

CHAPTER XVI - BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION

Twice, I looked into Toller's room during the remainder of the night, and found him sleeping. When the sun rose, I could endure the delay no longer. I woke him.

"What is it?" he asked peevishly.

"You must be the last person who saw Cristel," I answered. "I want to know all that you can tell me."

His anger completely mastered him; he burst out with a furious reply.

"It's you two--you my landlord, and him my lodger--who have driven Cristy away from her home. She said she would go, and she has gone. Get out of my place, sir! You ought to be ashamed to look at me."

It was useless to reason with him, and it was of vital importance to lose no time in instituting a search. After the reception I had met with, I took care to restore the key of the door leading into the new cottage, before I left him. It was his key; and the poor distracted old man might charge me with taking away his property next.

As I set forth on my way home, I found the new man-servant on the look-out.

His first words showed that he was acting under orders. He asked if I had found the young lady; and he next informed me that his master had revived some hours since, and "bore no malice." This outrageous assertion suddenly fired me with suspicion. I believed that the Cur had been acting a part when he threatened me with his pistol, and that he was answerable for the disappearance of Cristel. My first impulse now was to get the help of a lawyer.

The men at my stables were just stirring when I got home. In ten minutes more, I was driving to our town.

The substance of the professional opinion which I received has been already stated in these pages.

One among my answers to the many questions which my legal adviser put

to me led him to a conclusion that made my heart ache. He was of opinion that my brief absence, while I was taking that fatal "breath of air" on the banks of the river, had offered to Cristel her opportunity of getting away without discovery. "Her old father," the lawyer said, "was no doubt in his bed, and you yourself found nobody watching, in the neighborhood of the cottage."

"Employ me in some way!" I burst out. "I can't endure my life, if I'm not helping to trace Cristel."

He was most kind. "I understand," he said. "Try what you can get those two ladies to tell you--and you may help us materially."

Mrs. Roylake was nearest to me. I appealed to her womanly sympathies, and was answered by tears. I made another attempt; I said I was willing to believe that she meant well, and that I should be sorry to offend her. She got up, and indignantly left the room.

I went to Lady Rachel next.

She was at home, but the servant returned to me with an excuse: her ladyship was particularly engaged. I sent a message upstairs, asking when I might hope to be received. The servant was charged with the delivery of another excuse: her ladyship would write. After waiting at home for hours I was foolish enough to write, on my side; and (how could I help it?) to express myself strongly. The she-socialist's reply is easy to remember: "Dear Mr. Roylake, when you have recovered your temper, you will hear from me again."

Even my stepmother gained by comparison with this.

To rest, and do nothing, was to exercise a control over myself of which I was perfectly incapable. I went back to the cottage. Having no hopeful prospect in any other quarter, I persisted in believing that Toller must have seen something or heard something that might either help me, or suggest an idea to my legal adviser.

On entering the kitchen, I found the door of communication wide open, and the new servant established in the large armchair.

"I'm waiting for my master, sir."

He had got over his fright, and had recovered his temper. The respectful side

of him was turned to me again.

"Your master is with Mr. Toller?"

"Yes, sir."

What I felt, amply justified the lawyer in having exacted a promise from me to keep carefully out of the Cur's presence. "You might knock him on the head again, Mr. Roylake, and might hit a little too hard next time."

But I had an idea of my own. I said, as if speaking to myself: "I would give a five pound note to know what is going on upstairs."

"I shall be glad to earn it, sir," the fellow said. "If I make a clean breast of what I know already, and if I tell you to-morrow what I can find out--will it be worth the money?"

I began to feel degraded in my own estimation. But I nodded to him, for all that.

"I am the innocent cause, sir, of what happened last night," he coolly resumed. "We kept a look-out on the road and saw you, though you didn't see us. But my master never suspected you (for reasons which he kept to himself) of making use of the boat. I reminded him that one of us had better have an eye on the slip of pathway, between the cottage and the river. This led to his sending me to the boathouse--and you know what happened afterwards. My master, as I suppose, is pumping Mr. Toller. That's all, sir, for to-night. When may I have the honor of expecting you to-morrow morning?"

I appointed an hour, and left the place.

As I entered the wood again, I found a man on the watch. He touched his hat, and said: "I'm the clerk, sir. Your gamekeeper is wanted for his own duties to-night; he will relieve me in the morning."

I went home with my mind in a ferment of doubt. If I could believe the servant, the Cur was as innocent of the abduction of Cristel as I was. But could I trust the servant?

The events of the next morning altered the whole complexion of affairs fatally for the worse.

Arriving at the cottage, I found a man prostrate on the road, dead drunk-- and the Cur's servant looking at him.

"May I ask something?" the man said. "Have you been having my master watched?"

"Yes."

"Bad news, in that case, sir. Your man there is a drunken vagabond; and my master has gone to London by the first train."

When I had recovered the shock, I denied, for the sake of my own credit, that the brute on the road could be a servant of mine.

"Why not, sir?"

"Do you think I should have been kept in ignorance of it, if my gamekeeper had been a drunkard? His fellow servants would have warned me."

The man smiled. "I'm afraid, sir, you don't know much about servants. It's a point of honor among us never to tell tales of each other to our masters."

I began to wish that I had never left Germany. The one course to take now was to tell the lawyer what had happened. I turned away to get back, and drive at once to the town. The servant remembered, what I had forgotten-- the five pound note.

"Wait and hear my report, sir," he suggested.

The report informed me: First, that Mr. Toller was at the mill, and had been there for some time past. Secondly: that the Cur had been alone, for a while, on Mr. Toller's side of the cottage, in Mr. Toiler's absence--for what purpose his servant had not discovered. Thirdly: that the Cur had returned to his room in a hurry, and had packed a few things in his travelling-bag. Fourthly: that he had ordered the servant to follow, with his luggage, in a fly which he would send from the railway station, and to wait at the London terminus for further orders. Fifthly, and lastly: that it was impossible to say whether the drunkenness of the gamekeeper was due to his own habits, or to temptation privately offered by the very person whose movements he had been appointed to watch.

I paid the money. The man pocketed it, and paid me a compliment in return: "I wish I was your servant, sir."