

CHAPTER X.

MY first few days' experience in my new position satisfied me that Doctor Dulcifer preserved himself from betrayal by a system of surveillance worthy of the very worst days of the Holy Inquisition itself.

No man of us ever knew that he was not being overlooked at home, or followed when he went out, by another man. Peepholes were pierced in the wall of each room, and we were never certain, while at work, whose eye was observing, or whose ear was listening in secret. Though we all lived together, we were probably the least united body of men ever assembled under one roof. By way of effectually keeping up the want of union between us, we were not all trusted alike. I soon discovered that Old File and Young File were much further advanced in the doctor's confidence than Mill, Screw, or myself. There was a locked-up room, and a continually-closed door shutting off a back staircase, of both of which Old File and Young File possessed keys that were never so much as trusted in the possession of the rest of us. There was also a trap-door in the floor of the principal workroom, the use of which was known to nobody but the doctor and his two privileged men. If we had not been all nearly on an equality in the matter of wages, these distinctions would have made bad blood among us. As it was, nobody having reason to complain of unjustly-diminished wages, nobody cared about any preferences in which profit was not involved.

The doctor must have gained a great deal of money by his skill as a coiner. His profits in business could never have averaged less than five hundred per cent; and, to do him justice, he was really a generous as well as a rich master.

Even I, as a new hand, was, in fair proportion, as well paid by the week as the rest.

We, of course, had nothing to do with the passing of false money--we only manufactured it (sometimes at the rate of four hundred pounds' worth in a week); and left its circulation to be managed by our customers in London and the large towns. Whatever we paid for in Barkingham was paid for in the genuine Mint coinage. I used often to compare my own true guineas, half-crowns and shillings with our imitations under the doctor's supervision, and was always amazed at the resemblance. Our scientific chief had discovered a process something like what is called electrotyping nowadays, as I imagine. He was very proud of this; but he was prouder still of the ring of his metal, and with reason: it must have been a nice ear indeed that could discover the false tones in the doctor's coinage.

If I had been the most scrupulous man in the world, I must still have received my wages, for the very necessary purpose of not appearing to distinguish myself invidiously from my fellow-workmen. Upon the whole, I got on well with them. Old File and I struck up quite a friendship. Young File and Mill worked harmoniously with me, but Screw and I (as I

had foreboded) quarreled.

This last man was not on good terms with his fellows, and had less of the doctor's confidence than any of the rest of us. Naturally not of a sweet temper, his isolated position in the house had soured him, and he rashly attempted to vent his ill-humor on me, as a newcomer. For some days I bore with him patiently; but at last he got the better of my powers of endurance; and I gave him a lesson in manners, one day, on the educational system of Gentleman Jones. He did not return the blow, or complain to the doctor; he only looked at me wickedly, and said: "I'll be even with you for that, some of these days." I soon forgot the words and the look.

With Old File, as I have said, I became quite friendly. Excepting the secrets of our prison-house, he was ready enough to talk on subjects about which I was curious.

He had known his present master as a young man, and was perfectly familiar with all the events of his career. From various conversations, at odds and ends of spare time, I discovered that Doctor Dulcifer had begun life as a footman in a gentleman's family; that his young mistress had eloped with him, taking away with her every article of value that was her own personal property, in the shape of jewelry and dresses; that they had lived upon the sale of these things for some time; and that the husband, when the wife's means were exhausted, had turned strolling-player for a year or two. Abandoning that pursuit, he had

next become a quack-doctor, first in a resident, then in a vagabond capacity--taking a medical degree of his own conferring, and holding to it as a good traveling title for the rest of his life. From the selling of quack medicines he had proceeded to the adulterating of foreign wines, varied by lucrative evening occupation in the Paris gambling houses. On returning to his native land, he still continued to turn his chemical knowledge to account, by giving his services to that particular branch of our commercial industry which is commonly described as the adulteration of commodities; and from this he had gradually risen to the more refined pursuit of adulterating gold and silver--or, to use the common phrase again, making bad money.

According to Old File's statement, though Doctor Dulcifer had never actually ill-used his wife, he had never lived on kind terms with her: the main cause of the estrangement between them, in later years, being Mrs. Dulcifer's resolute resistance to her husband's plans for emerging from poverty, by the simple process of coining his own money. The poor woman still held fast by some of the principles imparted to her in happier days; and she was devotedly fond of her daughter. At the time of her sudden death, she was secretly making arrangements to leave the doctor, and find a refuge for herself and her child in a foreign country, under the care of the one friend of her family who had not cast her off. Questioning my informant about Alicia next, I found that he knew very little about her relations with her father in later years. That she must long since have discovered him to be not quite so respectable a man as he looked, and that she might suspect something

wrong was going on in the house at the present time, were, in Old File's opinion, matters of certainty; but that she knew anything positively on the subject of her father's occupations, he seemed to doubt. The doctor was not the sort of man to give his daughter, or any other woman, the slightest chance of surprising his secrets.

These particulars I gleaned during one long month of servitude and imprisonment in the fatal red-brick house.

During all that time not the slightest intimation reached me of Alicia's whereabouts. Had she forgotten me? I could not believe it. Unless the dear brown eyes were the falsest hypocrites in the world, it was impossible that she should have forgotten me. Was she watched? Were all means of communicating with me, even in secret, carefully removed from her? I looked oftener and oftener into the doctor's study as those questions occurred to me; but he never quitted it without locking the writing-desk first--he never left any papers scattered on the table, and he was never absent from the room at any special times and seasons that could be previously calculated upon. I began to despair, and to feel in my lonely moments a yearning to renew that childish experiment of crying, which I have already adverted to, in the way of confession. Moralists will be glad to hear that I really suffered acute mental misery at this time of my life. My state of depression would have gratified the most exacting of Methodists; and my penitent face would have made my fortune if I could only have been exhibited by a reformatory association on the platform of Exeter Hall.

How much longer was this to last? Whither should I turn my steps when I regained my freedom? In what direction throughout all England should I begin to look for Alicia?

Sleeping and walking--working and idling--those were now my constant thoughts. I did my best to prepare myself for every emergency that could happen; I tried to arm myself beforehand against every possible accident that could befall me. While I was still hard at work sharpening my faculties and disciplining my energies in this way, an accident befell the doctor, on the possibility of which I had not dared to calculate, even in my most hopeful moments.