

## CHAPTER IX.

THE doctor (like me) had his shoes off. The doctor (like me) had come in without making the least noise. He cocked the pistol without saying a word. I felt that I was probably standing face to face with death, and I too said not a word. We two Rogues looked each other steadily and silently in the face--he, the mighty and prosperous villain, with my life in his hands: I, the abject and poor scamp, waiting his mercy.

It must have been at least a minute after I heard the click of the cocked pistol before he spoke.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

The quiet commonplace terms in which he put his question, and the perfect composure and politeness of his manner, reminded me a little of Gentleman Jones. But the doctor was much the more respectable-looking man of the two; his baldness was more intellectual and benevolent; there was a delicacy and propriety in the pulpiness of his fat white chin, a bland bagginess in his unwhiskered cheeks, a reverent roughness about his eyebrows and a fullness in his lower eyelids, which raised him far higher, physiognomically speaking, in the social scale, than my old prison acquaintance. Put a shovel-hat on Gentleman Jones, and the effect would only have been eccentric; put the same covering on the head of Doctor Dulcifer, and the effect would have been strictly episcopal.

"How did you get here?" he repeated, still without showing the least irritation.

I told him how I had got in at the second-floor window, without concealing a word of the truth. The gravity of the situation, and the sharpness of the doctor's intellects, as expressed in his eyes, made anything like a suppression of facts on my part a desperately dangerous experiment.

"You wanted to see what I was about up here, did you?" said he, when I had ended my confession. "Do you know?"

The pistol barrel touched my cheek as he said the last words. I thought of all the suspicious objects scattered about the room, of the probability that he was only putting this question to try my courage, of the very likely chance that he would shoot me forthwith, if I began to prevaricate. I thought of these things, and boldly answered:

"Yes, I do know."

He looked at me reflectively; then said, in low, thoughtful tones, speaking, not to me, but entirely to himself:

"Suppose I shoot him?"

I saw in his eye, that if I flinched, he would draw the trigger.

"Suppose you trust me?" I said, without moving a muscle.

"I trusted you, as an honest man, downstairs, and I find you, like a thief, up here," returned the doctor, with a self-satisfied smile at the neatness of his own retort. "No," he continued, relapsing into soliloquy: "there is risk every way; but the least risk perhaps is to shoot him."

"Wrong," said I. "There are relations of mine who have a pecuniary interest in my life. I am the main condition of a contingent reversion in their favor. If I am missed, I shall be inquired after." I have wondered since at my own coolness in the face of the doctor's pistol; but my life depended on my keeping my self-possession, and the desperate nature of the situation lent me a desperate courage.

"How do I know you are not lying?" he asked.

"Have I not spoken the truth, hitherto?"

Those words made him hesitate. He lowered the pistol slowly to his side. I began to breathe freely.

"Trust me," I repeated. "If you don't believe I would hold my tongue about what I have seen here, for your sake, you may be certain that I would for--"

"For my daughter's," he interposed, with a sarcastic smile.

I bowed with all imaginable cordiality. The doctor waved his pistol in the air contemptuously.

"There are two ways of making you hold your tongue," he said. "The first is shooting you; the second is making a felon of you. On consideration, after what you have said, the risk in either case seems about equal. I am naturally a humane man; your family have done me no injury; I will not be the cause of their losing money; I won't take your life, I'll have your character. We are all felons on this floor of the house. You have come among us--you shall be one of us. Ring that bell."

He pointed with the pistol to a bell-handle behind me. I pulled it in silence.

Felon! The word has an ugly sound--a very ugly sound. But, considering how near the black curtain had been to falling over the adventurous drama of my life, had I any right to complain of the prolongation of the scene, however darkly it might look at first? Besides, some of the best feelings of our common nature (putting out of all question the value which men so unaccountably persist in setting on their own lives), impelled me, of necessity, to choose the alternative of felonious existence in preference to that of respectable death. Love and Honor bade me live to marry Alicia; and a sense of family duty made me shrink

from occasioning a loss of three thousand pounds to my affectionate sister. Perish the far-fetched scruples which would break the heart of one lovely woman, and scatter to the winds the pin-money of another!

"If you utter one word in contradiction of anything I say when my workmen come into the room," said the doctor, uncocking his pistol as soon as I had rung the bell, "I shall change my mind about leaving your life and taking your character. Remember that; and keep a guard on your tongue."

The door opened, and four men entered. One was an old man whom I had not seen before; in the other three I recognized the workman-like footman, and the two sinister artisans whom I had met at the house-gate. They all started, guiltily enough, at seeing me.

"Let me introduce you," said the doctor, taking me by the arm. "Old File and Young File, Mill and Screw--Mr. Frank Softly. We have nicknames in this workshop, Mr. Softly, derived humorously from our professional tools and machinery. When you have been here long enough, you will get a nickname, too. Gentlemen," he continued, turning to the workmen, "this is a new recruit, with a knowledge of chemistry which will be useful to us. He is perfectly well aware that the nature of our vocation makes us suspicious of all newcomers, and he, therefore, desires to give you practical proof that he is to be depended on, by making half-a-crown immediately, and sending the same up, along with our handiwork, directed

in his own handwriting, to our estimable correspondents in London. When you have all seen him do this of his own free will, and thereby put his own life as completely within the power of the law as we have put ours, you will know that he is really one of us, and will be under no apprehensions for the future. Take great pains with him, and as soon as he turns out a tolerably neat article, from the simple flatted plates, under your inspection, let me know. I shall take a few hours' repose on my camp-bed in the study, and shall be found there whenever you want me."

He nodded to us all round in the most friendly manner, and left the room.

I looked with considerable secret distrust at the four gentlemen who were to instruct me in the art of making false coin. Young File was the workman-like footman; Old File was his father; Mill and Screw were the two sinister artisans. The man of the company whose looks I liked least was Screw. He had wicked little twinkling eyes--and they followed me about treacherously whenever I moved. "You and I, Screw, are likely to quarrel," I thought to myself, as I tried vainly to stare him out of countenance.

I entered on my new and felonious functions forthwith. Resistance was useless, and calling for help would have been sheer insanity. It was midnight; and, even supposing the windows had not been barred, the house was a mile from any human habitation. Accordingly, I abandoned

myself to fate with my usual magnanimity. Only let me end in winning Alicia, and I am resigned to the loss of whatever small shreds and patches of respectability still hang about me--such was my philosophy. I wish I could have taken higher moral ground with equally consoling results to my own feelings.

The same regard for the well-being of society which led me to abstain from entering into particulars on the subject of Old Master-making, when I was apprenticed to Mr. Ishmael Pickup, now commands me to be equally discreet on the kindred subject of Half-Crown-making, under the auspices of Old File, Young File, Mill, and Screw.

Let me merely record that I was a kind of machine in the hands of these four skilled workmen. I moved from room to room, and from process to process, the creature of their directing eyes and guiding hands. I cut myself, I burned myself, I got speechless from fatigue, and giddy from want of sleep. In short, the sun of the new day was high in the heavens before it was necessary to disturb Doctor Dulcifer. It had absolutely taken me almost as long to manufacture a half-a-crown feloniously as it takes a respectable man to make it honestly. This is saying a great deal; but it is literally true for all that.

Looking quite fresh and rosy after his night's sleep, the doctor inspected my coin with the air of a schoolmaster examining a little boy's exercise; then handed it to Old File to put the finished touches and correct the mistakes. It was afterward returned to me. My own hand

placed it in one of the rouleaux of false half-crowns; and my own hand also directed the spurious coin, when it had been safely packed up, to a certain London dealer who was to be on the lookout for it by the next night's mail. That done, my initiation was so far complete.

"I have sent for your luggage, and paid your bill at the inn," said the doctor; "of course in your name. You are now to enjoy the hospitality that I could not extend to you before. A room upstairs has been prepared for you. You are not exactly in a state of confinement; but, until your studies are completed, I think you had better not interrupt them by going out."

"A prisoner!" I exclaimed aghast.

"Prisoner is a hard word," answered the doctor. "Let us say, a guest under surveillance."

"Do you seriously mean that you intend to keep me shut up in this part of the house, at your will and pleasure?" I inquired, my heart sinking lower and lower at every word I spoke.

"It is very spacious and airy," said the doctor; "as for the lower part of the house, you would find no company there, so you can't want to go to it."

"No company!" I repeated faintly.



"No. My daughter went away this morning for change of air and scene, accompanied by my housekeeper. You look astonished, my dear sir--let me frankly explain myself. While you were the respectable son of Doctor Softly, and grandson of Lady Malkinshaw, I was ready enough to let my daughter associate with you, and should not have objected if you had married her off my hands into a highly-connected family. Now, however, when you are nothing but one of the workmen in my manufactory of money, your social position is seriously altered for the worse; and, as I could not possibly think of you for a son-in-law, I have considered it best to prevent all chance of your communicating with Alicia again, by sending her away from this house while you are in it. You will be in it until I have completed certain business arrangements now in a forward state of progress--after that, you may go away if you please. Pray remember that you have to thank yourself for the position you now stand in; and do me the justice to admit that my conduct toward you is remarkably straightforward, and perfectly natural under all the circumstances."

These words fairly overwhelmed me. I did not even make an attempt to answer them. The hard trials to my courage, endurance, and physical strength, through which I had passed within the last twelve hours, had completely exhausted all my powers of resistance. I went away speechless to my own room; and when I found myself alone there, burst out crying. Childish, was it not?

When I had been rested and strengthened by a few hours' sleep, I found

myself able to confront the future with tolerable calmness.

What would it be best for me to do? Ought I to attempt to make my escape? I did not despair of succeeding; but when I began to think of the consequences of success, I hesitated. My chief object now was, not so much to secure my own freedom, as to find my way to Alicia. I had never been so deeply and desperately in love with her as I was now, when I knew she was separated from me. Suppose I succeeded in escaping from the clutches of Doctor Dulcifer--might I not be casting myself uselessly on the world, without a chance of finding a single clew to trace her by? Suppose, on the other hand, that I remained for the present in the red-brick house--should I not by that course of conduct be putting myself in the best position for making discoveries?

In the first place, there was the chance that Alicia might find some secret means of communicating with me if I remained where I was. In the second place, the doctor would, in all probability, have occasion to write to his daughter, or would be likely to receive letters from her; and, if I quieted all suspicion on my account, by docile behavior, and kept my eyes sharply on the lookout, I might find opportunities of surprising the secrets of his writing-desk. I felt that I need be under no restraints of honor with a man who was keeping me a prisoner, and who had made an accomplice of me by threatening my life. Accordingly, while resolving to show outwardly an amiable submission to my fate, I determined at the same time to keep secretly on the watch, and to take the very first chance of outwitting Doctor Dulcifer that might happen

to present itself. When we next met I was perfectly civil to him. He was too well-bred a man not to match me on the common ground of courtesy.

"Permit me to congratulate you," he said, "on the improvement in your manner and appearance. You are beginning well, Francis. Go on as you have begun."