

CHAPTER XIV.

THE instant Isabel was out of hearing, Old Sharon slapped Moody on the shoulder to rouse his attention. "I've got her out of the way," he said, "now listen to me. My business with the young angel is done--I may go back to London."

Moody looked at him with astonishment.

"Lord! how little you know of thieves!" exclaimed Old Sharon. "Why, man alive, I have tried her with two plain tests! If you wanted a proof of her innocence, there it was, as plain as the nose in your face. Did you hear me ask her how she came to seal the letter--just when her mind was running on something else?"

"I heard you," said Moody.

"Did you see how she started and stared at me?"

"I did."

"Well, I can tell you this--if she had stolen the money she would neither have started nor stared. She would have had her answer ready beforehand in her own mind, in case of accidents. There's only one thing in my experience that you can never do with a thief, when a thief happens to be a woman--you can never take her by surprise. Put that

remark by in your mind; one day you may find a use for remembering it. Did you see her blush, and look quite hurt in her feelings, pretty dear, when I asked about her sweetheart? Do you think a thief, in her place, would have shown such a face as that? Not she! The thief would have been relieved. The thief would have said to herself, 'All right! the more the old fool talks about sweethearts the further he is from tracing the robbery to Me!' Yes! yes! the ground's cleared now, Master Moody. I've reckoned up the servants; I've questioned Miss Isabel; I've made my inquiries in all the other quarters that may be useful to us--and what's the result? The advice I gave, when you and the lawyer first came to me--I hate that fellow!--remains as sound and good advice as ever. I have got the thief in my mind," said Old Sharon, closing his cunning eyes and then opening them again, "as plain as I've got you in my eye at this minute. No more of that now," he went on, looking round sharply at the path that led to the farmhouse. "I've something particular to say to you--and there's barely time to say it before that nice girl comes back. Look here! Do you happen to be acquainted with Mr.-Honorable-Hardyman's valet?"

Moody's eyes rested on Old Sharon with a searching and doubtful look.

"Mr. Hardyman's valet?" he repeated. "I wasn't prepared to hear Mr. Hardyman's name."

Old Sharon looked at Moody, in his turn, with a flash of sardonic triumph.

"Oho!" he said. "Has my good boy learned his lesson? Do you see the thief through my spectacles, already?"

"I began to see him," Moody answered, "when you gave us the guinea opinion at your lodgings."

"Will you whisper his name?" asked Old Sharon.

"Not yet. I distrust my own judgment. I wait till time proves that you are right."

Old Sharon knitted his shaggy brows and shook his head. "If you had only a little more dash and go in you," he said, "you would be a clever fellow. As it is--!" He finished the sentence by snapping his fingers with a grin of contempt. "Let's get to business. Are you going back by the next train along with me? or are you going to stop with the young lady?"

"I will follow you by a later train," Moody answered.

"Then I must give you my instructions at once," Sharon continued. "You get better acquainted with Hardyman's valet. Lend him money if he wants it--stick at nothing to make a bosom friend of him. I can't do that part of it; my appearance would be against me. You are the man--you are respectable from the top of your hat to the tips of your boots; nobody

would suspect You. Don't make objections! Can you fix the valet? Or can't you?"

"I can try," said Moody. "And what then?"

Old Sharon put his gross lips disagreeably close to Moody's ear.

"Your friend the valet can tell you who his master's bankers are," he said; "and he can supply you with a specimen of his master's handwriting."

Moody drew back, as suddenly as if his vagabond companion had put a knife to his throat. "You old villain!" he said. "Are you tempting me to forgery?"

"You infernal fool!" retorted Old Sharon. "Will you hold that long tongue of yours, and hear what I have to say. You go to Hardyman's bankers, with a note in Hardyman's handwriting (exactly imitated by me) to this effect:--'Mr. H. presents his compliments to Messrs. So-and-So, and is not quite certain whether a payment of five hundred pounds has been made within the last week to his account. He will be much obliged if Messrs. So-and-So will inform him by a line in reply, whether there is such an entry to his credit in their books, and by whom the payment has been made.' You wait for the bankers' answer, and bring it to me. It's just possible that the name you're afraid to whisper may appear in the letter. If it does, we've caught our man. Is that forgery, Mr.

Muddlehead Moody? I'll tell you what--if I had lived to be your age, and knew no more of the world than you do, I'd go and hang myself. Steady! here's our charming friend with the milk. Remember your instructions, and don't lose heart if my notion of the payment to the bankers comes to nothing. I know what to do next, in that case--and, what's more, I'll take all the risk and trouble on my own shoulders. Oh, Lord! I'm afraid I shall be obliged to drink the milk, now it's come!"

With this apprehension in his mind, he advanced to relieve Isabel of the jug that she carried.

"Here's a treat!" he burst out, with an affectation of joy, which was completely belied by the expression of his dirty face. "Here's a kind and dear young lady, to help an old man to a drink with her own pretty hands." He paused, and looked at the milk very much as he might have looked at a dose of physic. "Will anyone take a drink first?" he asked, offering the jug piteously to Isabel and Moody. "You see, I'm not wed to genuine milk; I'm used to chalk and water. I don't know what effect the unadulterated cow might have on my poor old inside." He tasted the milk with the greatest caution. "Upon my soul, this is too rich for me! The unadulterated cow is a deal too strong to be drunk alone. If you'll allow me I'll qualify it with a drop of gin. Here, Puggy, Puggy!" He set the milk down before the dog; and, taking a flask out of his pocket, emptied it at a draught. "That's something like!" he said, smacking his lips with an air of infinite relief. "So sorry, Miss, to have given you all your trouble for nothing; it's my ignorance that's to blame, not me.

I couldn't know I was unworthy of genuine milk till I tried--could I?
And do you know," he proceeded, with his eyes directed slyly on the way
back to the station, "I begin to think I'm not worthy of the fresh air,
either. A kind of longing seems to come over me for the London stink.
I'm home-sick already for the soot of my happy childhood and my own dear
native mud. The air here is too thin for me, and the sky's too clean;
and--oh, Lord!--when you're wed to the roar of the traffic--the 'busses
and the cabs and what not--the silence in these parts is downright
awful. I'll wish you good evening, miss; and get back to London."

Isabel turned to Moody with disappointment plainly expressed in her face
and manner.

"Is that all he has to say?" she asked. "You told me he could help us.
You led me to suppose he could find the guilty person."

Sharon heard her. "I could name the guilty person," he answered, "as
easily, miss, as I could name you."

"Why don't you do it then?" Isabel inquired, not very patiently

"Because the time's not ripe for it yet, miss--that's one reason.
Because, if I mentioned the thief's name, as things are now, you, Miss
Isabel, would think me mad; and you would tell Mr. Moody I had cheated
him out of his money--that's another reason. The matter's in train, if
you will only wait a little longer."

"So you say," Isabel rejoined. "If you really could name the thief, I believe you would do it now."

She turned away with a frown on her pretty face. Old Sharon followed her. Even his coarse sensibilities appeared to feel the irresistible ascendancy of beauty and youth.

"I say!" he began, "we must part friends, you know--or I shall break my heart over it. They have got milk at the farmhouse. Do you think they have got pen, ink, and paper too?"

Isabel answered, without turning to look at him, "Of course they have!"

"And a bit of sealing-wax?"

"I daresay!"

Old Sharon laid his dirty claws on her shoulder and forced her to face him as the best means of shaking them off.

"Come along!" he said. "I am going to pacify you with some information in writing."

"Why should you write it?" Isabel asked suspiciously.

"Because I mean to make my own conditions, my dear, before I let you into the secret."

In ten minutes more they were all three in the farmhouse parlor. Nobody but the farmer's wife was at home. The good woman trembled from head to foot at the sight of Old Sharon. In all her harmless life she had never yet seen humanity under the aspect in which it was now presented to her.

"Mercy preserve us, Miss!" she whispered to Isabel, "how come you to be in such company as that?" Instructed by Isabel, she produced the necessary materials for writing and sealing--and, that done, she shrank away to the door. "Please to excuse me, miss," she said with a last horrified look at her venerable visitor; "I really can't stand the sight of such a blot of dirt as that in my nice clean parlor." With those words she disappeared, and was seen no more.

Perfectly indifferent to his reception, Old Sharon wrote, inclosed what he had written in an envelope; and sealed it (in the absence of anything better fitted for his purpose) with the mouthpiece of his pipe.

"Now, miss," he said, "you give me your word of honor,"--he stopped and looked round at Moody with a grin--"and you give me yours, that you won't either of you break the seal on this envelope till the expiration of one week from the present day. There are the conditions, Miss Isabel, on which I'll give you your information. If you stop to dispute with me, the candle's alight, and I'll burn it!"

It was useless to contend with him. Isabel and Moody gave him the promise that he required. He handed the sealed envelope to Isabel with a low bow. "When the week's out," he said, "you will own I'm a cleverer fellow than you think me now. Wish you good evening, Miss. Come along, Puggy! Farewell to the horrid clean country, and back again to the nice London stink!"

He nodded to Moody--he leered at Isabel--he chuckled to himself--he left the farmhouse.