

CHAPTER XIV - GLOODY SETTLES THE ACCOUNT

A night of fever; a night, when I did slumber for a few minutes, of horrid dreams--this was what I might have expected, and this is what really happened. The fresh morning air, flowing through my open window, cooled and composed me; the mercy of sleep found me. When I woke, and looked at my watch, I was a new man. The hour was noon.

I rang my bell. The servant announced that a man was waiting to see me. "The same man, sir, who was found in the garden, looking at your flowers." I at once gave directions to have him shown up into my bedroom. The delay of dressing was more than I had patience to encounter. Unless I was completely mistaken, here was the very person whom I wanted to enlighten me.

Glody showed himself at the door, with a face ominously wretched, as well as ugly. I instantly thought of Cristel.

"If you bring me bad news," I said, "don't keep me waiting for it."

"It's nothing that need trouble You, sir. I'm dismissed from my master's service--that's all."

It was plainly not "all." Relieved even by that guarded reply, I pointed to a chair by the bedside.

"Do you believe that I mean well by you?" I asked.

"I do, sir, with all my heart."

"Then sit down, Glody, and make a clean breast of it."

He lifted his enormous fist, by way of emphasizing his answer.

"I was within a hair's breadth, sir, of striking him. If I hadn't kept my temper, I might have killed him."

"What did he do?"

"Flew into a furious rage. I don't complain of that; I daresay I deserved it. Please to excuse my getting up again. I can't look you in the face, and tell

you of it." He walked away to the window. "Even a poor devil, like me, does sometimes feel it when he is insulted. Mr. Roylake, he kicked me. Say no more about it, sir! I would never have mentioned it, if I hadn't had something else to tell you; only I don't know how." In this difficulty, he came back to my bedside. "Look here, sir! What I say is--that kick has wiped out the debt of thanks I owe him. Yes. I say the account between us two is settled now, on both sides. In two words, sir, if you mean to charge him before the magistrates with attempting your life, I'll take my Bible oath he did attempt it, and you may call me as your witness. There! Now it's out."

What his master had no doubt inferred, was what I saw plainly too. Cristel had saved my life, and had been directed how to do it by the poor fellow who had suffered in my cause.

"We will wait a little before we talk of setting the law in force," I said. "In the meantime, Gloody, I want you to tell me what you would tell the magistrate if I called you as a witness."

He considered a little. "The magistrate would put questions to me--wouldn't he, sir? Very good. You put questions to me, and I'll answer them to the best of my ability."

The investigation that followed was far too long and too wearisome to be related here. If I give the substance of it, I shall have done enough.

Sometimes when he was awake, and supposed that he was alone--sometimes when he was asleep and dreaming--the Cur had betrayed himself. (It was a paltry vengeance, I own, to gratify a malicious pleasure--as I did now--in thinking of him and speaking of him by the degrading name which his morbid humility had suggested. But are the demands of a man's dignity always paid in the ready money of prompt submission?) Anyway, it appeared that Gloody had heard enough, in the sleeping moments and the solitary moments of his master, to give him some idea of the jealous hatred with which the Cur regarded me. He had done his best to warn me, without actually betraying the man who had rescued him from starvation or the workhouse--and he had failed.

But his resolution to do me good service, in return for my kindness to him, far from being shaken, was confirmed by circumstances.

When his master returned to the chemical studies which have been already mentioned, Gloody was employed as assistant, to the extent of his limited capacity for making himself useful. He had no reason to suppose that I was

the object of any of the experiments, until the day before the tea-party. Then, he saw the dog enticed into the new cottage, and apparently killed by the administration of poison of some sort. After an interval, a dose of another kind was poured down the poor creature's throat, and he began to revive. A lapse of a quarter of an hour followed; the last dose was repeated; and the dog soon sprang to his feet again, as lively as ever. Gloody was thereupon told to set the animal free; and was informed at the same time that he would be instantly dismissed, if he mentioned to any living creature what he had just seen.

By what process he arrived at the suspicion that my safety might be threatened, by the experiment on the dog, he was entirely unable to explain.

"It was borne in on my mind, sir; and that's all I can tell you," he said. "I didn't dare speak to you about it; you wouldn't have believed me. Or, if you did believe me, you might have sent for the police. The one way of putting a stop to murdering mischief (if murdering mischief it might be) was to trust Miss Cristel. That she was fond of you--I don't mean any offence, sir--I pretty well guessed. That she was true as steel, and not easily frightened, I didn't need to guess; I knew it."

Gloody had done his best to prepare Cristel for the terrible confidence which he had determined to repose in her, and had not succeeded. What the poor girl must have suffered, I could but too readily understand, on recalling the startling changes in her look and manner when we met at the river-margin of the wood. She was pledged to secrecy, under penalty of ruining the man who was trying to save me; and to her presence of mind was trusted the whole responsibility of preserving my life. What a situation for a girl of eighteen!

"We made it out between us, sir, in two ways," Gloody proceeded. "First and foremost, she was to invite herself to tea. And, being at the table, she was to watch my master. Whatever she saw him drink, she was to insist on your drinking it too. You heard me ask leave to make the tea?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was one of the signals agreed on between us. When he sent me away, we were certain of what he had it in his mind to do."

"And when you looked at Miss Cristel, and she was too busy with her brooch to notice you, was that another signal?"

"It was, sir. When she handled her silver ornament, she told me that I might depend on her to forget nothing, and to be afraid of nothing."

I remembered the quiet firmness in her face, after the prayer that she had said in her own room. Her steady resolution no longer surprised me.

"Did you wonder, sir, what possessed her," Gloody went on, "when she burst out singing? That was a signal to me. We wanted him out of our way, while you were made to drink what he had drunk out of the jug."

"How did you know that he would not drink the whole contents of the jug?"

"You forget, sir, that I had seen the dog revived by two doses, given with a space of time between them."

I ought to have remembered this, after what he had already told me. My intelligence brightened a little as I went on.

"And your accident in the next room was planned, of course?" I said. "Do you think he saw through it? I should say, No; judging by his looks. He turned pale when he felt the floor shaken by your fall. For once in a way, he was honest--honestly frightened."

"I noticed the same thing, sir, when he picked me up, off the floor. A man who can change his complexion, at will, is a man we hav'n't heard of yet, Mr. Roylake."

I had been dressing for some time past; longing to see Cristel, it is needless to say.

"Is there anything more," I asked, "that I ought to know?"

"Only one thing, Mr. Roylake, that I can think of," Gloody replied. "I'm afraid it's Miss Cristel's turn next."

"What do you mean?"

"While the deaf man lodges at the cottage, he means mischief, and his eye is on Miss Cristel. Early this morning, sir, I happened to be at the boat-house. Somebody (I leave you to guess who it is) has stolen the oars."

I was dressed by this time, and so eager to get to the cottage, that I had already opened my door. What I had just heard brought me back into the

room. As a matter of course, we both suspected the same person of stealing the oars. Had we any proof to justify us?

Gloody at once acknowledged that we had no proof. "I happened to look at the boat," he said, "and I missed the oars. Oh, yes; I searched the boat-house. No oars! no oars!"

"And nothing more that you have forgotten, and ought to tell me?"

"Nothing, sir."

I left Gloody to wait my return; being careful to place him under the protection of the upper servants--who would see that he was treated with respect by the household generally.