

CHAPTER IX.

THE next day, Mr. Troy (taking Robert Moody with him as a valuable witness) rang the bell at the mean and dirty lodging-house in which Old Sharon received the clients who stood in need of his advice.

They were led up stairs to a back room on the second floor of the house. Entering the room, they discovered through a thick cloud of tobacco smoke, a small, fat, bald-headed, dirty, old man, in an arm-chair, robed in a tattered flannel dressing-gown, with a short pipe in his mouth, a pug-dog on his lap, and a French novel in his hands.

"Is it business?" asked Old Sharon, speaking in a hoarse, asthmatical voice, and fixing a pair of bright, shameless, black eyes attentively on the two visitors.

"It is business," Mr. Troy answered, looking at the old rogue who had disgraced an honorable profession, as he might have looked at a reptile which had just risen rampant at his feet. "What is your fee for a consultation?"

"You give me a guinea, and I'll give you half an hour." With this reply Old Sharon held out his unwashed hand across the rickety ink-splashed table at which he was sitting.

Mr. Troy would not have touched him with the tips of his own fingers for

a thousand pounds. He laid the guinea on the table.

Old Sharon burst into a fierce laugh--a laugh strangely accompanied by a frowning contraction of his eyebrows, and a frightful exhibition of the whole inside of his mouth. "I'm not clean enough for you--eh?" he said, with an appearance of being very much amused. "There's a dirty old man described in this book that is a little like me." He held up his French novel. "Have you read it? A capital story--well put together. Ah, you haven't read it? You have got a pleasure to come. I say, do you mind tobacco-smoke? I think faster while I smoke--that's all."

Mr. Troy's respectable hand waved a silent permission to smoke, given under dignified protest.

"All right," said Old Sharon. "Now, get on."

He laid himself back in his chair, and puffed out his smoke, with eyes lazily half closed, like the eyes of the pug-dog on his lap. At that moment, indeed there was a curious resemblance between the two. They both seemed to be preparing themselves, in the same idle way, for the same comfortable nap.

Mr. Troy stated the circumstances under which the five hundred pound note had disappeared, in clear and consecutive narrative. When he had done, Old Sharon suddenly opened his eyes. The pug-dog suddenly opened his eyes. Old Sharon looked hard at Mr. Troy. The pug looked hard at Mr.

Troy. Old Sharon spoke. The pug growled.

"I know who you are--you're a lawyer. Don't be alarmed! I never saw you before; and I don't know your name. What I do know is a lawyer's statement of facts when I hear it. Who's this?" Old Sharon looked inquisitively at Moody as he put the question.

Mr. Troy introduced Moody as a competent witness, thoroughly acquainted with the circumstances, and ready and willing to answer any questions relating to them. Old Sharon waited a little, smoking hard and thinking hard. "Now, then!" he burst out in his fiercely sudden way. "I'm going to get to the root of the matter."

He leaned forward with his elbows on the table, and began his examination of Moody. Heartily as Mr. Troy despised and disliked the old rogue, he listened with astonishment and admiration--literally extorted from him by the marvelous ability with which the questions were adapted to the end in view. In a quarter of an hour Old Sharon had extracted from the witness everything, literally everything down to the smallest detail, that Moody could tell him. Having now, in his own phrase, "got to the root of the matter," he relighted his pipe with a grunt of satisfaction, and laid himself back in his old armchair.

"Well?" said Mr. Troy. "Have you formed your opinion?"

"Yes; I've formed my opinion."

"What is it?"

Instead of replying, Old Sharon winked confidentially at Mr. Troy, and put a question on his side.

"I say! is a ten-pound note much of an object to you?"

"It depends on what the money is wanted for," answered Mr. Troy.

"Look here," said Old Sharon; "I give you an opinion for your guinea; but, mind this, it's an opinion founded on hearsay--and you know as a lawyer what that is worth. Venture your ten pounds--in plain English, pay me for my time and trouble in a baffling and difficult case--and I'll give you an opinion founded on my own experience."

"Explain yourself a little more clearly," said Mr. Troy. "What do you guarantee to tell us if we venture the ten pounds?"

"I guarantee to name the person, or the persons, on whom the suspicion really rests. And if you employ me after that, I guarantee (before you pay me a halfpenny more) to prove that I am right by laying my hand on the thief."

"Let us have the guinea opinion first," said Mr. Troy.

Old Sharon made another frightful exhibition of the whole inside of his mouth; his laugh was louder and fiercer than ever. "I like you!" he said to Mr. Troy, "you are so devilish fond of your money. Lord! how rich you must be! Now listen. Here's the guinea opinion: Suspect, in this case, the very last person on whom suspicion could possibly fall."

Moody, listening attentively, started, and changed color at those last words. Mr. Troy looked thoroughly disappointed and made no attempt to conceal it.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"All?" retorted the cynical vagabond. "You're a pretty lawyer! What more can I say, when I don't know for certain whether the witness who has given me my information has misled me or not? Have I spoken to the girl and formed my own opinion? No! Have I been introduced among the servants

(as errand-boy, or to clean the boots and shoes, or what not), and have I formed my own judgement of them? No! I take your opinions for granted, and I tell you how I should set to work myself if they were my opinions too--and that's a guinea's-worth, a devilish good guinea's-worth to a rich man like you!"

Old Sharon's logic produced a certain effect on Mr. Troy, in spite of himself. It was smartly put from his point of view--there was no denying that.

"Even if I consented to your proposal," he said, "I should object to your annoying the young lady with impertinent questions, or to your being introduced as a spy into a respectable house."

Old Sharon doubled his dirty fists and drummed with them on the rickety table in a comical frenzy of impatience while Mr. Troy was speaking.

"What the devil do you know about my way of doing my business?" he burst out when the lawyer had done. "One of us two is talking like a born idiot--and (mind this) it isn't me. Look here! Your young lady goes out for a walk, and she meets with a dirty, shabby old beggar--I look like a shabby old beggar already, don't I? Very good. This dirty old wretch whines and whimpers and tells a long story, and gets sixpence out of the girl--and knows her by that time, inside and out, as well as if he had made her--and, mark! hasn't asked her a single question, and, instead of annoying her, has made her happy in the performance of a charitable action. Stop a bit! I haven't done with you yet. Who blacks your boots and shoes? Look here!" He pushed his pug-dog off his lap, dived under the table, appeared again with an old boot and a bottle of blackening, and set to work with tigerish activity. "I'm going out for a walk, you know, and I may as well make myself smart." With that announcement, he began to sing over his work--a song of sentiment, popular in England in the early part of the present century--"She's all my fancy painted her; she's lovely, she's divine; but her heart it is another's; and it never can be mine! Too-ral-loo-ral-loo'. I like a love-song. Brush away! brush

away! till I see my own pretty face in the blacking. Hey! Here's a nice, harmless, jolly old man! sings and jokes over his work, and makes the kitchen quite cheerful. What's that you say? He's a stranger, and don't talk to him too freely. You ought to be ashamed of yourself to speak in that way of a poor old fellow with one foot in the grave. Mrs. Cook will give him a nice bit of dinner in the scullery; and John Footman will look out an old coat for him. And when he's heard everything he wants to hear, and doesn't come back again the next day to his work--what do they think of it in the servants' hall? Do they say, 'We've had a spy among us!' Yah! you know better than that, by this time. The cheerful old man has been run over in the street, or is down with the fever, or has turned up his toes in the parish dead-house--that's what they say in the servants' hall. Try me in your own kitchen, and see if your servants take me for a spy. Come, come, Mr. Lawyer! out with your ten pounds, and don't waste any more precious time about it!"

"I will consider and let you know," said Mr. Troy.

Old Sharon laughed more ferociously than ever, and hobbled round the table in a great hurry to the place at which Moody was sitting. He laid one hand on the steward's shoulder, and pointed derisively with the other to Mr. Troy.

"I say, Mr. Silent-man! Bet you five pounds I never hear of that lawyer again!"

Silently attentive all through the interview (except when he was answering questions), Moody only replied in the fewest words. "I don't bet," was all he said. He showed no resentment at Sharon's familiarity, and he appeared to find no amusement in Sharon's extraordinary talk. The old vagabond seemed actually to produce a serious impression on him! When Mr. Troy set the example of rising to go, he still kept his seat, and looked at the lawyer as if he regretted leaving the atmosphere of tobacco smoke reeking in the dirty room.

"Have you anything to say before we go?" Mr. Troy asked.

Moody rose slowly and looked at Old Sharon. "Not just now, sir," he replied, looking away again, after a moment's reflection.

Old Sharon interpreted Moody's look and Moody's reply from his own peculiar point of view. He suddenly drew the steward away into a corner of the room.

"I say!" he began, in a whisper. "Upon your solemn word of honor, you know--are you as rich as the lawyer there?"

"Certainly not."

"Look here! It's half price to a poor man. If you feel like coming back, on your own account--five pounds will do from you. There! there! Think of it!--think of it!"

"Now, then!" said Mr. Troy, waiting for his companion, with the door open in his hand. He looked back at Sharon when Moody joined him. The old vagabond was settled again in his armchair, with his dog in his lap, his pipe in his mouth, and his French novel in his hand; exhibiting exactly the picture of frowzy comfort which he had presented when his visitors first entered the room.

"Good-day," said Mr. Troy, with haughty condescension.

"Don't interrupt me!" rejoined Old Sharon, absorbed in his novel.

"You've had your guinea's worth. Lord! what a lovely book this is! Don't interrupt me!"

"Impudent scoundrel!" said Mr. Troy, when he and Moody were in the street again. "What could my friend mean by recommending him? Fancy his expecting me to trust him with ten pounds! I consider even the guinea completely thrown away."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Moody, "I don't quite agree with you there."

"What! you don't mean to tell me you understand that oracular sentence of his--'Suspect the very last person on whom suspicion could possibly fall.' Rubbish!"

"I don't say I understand it, sir. I only say it has set me thinking."

"Thinking of what? Do your suspicions point to the thief?"

"If you will please to excuse me, Mr. Troy, I should like to wait a while before I answer that."

Mr. Troy suddenly stood still, and eyed his companion a little distrustfully.

"Are you going to turn detective-policeman on your own account?" he asked.

"There's nothing I won't turn to, and try, to help Miss Isabel in this matter," Moody answered, firmly. "I have saved a few hundred pounds in Lady Lydiard's service, and I am ready to spend every farthing of it, if I can only discover the thief."

Mr. Troy walked on again. "Miss Isabel seems to have a good friend in you," he said. He was (perhaps unconsciously) a little offended by the independent tone in which the steward spoke, after he had himself engaged to take the vindication of the girl's innocence into his own hands.

"Miss Isabel has a devoted servant and slave in me!" Moody answered, with passionate enthusiasm.

"Very creditable; I haven't a word to say against it," Mr. Troy rejoined. "But don't forget that the young lady has other devoted friends besides you. I am her devoted friend, for instance--I have promised to serve her, and I mean to keep my word. You will excuse me for adding that my experience and discretion are quite as likely to be useful to her as your enthusiasm. I know the world well enough to be careful in trusting strangers. It will do you no harm, Mr. Moody, to follow my example."

Moody accepted his reproof with becoming patience and resignation. "If you have anything to propose, sir, that will be of service to Miss Isabel," he said, "I shall be happy if I can assist you in the humblest capacity."

"And if not?" Mr. Troy inquired, conscious of having nothing to propose as he asked the question.

"In that case, sir, I must take my own course, and blame nobody but myself if it leads me astray."

Mr. Troy said no more: he parted from Moody at the next turning.

Pursuing the subject privately in his own mind, he decided on taking the earliest opportunity of visiting Isabel at her aunt's house, and on warning her, in her future intercourse with Moody, not to trust too much

to the steward's discretion. "I haven't a doubt," thought the lawyer,
"of what he means to do next. The infatuated fool is going back to Old
Sharon!"