

CHAPTER XIII - THE CLARET JUG

I perceived but one change in the Lodger's miserable room, since I had seen it last.

A second table was set against one of the walls. Our boiling water for the tea was kept there, in a silver kettle heated by a spirit-lamp. I next observed a delicate little china vase which held the tea, and a finely-designed glass claret jug, with a silver cover. Other men, possessing that beautiful object, would have thought it worthy of the purest Bordeaux wine which the arts of modern adulteration permit us to drink. This man had filled the claret jug with water.

"All my valuable property, ostentatiously exposed to view," he said, in his bitterly facetious manner. "My landlord's property matches it on the big table."

The big table presented a coarse earthenware teapot; cups and saucers with pieces chipped out of them; a cracked milk jug; a tumbler which served as a sugar basin; and an old vegetable dish, honored by holding delicate French sweet-meats for the first time since it had left the shop.

My deaf friend, in boisterously good spirits, pointed backwards and forwards between the precious and the worthless objects on the two tables, as if he saw a prospect that delighted him.

"I don't believe the man lives," he said, "who enjoys Contrast as I do.--What do you want now?"

This question was addressed to Gloody, who had just entered the room. He touched the earthenware teapot. His master answered: "Let it alone."

"I make the tea at other times," the man persisted, looking at me.

"What does he say? Write it down for me, Mr. Roylake. I beg you will write it down."

There was anger in his eyes as he made that request. I took his book, and wrote the words--harmless words, surely? He read them, and turned savagely to his unfortunate servant.

"In the days when you were a ruffian in the prize-ring, did the other men's fists beat all the brains out of your head? Do you think you can make tea that is fit for Mr. Roylake to drink?"

He pointed to an open door, communicating with another bedroom. Gloody's eyes rested steadily on Cristel: she failed to notice him, being occupied at the moment in replacing the pin of a brooch which had slipped out of her dress. The man withdrew into the second bedroom, and softly closed the door.

Our host recovered his good humor. He took a wooden stool, and seated himself by Cristel.

"Borrowed furniture," he said, "as well as borrowed tea-things. What a debt of obligation I owe to your excellent father. How quiet you are, dear girl. Do you regret having followed the impulse which made you kindly offer to drink tea with us?" He suddenly turned to me. "Another proof, Mr. Roylake, of the sisterly interest that she feels in you; she can't hear of your coming to my room, without wanting to be with you. Ah, you possess the mysterious attractions which fascinate the sex. One of these days, some woman will love you as never man was loved yet." He addressed himself again to Cristel. "Still out of spirits? I dare say you are tired of waiting for your tea. No? You have had tea already? It's Gloody's fault; he ought to have told me that seven o'clock was too late for you. The poor devil deserved that you should take no notice of him when he looked at you just now. Are you one of the few women who dislike an ugly man? Women in general, I can tell you, prefer ugly men. A handsome man matches them on their own ground, and they don't like that. 'We are so fond of our ugly husbands; they set us off to such advantage.' Oh, I don't report what they say; I speak the language in which they think.--Mr. Roylake, does it strike you that the Cur is a sad cynic? By-the-by, do you call me 'the Cur' (as I suggested) when you speak of me to other people--to Miss Cristel, for instance? My charming young friends, you both look shocked; you both shake your heads. Perhaps I am in one of my tolerant humors to-day; I see nothing disgraceful in being a Cur. He is a dog who represents different breeds. Very well, the English are a people who represent different breeds: Saxons, Normans, Danes. The consequence, in one case, is a great nation. The consequence, in the other case, is the cleverest member of the whole dog family--as you may find out for yourself if you will only teach him. Ha--how I am running on. My guests try to slip in a word or two, and can't find their opportunity. Enjoyment, Miss Cristel. Excitement, Mr. Roylake. For more than a year past, I have not luxuriated in the pleasures of society. I feel the social glow; I love the human family; I never, never, never was such a good man as I am now. Let vile

slang express my emotions: isn't it jolly?"

Cristel and I stopped him, at the same moment. We instinctively lifted our hands to our ears.

In his delirium of high spirits, he had burst through the invariable monotony of his articulation. Without the slightest gradation of sound, his voice broke suddenly into a screech, prolonged in its own discord until it became perfectly unendurable to hear. The effect that he had produced upon us was not lost on him. His head sank on his breast; horrid shudderings shook him without mercy; he said to himself not to us:

"I had forgotten I was deaf."

There was a whole world of misery in those simple words. Cristel kept her place, unmoved. I rose, and put my hand kindly on his shoulder. It was the best way I could devise of assuring him of my sympathy.

He looked up at me, in silence.

His book of leaves was on the table; he did once more, what he had already done at the spring. Instead of using the book as usual, he wrote in it himself, and then handed it to me.

"Let me spare your nerves a repetition of my deaf discord. Sight, smell, touch, taste--I would give them all to be able to hear. In reminding me of that vain aspiration, my infirmity revenges itself: my deafness is not accustomed to be forgotten. Well! I can be silently useful; I can make the tea."

He rose, and, taking the teapot with him, went to the table that had been placed against the wall. In that position, his back was turned towards us.

At the same time, I felt his book gently taken out of my hand. Cristel had been reading, while I read, over my shoulder. She wrote on the next blank leaf: "Shall I make the tea?"

"Now," she said to me, "notice what happens."

Following him, she touched his arm, and presented her request. He shook his head in token of refusal. She came back to her place by me.

"You expected that?" I said.

"Yes."

"Why did you ask me to notice his refusal?"

"Because I may want to remind you that he wouldn't let me make the tea."

"Mysteries, my dear?"

"Yes: mysteries."

"Not to be mentioned more particularly?"

"I will mention one of them more particularly. After the tea has been made, you may possibly feel me touch your knee under the table."

I was fool enough to smile at this, and wise enough afterwards to see in her face that I had made a mistake.

"What is your touch intended to mean?" I asked.

"It means, 'Wait,' she said."

My sense of humor was, by this time, completely held in check. That some surprise was in store for me, and that Cristel was resolved not to take me into her confidence, were conclusions at which I naturally arrived. I felt, and surely not without good cause, a little annoyed. The Lodger came back to us with the tea made. As he put the teapot on the table, he apologized to Cristel.

"Don't think me rude, in refusing your kind offer. If there is one thing I know I can do better than anybody else, that thing is making tea. Do you take sugar and milk, Mr. Roylake?"

I made the affirmative sign. He poured out the tea. When he had filled two cups, the supply was exhausted. Cristel and I noticed this. He saw it, and at once gratified our curiosity.

"It is a rule," he said, "with masters in the art of making tea, that one infusion ought never to be used twice. If we want any more, we will make more; and if you feel inclined to join us, Miss Cristel, we will fill the third cup."

What was there in this (I wondered) to make her turn pale? And why, after what he had just said, did I see her eyes willingly rest on him, for the first time in my experience? Entirely at a loss to understand her, I resignedly stirred my tea. On the point of tasting it next, felt her hand on my knee, under the table.

Bewildered as I was, I obeyed my instructions, and went on stirring my tea. Our host smiled.

"Your sugar takes a long time to melt," he said--and drank his tea. As he emptied the cup, the touch was taken off me. I followed his example.

In spite of his boasting, the tea was the worst I ever tasted. I should have thrown it out of the window, if they had offered us such nasty stuff at Trimley Deen. When I set down my cup, he asked facetiously if I wished him to brew any more. My negative answer was a masterpiece of strong expression, in the language of signs.

Instead of sending for Gloody to clear the table, he moved away the objects near him, so as to leave an empty space at his disposal.

"I ought perhaps to have hesitated, before I asked you to spend the evening with me," he said, speaking with a gentleness and amiability of manner, strongly in contrast with his behavior up to this time. "It is my misfortune, as you both well know, to be a check on conversation. I dare say you have asked yourselves: How is he going to amuse us, after tea? If you will allow me, I propose to amuse you by exhibiting the dexterity of my fingers and thumbs. Before I was deaf, I should have preferred the piano for this purpose. As it is, an inferior accomplishment must serve my turn."

He opened a cupboard in the wall, close by the second table, and returned with a pack of cards.

Cristel imitated the action of dealing cards for a game. "No," he said, "that is not the amusement which I have in view. Allow me to present myself in a new character. I am no longer the Lodger, and no longer the Cur. My new name is more honorable still--I am the Conjurer."

He shuffled the pack by pouring it backwards and forwards from one hand to the other, in a cascade of cards. The wonderful ease with which he did it prepared me for something worth seeing. Cristel's admiration of his dexterity expressed itself by a prolonged clapping of hands, and a strange uneasy laugh. As his excitement subsided, her agitation broke out. I saw the flush

again on her face, and the fiery brightness in her eyes. Once, when his attention was engaged, she stole a look at the door by which Gloody had left the room. Did this indicate another of the mysteries which, by her own confession, she had in preparation for me? My late experience had not inclined me favorably towards mysteries. I devoted my whole attention to the Conjuror.

Whether he chose the easiest examples of skill in sleight of hand is more than I know. I can only say that I never was more completely mystified by any professor of legerdemain on the public platform. After the performance of each trick, he asked leave to time himself by looking at his watch; being anxious to discover if he had lost his customary quickness of execution through recent neglect of the necessary practice.

Of Cristel's conduct, while he was amusing us, I can only say that it justified Mrs. Roylake's spiteful description of her as a bold girl. The more cleverly the tricks were performed, the more they seemed to annoy and provoke her.

"I hate being puzzled!" she said, addressing herself of course to me. "Yes, yes; his fingers are quicker than my eyes--I have heard that explanation before. When he has done one of his tricks, I want to know how he does it. Conjurors are people who ask riddles, and, when one can't guess them, refuse to say what the answer is. It's as bad as calling me a fool, to suppose that I like being deceived. Ah," she cried, with a shocking insolence of look and manner, "if our friend could only hear what I am saying!"

He had paused while she was speaking, observing her attentively. "Your face doesn't encourage me," he said, with a patience and courtesy of manner which it was impossible not to admire. "I am coming gradually to my greatest triumph; and I think I can surprise and please you."

He timed his last trick, and returned to the table placed against the wall.

"Excuse me for a moment," he resumed; "I am suffering as usual, after drinking tea. I so delight in it that the temptation to-night was more than I could resist. Tea disagrees with my weak stomach. It always produces thirst."

"What nonsense he talks!" Cristel exclaimed. "All mere fancy! He reminds me of the old song called 'The Nervous Man.' Do you know it, Mr. Roylake?"

In spite of my efforts to prevent her, she burst out with the first verse of a stupid comic song. Spared by his deafness from this infliction of vulgarity,

our host filled a tumbler from the water in the claret jug, and drank it.

As he set the tumbler down, we were startled by an accident in the next room. The floor was suddenly shaken by the sound of a heavy fall. The fall was followed by a groan which instantly brought me to my feet.

Although his infirmity made him unconscious of the groan, my friend felt the vibration of the floor, and saw me start up from my chair. He looked even more alarmed than I was, judging by the ghastly change that I saw in his color; and he reached the door of the second room as soon as I did. It is needless to say that I allowed him to enter first.

On the point of following him, I felt myself roughly pulled back. When I turned round, and saw Cristel, I did really and truly believe that she was mad. The furious impatience in her eyes, the frenzied strength of her grasp on my arm, would have led most other men to form the same conclusion.

"Come!" she cried. "No! not a word. There isn't a moment to lose." She dragged me across the room to the table on which the claret jug stood. She filled the tumbler from it, as he had filled the tumbler. The material of which the jug had been made was so solid (crystal, not glass as I had supposed) that the filling of the two tumblers emptied it. Cristel held the water out to me, gasping for breath, trembling as if she saw some frightful reptile before her instead of myself.

"Drink it," she said, "if you value your life!"

I should of course have found it perfectly easy to obey her, strange as her language was, if I had been in full possession of myself. Between distress and alarm, my mind (I suppose) had lost its balance. With or without a cause, I hesitated.

She crossed the room, and threw open the window which looked out on the river.

"You shan't die alone," she said. "If you don't drink it, I'll throw myself out!"

I drank from the tumbler to the last drop.

It was not water.

It had a taste which I can compare to no drink, and to no medicine, known to me. I thought of the other strange taste peculiar to the tea. At last, the

tremendous truth forced itself on my mind. The man in whom my boyish generosity had so faithfully believed had attempted my life.

Cristel took the tumbler from me. My poor angel clasped her free arm round my neck, and pressed her lips, in an ecstasy of joy, on my cheek. The next instant, she seized the claret jug, and dashed it into pieces on the floor. "Get the jug from his washhand-stand," she said. When I gave it to her, she poured some of the water upon the broken fragments of crystal scattered on the floor. I had put the jug back in its place, and was returning to Cristel, when the poisoner showed himself, entering from the servant's room.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "Gloody's name ought to be Glutton. An attack of giddiness, thoroughly well deserved. I have relieved him. You remember, Mr. Roylake, that I was once a surgeon--"

The broken claret jug caught his eye.

We have all read of men who were petrified by terror. Of the few persons who have really witnessed that spectacle, I am one. The utter stillness of him was really terrible to see. Cristel wrote in his book an excuse, no doubt prepared beforehand: "That fall in the next room frightened me, and I felt faint. I went to get some water from the jug you drank out of, and it slipped from my hand."

She placed those words under his eyes--she might just as well have shown them to the dog. A dead man, erect on his feet--so he looked to our eyes. So he still looked, when I took Cristel's arm, and led her out of that dreadful presence.

"Take me into the air!" she whispered.

A burst of tears relieved her, after the unutterable suspense that she had so bravely endured. When she was in some degree composed again, we walked gently up and down for a minute or two in the cool night air. "Don't speak to me," she said, as we stopped before her father's door. "I am not fit for it yet; I know what you feel." I pressed her to my heart, and let the embrace speak for me. She yielded to it, faintly sighing. "To-morrow?" I whispered. She bent her head, and left me.

Walking home through the wood, I became aware, little by little, that my thoughts were not under the customary control. Over and over again, I tried to review the events of that terrible evening, and failed. Fragments of other memories presented themselves--and then deserted me. Nonsense, absolute

nonsense, found its way into my mind next, and rose in idiotic words to my lips. I grew too lazy even to talk to myself. I strayed from the path. The mossy earth began to rise and sink under my feet, like the waters in a ground-swell at sea. I stood still, in a state of idiot-wonder. The ground suddenly rose right up to my face. I remember no more.

My first conscious exercise of my senses, when I revived, came to me by way of my ears. Leaden weights seemed to close my eyes, to fetter my movements, to silence my tongue, to paralyze my touch. But I heard a wailing voice, speaking close to me, so close that it might have been my own voice: I distinguished the words; I knew the tones.

"Oh, my master, my lord, who am I that I should live--and you die! and you die!"

Was it her warm young breath that quickened me with its vigorous life? I only know that the revival of my sense of touch did certainly spring from the contact of her lips, pressed to mine in the reckless abandonment of grief without hope. Her cry of joy, when my first sigh told her that I was still a living creature, ran through me like an electric shock. I opened my eyes; I held out my hand; I tried to help her when she raised my head, and set me against the tree under which I had been stretched helpless. With an effort I could call her by her name. Even that exhausted me. My mind was so weak that I should have believed her, if she had declared herself to be a spirit seen in a dream, keeping watch over me in the wood.

Wiser than I was, she snatched up my hat, ran on before me, and was lost in the darkness.

An interval, an unendurable interval, passed. She returned, having filled my hat from the spring. But for the exquisite coolness of the water falling on my face, trickling down my throat, I should have lost my senses again. In a few minutes more, I could take that dear hand, and hold it to me as if I was holding to my life. We could only see each other obscurely, and in that very circumstance (as we confessed to each other afterwards) we found the needful composure before we could speak.

"Cristel! what does it mean?"

"Poison," she answered. "And he has suffered too."

To my astonishment, there was no anger in her tone: she spoke of him as quietly as if she had been alluding to an innocent man.

"Do you mean that he has been at death's door, like me?"

"Yes, thank God--or I should never have found you here. Poor old Gloody came to us, in search of help. 'My master's in a swoon, and I can't bring him to.' Directly I heard that, I remembered that you had drunk what he had drunk. What had happened to him, must have happened to you. Don't ask me how long it was before I found you, and what I felt when I did find you. I do so want to enjoy my happiness! Only let me see you safely home, and I ask no more."

She helped me to rise, with the encouraging words which she might have used to a child. She put my arm in hers, and led me carefully along through the wood, as if I had been an old man.

Cristel had saved my life--but she would hear of no allusion to it. She knew how the poisoner had plotted to get rid of me--but nothing that I could say induced her to tell me how she had made the discovery. In view of Trimley Deen, my guardian angel dropped my arm.

"Go on," she said, "and let me see the servant let you in, before I run home."

If she had not been once more wiser than I was, I should have taken her with me to the house; I should have positively refused to let her go back by herself. Nothing that I could say or do had the slightest effect on her resolution. Does the man live who could have taken leave of her calmly, in my place? She tore herself away from me, with a sigh of bitterness that was dreadful to hear.

"Oh, my darling," I said, "do I distress you?"

"Horribly," she answered; "but you are not to blame."

Those were her farewell words. I called after her. I tried to follow her. She was lost to me in the darkness.