troublesome dogs. I then dressed, disposed of these things neatly in my coat pockets, and went to the doctor's to dinner. In one respect, Fortune favored my audacity. It was the sultriest day of the whole season--surely they could not think of shutting up the second-floor back windows to-night!

Alicia was pale and silent. The lovely brown eyes, when they looked at me, said as plainly as in words, "We have been crying a great deal,

Frank, since we saw you last." The little white fingers gave mine a significant squeeze--and that was all the reference that passed between us to what happened in the morning. She sat through the dinner bravely; but, when the dessert came, left us for the night, with a few shy, hurried words about the excessive heat of the weather being too much for her. I rose to open the door, and exchanged a last meaning look with her, as she bowed and went by me. Little did I think that I should have to live upon nothing but the remembrance of that look for many weary days that were yet to come.

The doctor was in excellent spirits, and almost oppressively hospitable. We sat sociably chatting over our claret till past eight o'clock. Then my host turned to his desk to write a letter before the post went out; and I strolled away to smoke a cigar in the garden.

Second-floor back windows all open, atmosphere as sultry as ever, gardener's pruning-ladder quite safe in the tool-shed, savage mastiff in his kennel crunching his bones for supper. Good. The dog will not be visited again tonight: I may throw my medicated bit of beef at once into his kennel. I acted on the idea immediately; the dog seized his piece of beef; I heard a snap, a wheeze, a choke, and a groan--and there was the mastiff disposed of, inside the kennel, where nobody could find out that he was dead till the time came for feeding him the next morning.

I went back to the doctor; we had a social glass of cold brandy-and-water together; I lighted another cigar, and took my leave.

My host being too respectable a man not to keep early country hours, I went away, as usual, about ten. The mysterious man-servant locked the gate behind me. I sauntered on the road back to Barkingham for about five minutes, then struck off sharp for the plantation, lighted my lantern with the help of my cigar and a brimstone match of that barbarous period, shut down the slide again, and made for the garden wall.

It was formidably high, and garnished horribly with broken bottles; but it was also old, and when I came to pick at the mortar with my screw-driver, I found it reasonably rotten with age and damp.

I removed four bricks to make footholes in different positions up the wall. It was desperately hard and long work, easy as it may sound in description--especially when I had to hold on by the top of the wall, with my flat opera hat (as we used to call it in those days) laid, as a guard, between my hand and the glass, while I cleared a way through the sharp bottle-ends for my other hand and my knees. This done, my great difficulty was vanquished; and I had only to drop luxuriously into a flower-bed on the other side of the wall.

Perfect stillness in the garden: no sign of a light anywhere at the back of the house: first-floor windows all shut: second-floor windows still open. I fetched the pruning-ladder; put it against the side of the porch; tied one end of my bit of rope to the top round of it; took the other end in my mouth, and prepared to climb to the balcony over the

porch by the thick vine branches and the trellis-work.

No man who has had any real experience of life can have failed to observe how amazingly close, in critical situations, the grotesque and the terrible, the comic and the serious, contrive to tread on each other's heels. At such times, the last thing we ought properly to think of comes into our heads, or the least consistent event that could possibly be expected to happen does actually occur. When I put my life in danger on that memorable night, by putting my foot on the trellis-work, I absolutely thought of the never-dying Lady Malkinshaw plunged in refreshing slumber, and of the frantic exclamations Mr. Batterbury would utter if he saw what her ladyship's grandson was doing with his precious life and limbs at that critical moment. I am no hero--I was fully aware of the danger to which I was exposing myself; and yet I protest that I caught myself laughing under my breath, with the most outrageous inconsistency, at the instant when I began the ascent of the trellis-work.

I reached the balcony over the porch in safety, depending more upon the tough vine branches than the trellis-work during my ascent. My next employment was to pull up the pruning-ladder, as softly as possible, by the rope which I held attached to it. This done, I put the ladder against the house wall, listened, measured the distance to the open second-floor window with my eye, listened again--and, finding all quiet, began my second and last ascent. The ladder was comfortably long, and I was conveniently tall; my hand was on the window-sill--I mounted another

two rounds--and my eyes were level with the interior of the room.

Suppose any one should be sleeping there!

I listened at the window attentively before I ventured on taking my lantern out of my coatpocket. The night was so quite and airless that there was not the faintest rustle among the leaves in the garden beneath me to distract my attention. I listened. The breathing of the lightest of sleepers must have reached my ear, through that intense stillness, if the room had been a bedroom, and the bed were occupied. I heard nothing but the quick beat of my own heart. The minutes of suspense were passing heavily--I laid my other hand over the window-sill, then a moment of doubt came--doubt whether I should carry the adventure any further. I mastered my hesitation directly--it was too late for second thoughts. "Now for it!" I whispered to myself, and got in at the window.

To wait, listening again, in the darkness of that unknown region, was more than I had courage for. The moment I was down on the floor, I pulled the lantern out of my pocket and raised the shade.

So far, so good--I found myself in a dirty lumber-room. Large pans, some of them cracked and more of them broken; empty boxes bound with iron, of the same sort as those I had seen the workmen bringing in at the front gate; old coal sacks; a packing-case full of coke; and a huge, cracked, mouldy blacksmith's bellows--these were the principal objects that I observed in the lumber-room. The one door leading out of it was open,

as I had expected it would be, in order to let the air through the back window into the house. I took off my shoes, and stole into the passage. My first impulse, the moment I looked along it, was to shut down my lantern-shade, and listen again.

Still I heard nothing; but at the far end of the passage I saw a bright light pouring through the half-opened door of one of the mysterious front rooms.

I crept softly toward it. A decidedly chemical smell began to steal into my nostrils--and, listening again, I thought I heard above me, and in some distant room, a noise like the low growl of a large furnace, muffled in some peculiar manner. Should I retrace my steps in that direction? No--not till I had seen something of the room with the bright light, outside of which I was now standing. I bent forward softly; looking by little and little further and further through the opening of the door, until my head and shoulders were fairly inside the room, and my eyes had convinced me that no living soul, sleeping or waking, was in any part of it at that particular moment. Impelled by a fatal curiosity, I entered immediately, and began to look about me with eager eyes.

I saw iron ladles, pans full of white sand, files with white metal left glittering in their teeth, molds of plaster of Paris, bags containing the same material in powder, a powerful machine with the name and use of which I was theoretically not unacquainted, white metal in a partially-fused state, bottles of aquafortis, dies scattered over a

dresser, crucibles, sandpaper, bars of metal, and edged tools in plenty, of the strangest construction. I was not at all a scrupulous man, as the reader knows by this time; but when I looked at these objects, and thought of Alicia, I could not for the life of me help shuddering. There was not the least doubt about it, even after the little I had seen: the important chemical pursuits to which Doctor Dulcifer was devoting himself, meant, in plain English and in one word--Coining.

Did Alicia know what I knew now, or did she only suspect it?

Whichever way I answered that question in my own mind, I could be no longer at any loss for an explanation of her behavior in the meadow by the stream, or of that unnaturally gloomy, downcast look which overspread her face when her father's pursuits were the subject of conversation. Did I falter in my resolution to marry her, now that I had discovered what the obstacle was which had made mystery and wretchedness

between us? Certainly not. I was above all prejudices. I was the least particular of mankind. I had no family affection in my way--and, greatest fact of all, I was in love. Under those circumstances what Rogue of any spirit would have faltered? After the first shock of the discovery was over, my resolution to be Alicia's husband was settled more firmly than ever.

There was a little round table in a corner of the room furthest from the door, which I had not yet examined. A feverish longing to look at

everything within my reach--to penetrate to the innermost recesses of the labyrinth in which I had involved myself--consumed me. I went to the table, and saw upon it, ranged symmetrically side by side, four objects which looked like thick rulers wrapped up in silver paper. I opened the paper at the end of one of the rulers, and found that it was composed of half-crowns. I had closed the paper again, and was just raising my head from the table over which it had been bent, when my right cheek came in contact with something hard and cold. I started back--looked up--and confronted Doctor Dulcifer, holding a pistol at my right temple.