

CHAPTER XVII - UTTER FAILURE

My lawyer took a serious view of the disaster that had overtaken us. He would trust nobody but his head clerk to act in my interests, after the servant had been followed to the London terminus, and when it became a question of matching ourselves against the deadly cunning of the man who had escaped us.

Provided with money, and with a letter to the police authorities in London, the head clerk went to the station. I accompanied him to point out the servant (without being allowed to show myself), and then returned to wait for telegraphic information at the lawyer's office.

This was the first report transmitted by the telegram:

The Cur had been found waiting for his servant at the terminus; and the two had been easily followed to the railway hotel close by. The clerk had sent his letter of introduction to the police--had consulted with picked men who joined him at the hotel--had given the necessary instructions--and would return to us by the last train in the evening.

In two days, the second telegram arrived.

Our man had been traced to the Thames Yacht Club in Albemarle Street--had consulted a yachting list in the hall--and had then travelled to the Isle of Wight. There, he had made inquiries at the Squadron Yacht Club, and the Victoria Yacht Club--and had returned to London, and the railway hotel.

The third telegram announced the utter destruction of all our hopes. As far as Marseilles, the Cur had been followed successfully, and in that city the detective officers had lost sight of him.

My legal adviser insisted on having the men sent to him to explain themselves. Nothing came of it but one more repetition of an old discovery. When the detective police force encounters intelligence instead of stupidity, in seven cases out of ten the detective police force is beaten.

There were still two persons at our disposal. Lady Rachel might help us, as I believed, if she chose to do it. As for old Toller, I suggested (on reflection) that the lawyer should examine him. The lawyer declined to waste any more of my money. I called again on Lady Rachel. This time, I was let in. I found

the noble lady smoking a cigarette and reading a French novel.

"This is going to be a disagreeable interview," she said. "Let us get it over, Mr. Roylake, as soon as possible. Tell me what you want--and speak as freely as if you were in the company of a man."

I obeyed her to the letter; and I got these replies:

"Yes; I did have a talk, in your best interests, with Miss Toller. She is as sensible as she is charming, and as good as she is sensible. We entirely agreed that the sacrifice must be on her side; and that it was due to her own self-respect to prevent a gentleman of your rank from ruining himself by marrying a miller's daughter."

The next reply was equally free from the smallest atom of sympathy on Lady Rachel's part.

"You are quite right--your deaf man was at his window when I went by. We recognized each other and had a long talk. If I remember correctly, he said you knew of his reasons for concealing his name. I gave my promise (being a matter of perfect indifference to me) to conceal it too. One thing led to another, and I discovered that you were his hated rival in the affections of Miss Toller. I proved worthy of his confidence in me. That is to say, I told him that Mrs. Roylake and I would be only too glad, as representing your interests, if he succeeded in winning the young lady. I asked if he had any plans. He said one of his plans had failed. What it was, and how it had failed, he did not mention. I asked if he could devise nothing else. He said, "Yes, if I was not a poor man." In my place, you would have offered, as I did, to find the money if the plan was approved of. He produced some manuscript story of an abduction of a lady, which he had written to amuse himself. The point of it was that the lover successfully carried away the lady, by means of a boat, while the furious father's attention was absorbed in watching the high road. It seemed to me to be a new idea. "If you think you can carry it out," I said, "send your estimate of expenses to me and Mrs. Roylake, and we will subscribe." We received the estimate. But the plan has failed, and the man is off. I am quite certain myself that Miss Toller has done what she promised to do. Wherever she may be now, she has sacrificed herself for your sake. When you have got over it, you will marry my sister. I wish you good morning."

Between Lady Rachel's hard insolence, and Mrs. Roylake's sentimental hypocrisy, I was in such a state of irritation that I left Trimley Deen the next morning, to find forgetfulness, as I rashly supposed, in the gay world of

London.

I had been trying my experiment for something like three weeks, and was beginning to get heartily weary of it, when I received a letter from the lawyer.

"Dear Sir,--Your odd tenant, old Mr. Toller, has died suddenly of rupture of a blood-vessel on the brain, as the doctor thinks. There is to be an inquest, as I need hardly tell you. What do you say to having the report of the proceedings largely copied in the newspapers? If it catches his daughter's eye, important results may follow."

To speculate in this way on the impulse which might take its rise in my poor girl's grief--to surprise her, as it were, at her father's grave--revolted me. I directed the lawyer to take no steps whatever in the matter, and to pay the poor old fellow's funeral expenses, on my account. He had died intestate. The law took care of his money until his daughter appeared; and the mill, being my property, I gave to Toller's surviving partner--our good Gloody.

And what did I do next? I went away travelling; one of the wretchedest men who ever carried his misery with him to foreign countries. Go where I might on the continent of Europe, the dreadful idea pursued me that Cristel might be dead.