

CHAPTER XIV.

As soon as I was alone, I took from my pocket one of the handbills which my excitable fellow-traveler had presented to me, so as to have it ready for Mrs. Baggs the moment we stood face to face. Armed with this ominous letter of introduction, I kicked a chair down against the folding-doors, by way of giving a preliminary knock to arouse the housekeeper's attention. The plan was immediately successful. Mrs. Baggs opened the doors of communication violently. A slight smell of spirits entered the room, and was followed close by the housekeeper herself, with an indignant face and a disordered head-dress.

"What do you mean, sir? How dare you--" she began; then stopped aghast, looking at me in speechless astonishment.

"I have been obliged to make a slight alteration in my personal appearance, ma'am," I said. "But I am still Frank Softly."

"Don't talk to me about personal appearances, sir," cried Mrs. Baggs recovering. "What do you mean by being here? Leave the house immediately. I shall write to the doctor, Mr. Softly, this very night."

"He has no address you can direct to," I rejoined. "If you don't believe me, read that." I gave her the handbill without another word of preface.

Mrs. Baggs looked at it--lost in an instant some of the fine color

plentifully diffused over her face by sleep and spirits--sat down in the nearest chair with a thump that seemed to threaten the very foundations of Number Two, Zion Place--and stared me hard in the face; the most speechless and helpless elderly female I ever beheld.

"Take plenty of time to compose yourself ma'am," I said. "If you don't see the doctor again soon, under the gallows, you will probably not have the pleasure of meeting with him for some considerable time."

Mrs. Baggs smote both her hands distractedly on her knees, and whispered a devout ejaculation to herself softly.

"Allow me to deal with you, ma'am, as a woman of the world," I went on. "If you will give me half-an-hour's hearing, I will explain to you how I come to know what I do; how I got here; and what I have to propose to Miss Alicia and to you."

"If you have the feelings of a man, sir," said Mrs. Baggs, shaking her head and raising her eyes to heaven, "you will remember that I have nerves, and will not presume upon them."

As the old lady uttered the last words, I thought I saw her eyes turn from heaven, and take the earthly direction of the sofa in the front parlor. It struck me also that her lips looked rather dry. Upon these two hints I spoke.

"Might I suggest some little stimulant?" I asked, with respectful earnestness. "I have heard my grandmother (Lady Malkinshaw) say that, 'a drop in time saves nine.'"

"You will find it under the sofa pillow," said Mrs. Baggs, with sudden briskness. "'A drop in time saves nine'--my sentiments, if I may put myself on a par with her ladyship. The liqueur-glass, Mr. Softly, is in the backgammon-board. I hope her ladyship was well the last time you heard from her? Suffers from her nerves, does she? Like me, again. In the backgammon-board. Oh, this news, this awful news!"

I found the bottle of brandy in the place indicated, but no liqueur-glass in the backgammon-board. There was, however, a wine-glass, accidentally left on a chair by the sofa. Mrs. Baggs did not seem to notice the difference when I brought it into the back room and filled it with brandy.

"Take a toothful yourself," said Mrs. Baggs, lightly tossing off the dram in a moment. "'A drop in time'--I can't help repeating it, it's so nicely expressed. Still, with submission to her ladyship's better judgment, Mr. Softly, the question seems now to arise, whether, if one drop in time saves nine, two drops in time may not save eighteen." Here Mrs. Baggs forgot her nerves and winked. I returned the wink and filled the glass a second time. "Oh, this news, this awful news!" said Mrs. Baggs, remembering her nerves again.

Just then I thought I heard footsteps in front of the house, but, listening more attentively, found that it had begun to rain, and that I had been deceived by the pattering of the first heavy drops against the windows. However, the bare suspicion that the same stranger who had called already might be watching the house now, was enough to startle me very seriously, and to suggest the absolute necessity of occupying no more precious time in paying attention to the vagaries of Mrs. Baggs' nerves. It was also of some importance that I should speak to her while she was sober enough to understand what I meant in a general way.

Feeling convinced that she was in imminent danger of becoming downright drunk if I gave her another glass, I kept my hand on the bottle, and forthwith told my story over again in a very abridged and unceremonious form, and without allowing her one moment of leisure for comment on my narrative, whether it might be of the weeping, winking, drinking, groaning, or ejaculating kind. As I had anticipated, when I came to a conclusion, and consequently allowed her an opportunity of saying a few words, she affected to be extremely shocked and surprised at hearing of the nature of her master's pursuits, and reproached me in terms of the most vehement and virtuous indignation for incurring the guilt of abetting them, even though I had done so from the very excusable motive of saving my own life. Having a lively sense of the humorous, I was necessarily rather amused by this; but I began to get a little surprised as well, when we diverged to the subject of the doctor's escape, on finding that Mrs. Baggs viewed the fact of his running away to some hiding-place of his own in the light of a personal insult to his

faithful and attached housekeeper.

"It shows a want of confidence in me," said the old lady, "which I may forgive, but can never forget. The sacrifices I have made for that ungrateful man are not to be told in words. The very morning he sent us away here, what did I do? Packed up the moment he said Go. I had my preserves to pot, and the kitchen chimney to be swept, and the lock of my box hampered into the bargain. Other women in my place would have grumbled--I got up directly, as lively as any girl of eighteen you like to mention. Says he, 'I want Alicia taken out of young Softly's way, and you must do it.'---Says I, 'This very morning, sir?'--Says he, 'This very morning.'--Says I, 'Where to?'--Says he, 'As far off as ever you can go; coast of Wales--Crickgelly. I won't trust her nearer; young Softly's too cunning, and she's too fond of him.'--'Any more orders, sir?' says I.--'Yes; take some fancy name--Simkins, Johnson, Giles, Jones, James,' says he, 'what you like but Dulcifer; for that scamp Softly will move heaven and earth to trace her.'--'What else?' says I.--'Nothing, but look sharp,' says he; 'and mind one thing, that she sees no visitors, and posts no letters.' Before those last words had been out of his wicked lips an hour, we were off. A nice job I had to get her away--a nice job to stop her from writing letters to you--a nice job to keep her here. But I did it; I followed my orders like a slave in a plantation with a whip at his bare back. I've had rheumatics, weak legs, bad nights, and miss in the sulks--all from obeying the doctor's orders. And what is my reward? He turns coiner, and runs away without a word to me beforehand, and writes me a trumpery note, without a date to

it, without a farthing of money in it, telling me nothing! Look at my confidence in him, and then look at the way he's treated me in return. What woman's nerves can stand that? Don't keep fidgeting with the bottle! Pass it this way, Mr. Softly, or you'll break it, and drive me distracted."

"He has no excuse, ma'am," I said. "But will you allow me to change the subject, as I am pressed for time? You appear to be so well acquainted with the favorable opinion which Miss Alicia and I entertain of each other, that I hope it will be no fresh shock to your nerves, if I inform you, in plain words, that I have come to Crickgelly to marry her."

"Marry her! marry--If you don't leave off fidgeting with the bottle, Mr. Softly, and change the subject directly, I shall ring the bell."

"Hear me out, ma'am, and then ring if you like. If you persist, however, in considering yourself still the confidential servant of a felon who is now flying for his life, and if you decline allowing the young lady to act as she wishes, I will not be so rude as to hint that--as she is of age--she may walk out of this house with me, whenever she likes, without your having the power to prevent her; but, I will politely ask instead, what you would propose to do with her, in the straitened position as to money in which she and you are likely to be placed? You can't find her father to give her to; and, if you could, who would be the best protector for her? The doctor, who is the principal criminal in the eye of the law, or I, who am only the unwilling accomplice? He is known to

the Bow Street runners--I am not. There is a reward for the taking of him, and none for the taking of me. He has no respectable relatives and friends, I have plenty. Every way my chances are the best; and consequently I am, every way, the fittest person to trust her to. Don't you see that?"

Mrs. Baggs did not immediately answer. She snatched the bottle out of my hands--drank off another dram, shook her head at me, and ejaculated lamentably: "My nerves, my nerves! what a heart of stone he must have to presume on my poor nerves!"

"Give me one minute more," I went on. "I propose to take you and Alicia to-morrow morning to Scotland. Pray don't groan! I only suggest the journey with a matrimonial object. In Scotland, Mrs. Baggs, if a man and woman accept each other as husband and wife, before one witness, it is a lawful marriage; and that kind of wedding is, as you see plainly enough, the only safe refuge for a bridegroom in my situation. If you consent to come with us to Scotland, and serve as witness to the marriage, I shall be delighted to acknowledge my sense of your kindness in the eloquent language of the Bank of England, as expressed to the world in general on the surface of a five-pound note."

I cautiously snatched away the brandy bottle as I spoke, and was in the drawing-room with it in an instant. As I suppose, Mrs. Baggs tried to follow me, for I heard the door rattle, as if she had got out of her chair, and suddenly slipped back into it again. I felt certain of her

deciding to help us, if she was only sober enough to reflect on what I had said to her. The journey to Scotland was a tedious, and perhaps a dangerous, undertaking. But I had no other alternative to choose.

In those uncivilized days, the Marriage Act had not been passed, and there was no convenient hymeneal registrar in England to change a vagabond runaway couple into a respectable man and wife at a moment's notice. The trouble and expense of taking Mrs. Baggs with us, I encountered, of course, solely out of regard for Alicia's natural prejudices. She had led precisely that kind of life which makes any woman but a bad one morbidly sensitive on the subject of small proprieties. If she had been a girl with a recognized position in society, I should have proposed to her to run away with me alone. As it was, the very defenselessness of her situation gave her, in my opinion, the right to expect from me even the absurdest sacrifices to the narrowest conventionalities. Mrs. Baggs was not quite so sober in her habits, perhaps, as matrons in general are expected to be; but, for my particular purpose, this was only a slight blemish; it takes so little, after all, to represent the abstract principle of propriety in the short-sighted eye of the world.

As I reached the drawing-room door, I looked at my watch.

Nine o'clock! and nothing done yet to facilitate our escaping from Crickgelly to the regions of civilized life the next morning. I was pleased to hear, when I knocked at the door, that Alicia's voice sounded

firmer as she told me to come in. She was more confused than astonished or frightened when I sat down by her on the sofa, and repeated the principal topics of my conversion with Mrs. Baggs.

"Now, my own love," I said, in conclusion--suited my gestures, it is unnecessary to say, to the tenderness of my language--"there is not the least doubt that Mrs. Baggs will end by agreeing to my proposals. Nothing remains, therefore, but for you to give me the answer now, which I have been waiting for ever since that last day when we met by the riverside. I did not know then what the motive was for your silence and distress. I know now, and I love you better after that knowledge than I did before it."

Her head dropped into its former position on my bosom, and she murmured a few words, but too faintly for me to hear them.

"You knew more about your father, then, than I did?" I whispered.

"Less than you have told me since," she interposed quickly, without raising her face.

"Enough to convince you that he was breaking the laws," I suggested; "and, to make you, as his daughter, shrink from saying 'yes' to me when we sat together on the river bank?"

She did not answer. One of her arms, which was hanging over my shoulder,

stole round my neck, and clasped it gently.

"Since that time," I went on, "your father has compromised me. I am in some danger, not much, from the law. I have no prospects that are not of the most doubtful kind; and I have no excuse for asking you to share them, except that I have fallen into my present misfortune through trying to discover the obstacle that kept us apart. If there is any protection in the world that you can turn to, less doubtful than mine, I suppose I ought to say no more, and leave the house. But if there should be none, surely I am not so very selfish in asking you to take your chance with me? I honestly believe that I shall have little difficulty, with ordinary caution, in escaping from pursuit, and finding a safe home somewhere to begin life in again with new interests. Will you share it with me, Alicia? I can try no fresh persuasions---I have no right, perhaps, in my present situation to have addressed so many to you already."

Her other arm stole round my neck; she laid her cheek against mine, and whispered--

"Be kind to me, Frank--I have nobody in the world who loves me but you!"

I felt her tears on my face; my own eyes moistened as I tried to answer her. We sat for some minutes in perfect silence--without moving, without a thought beyond the moment. The rising of the wind, and the splashing of the rain outside were the first sounds that stirred me into action

again.

I summoned my resolution, rose from the sofa, and in a few hasty words told Alicia what I proposed for the next day, and mentioned the hour at which I would come in the morning. As I had anticipated, she seemed relieved and reassured at the prospect even of such slight sanction and encouragement, on the part of another woman, as would be implied by the companionship of Mrs. Baggs on the journey to Scotland.

The next and last difficulty I had to encounter was necessarily connected with her father. He had never been very affectionate; and he was now, for aught she or I knew to the contrary, parted from her forever. Still, the instinctive recognition of his position made her shrink, at the last moment, when she spoke of him, and thought of the serious nature of her engagement with me. After some vain arguing and remonstrating, I contrived to quiet her scruples, by promising that an address should be left at Crickgelly, to which any second letter that might arrive from the doctor could be forwarded. When I saw that this prospect of being able to communicate with him, if he wrote or wished to see her, had sufficiently composed her mind, I left the drawing-room. It was vitally important that I should get back to the inn and make the necessary arrangements for our departure the next morning, before the primitive people of the place had retired to bed.

As I passed the back parlor door on my way out, I heard the voice of Mrs. Baggs raised indignantly. The words "bottle!" "audacity!" and

"nerves!" reached my ear disjointedly. I called out "Good-by! till to-morrow;" heard a responsive groan of disgust; then opened the front door, and plunged out into the dark and rainy night.

It might have been the dropping of water from the cottage roofs while I passed through the village, or the groundless alarm of my own suspicious fancy, but I thought I was being followed as I walked back to the inn. Two or three times I turned round abruptly. If twenty men had been at my heels, it was too dark to see them. I went on to the inn.

The people there were not gone to bed; and I sent for the landlord to consult with him about a conveyance. Perhaps it was my suspicious fancy again; but I thought his manner was altered. He seemed half distrustful, half afraid of me, when I asked him if there had been any signs, during my absence, of those two gentlemen, for whom I had already inquired on arriving at his door that evening. He gave an answer in the negative, looking away from me while he spoke.

Thinking it advisable, on the whole, not to let him see that I noticed a change in him, I proceeded at once to the question of the conveyance, and was told that I could hire the landlord's light cart, in which he was accustomed to drive to the market town. I appointed an hour for starting the next day, and retired at once to my bedroom. There my thoughts were enough. I was anxious about Screw and the Bow Street runner. I was uncertain about the stranger who had called at Number Two, Zion Place. I was in doubt even about the landlord of the inn. Never did

I know what real suffering from suspense was, until that night, Whatever my apprehensions might have been, they were none of them realized the next morning.

Nobody followed me on my way to Zion Place, and no stranger had called there before me a second time, when I made inquiries on entering the house. I found Alicia blushing, and Mrs. Baggs impenetrably wrapped up in dignified sulkiness. After informing me with a lofty look that she intended to go to Scotland with us, and to take my five-pound note--partly under protest, and partly out of excessive affection for Alicia--she retired to pack up. The time consumed in performing this process, and the further delay occasioned by paying small outstanding debts to tradespeople, and settling with the owner of the house, detained us till nearly noon before we were ready to get into the landlord's cart.

I looked behind me anxiously at starting, and often afterward on the road; but never saw anything to excite my suspicions. In settling matters with the landlord over night, I had arranged that we should be driven to the nearest town at which a post-chaise could be obtained. My resources were just as likely to hold out against the expenses of posting, where public conveyances could not be obtained, as against the expense of waiting privately at hotels, until the right coaches might start. According to my calculations, my money would last till we got to Scotland. After that, I had my watch, rings, shirtpin, and Mr. Batterbury, to help in replenishing my purse. Anxious, therefore, as I

was about other things, money matters, for once in a way, did not cause me the smallest uneasiness.