

## CHAPTER XII.

THE conference between Lady Lydiard and Mr. Troy, on the way back to London, led to some practical results.

Hearing from her legal adviser that the inquiry after the missing money was for a moment at a standstill, Lady Lydiard made one of those bold suggestions with which she was accustomed to startle her friends in cases of emergency. She had heard favorable reports of the extraordinary ingenuity of the French police; and she now proposed sending to Paris for assistance, after first consulting her nephew, Mr. Felix Sweetsir.

"Felix knows Paris as well as he knows London," she remarked. "He is an idle man, and it is quite likely that he will relieve us of all trouble by taking the matter into his own hands. In any case, he is sure to know who are the right people to address in our present necessity. What do you say?"

Mr. Troy, in reply, expressed his doubts as to the wisdom of employing foreigners in a delicate investigation which required an accurate knowledge of English customs and English character. Waiving this objection, he approved of the idea of consulting her Ladyship's nephew.

"Mr. Sweetsir is a man of the world," he said. "In putting the case before him, we are sure to have it presented to us from a new point of view." Acting on this favorable expression of opinion, Lady Lydiard wrote to her nephew. On the day after the visit to Miss Pink, the proposed council of three was held at Lady Lydiard's house.

Felix, never punctual at keeping an appointment, was even later than usual on this occasion. He made his apologies with his hand pressed upon his forehead, and his voice expressive of the languor and discouragement of a suffering man.

"The beastly English climate is telling on my nerves," said Mr. Sweetsir--"the horrid weight of the atmosphere, after the exhilarating air of Paris; the intolerable dirt and dullness of London, you know. I was in bed, my dear aunt, when I received your letter. You may imagine the completely demoralised?? state I was in, when I tell you of the effect which the news of the robbery produced on me. I fell back on my pillow, as if I had been shot. Your Ladyship should really be a little more careful in communicating these disagreeable surprises to a sensitively-organised man. Never mind--my valet is a perfect treasure; he brought me some drops of ether on a lump of sugar. I said, 'Alfred' (his name is Alfred), 'put me into my clothes!' Alfred put me in. I assure you it reminded me of my young days, when I was put into my first pair of trousers. Has Alfred forgotten anything? Have I got my braces on? Have I come out in my shirt-sleeves? Well, dear aunt;--well, Mr. Troy!--what can I say? What can I do?"

Lady Lydiard, entirely without sympathy for nervous suffering, nodded to the lawyer. "You tell him," she said.

"I believe I speak for her Ladyship," Mr. Troy began, "when I say that

we should like to hear, in the first place, how the whole case strikes you, Mr. Sweetsir?"

"Tell it me all over again," said Felix.

Patient Mr. Troy told it all over again--and waited for the result.

"Well?" said Felix.

"Well?" said Mr. Troy. "Where does the suspicion of robbery rest in your opinion? You look at the theft of the bank-note with a fresh eye."

"You mentioned a clergyman just now," said Felix. "The man, you know, to whom the money was sent. What was his name?"

"The Reverend Samuel Bradstock."

"You want me to name the person whom I suspect?"

"Yes, if you please," said Mr. Troy.

"I suspect the Reverend Samuel Bradstock," said Felix.

"If you have come here to make stupid jokes," interposed Lady Lydiard, "you had better go back to your bed again. We want a serious opinion."

"You have a serious opinion," Felix coolly rejoined. "I never was more in earnest in my life. Your Ladyship is not aware of the first principle to be adopted in cases of suspicion. One proceeds on what I will call the exhaustive system of reasoning. Thus: Does suspicion point to the honest servants downstairs? No. To your Ladyship's adopted daughter? Appearances are against the poor girl; but you know her better than to trust to appearances. Are you suspicious of Moody? No. Of Hardyman--who was in the house at the time? Ridiculous! But I was in the house at the time, too. Do you suspect Me? Just so! That idea is ridiculous, too. Now let us sum up. Servants, adopted daughter, Moody, Hardyman, Sweetsir--all beyond suspicion. Who is left? The Reverend Samuel Bradstock."

This ingenious exposition of "the exhaustive system of reasoning," failed to produce any effect on Lady Lydiard. "You are wasting our time," she said sharply. "You know as well as I do that you are talking nonsense."

"I don't," said Felix. "Taking the gentlemanly professions all round, I know of no men who are so eager to get money, and who have so few scruples about how they get it, as the parsons. Where is there a man in any other profession who perpetually worries you for money?--who holds the bag under your nose for money?--who sends his clerk round from door to door to beg a few shillings of you, and calls it an 'Easter offering'? The parson does all this. Bradstock is a parson. I put it logically. Bowl me over, if you can."

Mr. Troy attempted to "bowl him over," nevertheless. Lady Lydiard wisely interposed.

"When a man persists in talking nonsense," she said, "silence is the best answer; anything else only encourages him." She turned to Felix. "I have a question to ask you," she went on. "You will either give me a serious reply, or wish me good-morning." With this brief preface, she made her inquiry as to the wisdom and possibility of engaging the services of the French police.

Felix took exactly the view of the matter which had been already expressed by Mr. Troy. "Superior in intelligence," he said, "but not superior in courage, to the English police. Capable of performing wonders on their own ground and among their own people. But, my dear aunt, the two most dissimilar nations on the face of the earth are the English and the French. The French police may speak our language--but they are incapable of understanding our national character and our national manners. Set them to work on a private inquiry in the city of Peking--and they would get on in time with the Chinese people. Set them to work in the city of London--and the English people would remain, from first to last, the same impenetrable mystery to them. In my belief the London Sunday would be enough of itself to drive them back to Paris in despair. No balls, no concerts, no theaters, not even a museum or a picture-gallery open; every shop shut up but the gin-shop; and nothing moving but the church bells and the men who sell the penny ices.

Hundreds of Frenchmen come to see me on their first arrival in England. Every man of them rushes back to Paris on the second Saturday of his visit, rather than confront the horrors of a second Sunday in London! However, you can try it if you like. Send me a written abstract of the case, and I will forward it to one of the official people in the Rue Jerusalem, who will do anything he can to oblige me. Of course," said Felix, turning to Mr. Troy, "some of you have got the number of the lost bank-note? If the thief has tried to pass it in Paris, my man may be of some use to you."

"Three of us have got the number of the note," answered Mr. Troy; "Miss Isabel Miller, Mr. Moody, and myself."

"Very good," said Felix. "Send me the number, with the abstract of the case. Is there anything else I can do towards recovering the money?" he asked, turning to his aunt. "There is one lucky circumstance in connection with this loss--isn't there? It has fallen on a person who is rich enough to take it easy. Good heavens! suppose it had been my loss!"

"It has fallen doubly on me," said Lady Lydiard; "and I am certainly not rich enough to take it that easy. The money was destined to a charitable purpose; and I have felt it my duty to pay it again."

Felix rose and approached his aunt's chair with faltering steps, as became a suffering man. He took Lady Lydiard's hand and kissed it with

enthusiastic admiration.

"You excellent creature!" he said. "You may not think it, but you reconcile me to human nature. How generous! how noble! I think I'll go to bed again, Mr. Troy, if you really don't want any more of me. My head feels giddy and my legs tremble under me. It doesn't matter; I shall feel easier when Alfred has taken me out of my clothes again. God bless you, my dear aunt! I never felt so proud of being related to you as I do to-day. Good-morning Mr. Troy! Don't forget the abstract of the case; and don't trouble yourself to see me to the door. I dare say I shan't tumble downstairs; and, if I do, there's the porter in the hall to pick me up again. Envious porter! as fat as butter and as idle as a pig! Au revoir! au revoir!" He kissed his hand, and drifted feebly out of the room. Sweet's one might say, in a state of eclipse; but still the serviceable Sweet's, who was never consulted in vain by the fortunate people privileged to call him friend!

"Is he really ill, do you think?" Mr. Troy asked.

"My nephew has turned fifty," Lady Lydiard answered, "and he persists in living as if he was a young man. Every now and then Nature says to him, 'Felix, you are old!' And Felix goes to bed, and says it's his nerves."

"I suppose he is to be trusted to keep his word about writing to Paris?" pursued the lawyer.

"Oh, yes! He may delay doing it but he will do it. In spite of his lackadaisical manner, he has moments of energy that would surprise you. Talking of surprises, I have something to tell you about Moody. Within the last day or two there has been a marked change in him--a change for the worse."

"You astonish me, Lady Lydiard! In what way has Moody deteriorated?"

"You shall hear. Yesterday was Friday. You took him out with you, on business, early in the morning."

Mr. Troy bowed, and said nothing. He had not thought it desirable to mention the interview at which Old Sharon had cheated him of his guinea.

"In the course of the afternoon," pursued Lady Lydiard, "I happened to want him, and I was informed that Moody had gone out again. Where had he gone? Nobody knew. Had he left word when he would be back? He had left no message of any sort. Of course, he is not in the position of an ordinary servant. I don't expect him to ask permission to go out. But I do expect him to leave word downstairs of the time at which he is likely to return. When he did come back, after an absence of some hours, I naturally asked for an explanation. Would you believe it? he simply informed me that he had been away on business of his own; expressed no regret, and offered no explanation--in short, spoke as if he was an independent gentleman. You may not think it, but I kept my temper. I



merely remarked that I hoped it would not happen again. He made me a bow, and he said, 'My business is not completed yet, my Lady. I cannot guarantee that it may not call me away again at a moment's notice.' What do you think of that? Nine people out of ten would have given him warning to leave their service. I begin to think I am a wonderful woman--I only pointed to the door. One does hear sometimes of men's brains softening in the most unexpected manner. I have my suspicions of Moody's brains, I can tell you."

Mr. Troy's suspicions took a different direction: they pointed along the line of streets which led to Old Sharon's lodgings. Discreetly silent as to the turn which his thoughts had taken, he merely expressed himself as feeling too much surprised to offer any opinion at all.

"Wait a little," said Lady Lydiard, "I haven't done surprising you yet. You have been a boy here in a page's livery, I think? Well, he is a good boy; and he has gone home for a week's holiday with his friends. The proper person to supply his place with the boots and shoes and other small employments, is of course the youngest footman, a lad only a few years older than himself. What do you think Moody does? Engages a stranger, with the house full of idle men-servants already, to fill the page's place. At intervals this morning I heard them wonderfully merry in the servants hall--so merry that the noise and laughter found its way upstairs to the breakfast-room. I like my servants to be in good spirits; but it certainly did strike me that they were getting beyond reasonable limits. I questioned my maid, and was informed that the noise

was all due to the jokes of the strangest old man that ever was seen. In other words, to the person whom my steward had taken it on himself to engage in the page's absence. I spoke to Moody on the subject. He answered in an odd, confused way, that he had exercised his discretion to the best of his judgment and that (if I wished it), he would tell the old man to keep his good spirits under better control. I asked him how he came to hear of the man. He only answered, 'By accident, my Lady'--and not one more word could I get out of him, good or bad. Moody engages the servants, as you know; but on every other occasion he has invariably consulted me before an engagement was settled. I really don't feel at all sure about this person who has been so strangely introduced into the house--he may be a drunkard or a thief. I wish you would speak to Moody yourself, Mr. Troy. Do you mind ringing the bell?"

Mr. Troy rose, as a matter of course, and rang the bell.

He was by this time, it is needless to say, convinced that Moody had not only gone back to consult Old Sharon on his own responsibility, but worse still, had taken the unwarrantable liberty of introducing him, as a spy, into the house. To communicate this explanation to Lady Lydiard would, in her present humor, be simply to produce the dismissal of the steward from her service. The only other alternative was to ask leave to interrogate Moody privately, and, after duly reproofing him, to insist on the departure of Old Sharon as the one condition on which Mr. Troy would consent to keep Lady Lydiard in ignorance of the truth.

"I think I shall manage better with Moody, if your Ladyship will permit me to see him in private," the lawyer said. "Shall I go downstairs and speak with him in his own room?"

"Why should you trouble yourself to do that?" said her Ladyship. "See him here; and I will go into the boudoir."

As she made that reply, the footman appeared at the drawing-room door.

"Send Moody here," said Lady Lydiard.

The footman's answer, delivered at that moment, assumed an importance which was not expressed in the footman's words. "My Lady," he said, "Mr. Moody has gone out."