

## CHAPTER XVIII.

SHARON'S news was not of an encouraging character. He had met with serious difficulties, and had spent the last farthing of Moody's money in attempting to overcome them.

One discovery of importance he had certainly made. A horse withdrawn from the sale was the only horse that had met with Hardyman's approval. He had secured the animal at the high reserved price of twelve thousand francs--being four hundred and eighty pounds in English money; and he had paid with an English bank-note. The seller (a French horse-dealer resident in Brussels) had returned to Belgium immediately on completing the negotiations. Sharon had ascertained his address, and had written to him at Brussels, inclosing the number of the lost banknote. In two days he had received an answer, informing him that the horse-dealer had been called to England by the illness of a relative, and that he had hitherto failed to send any address to which his letters could be forwarded. Hearing this, and having exhausted his funds, Sharon had returned to London. It now rested with Moody to decide whether the course of the inquiry should follow the horse-dealer next. Here was the cash account, showing how the money had been spent. And there was Sharon, with his pipe in his mouth and his dog on his lap, waiting for orders.

Moody wisely took time to consider before he committed himself to a decision. In the meanwhile, he ventured to recommend a new course of proceeding which Sharon's report had suggested to his mind.

"It seems to me," he said, "that we have taken the roundabout way of getting to our end in view, when the straight road lay before us. If Mr. Hardyman has passed the stolen note, you know, as well as I do, that he has passed it innocently. Instead of wasting time and money in trying to trace a stranger, why not tell Mr. Hardyman what has happened, and ask him to give us the number of the note? You can't think of everything, I know; but it does seem strange that this idea didn't occur to you before you went to France."

"Mr. Moody," said Old Sharon, "I shall have to cut your acquaintance. You are a man without faith; I don't like you. As if I hadn't thought of Hardyman weeks since!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "Are you really soft enough to suppose that a gentleman in his position would talk about his money affairs to me? You know mighty little of him if you do. A fortnight since I sent one of my men (most respectably dressed) to hang about his farm, and see what information he could pick up. My man became painfully acquainted with the toe of a boot. It was thick, sir; and it was Hardyman's."

"I will run the risk of the boot," Moody replied, in his quiet way.

"And put the question to Hardyman?"

"Yes."

"Very good," said Sharon. "If you get your answer from his tongue, instead of his boot, the case is cleared up--unless I have made a complete mess of it. Look here, Moody! If you want to do me a good turn, tell the lawyer that the guinea-opinion was the right one. Let him know that he was the fool, not you, when he buttoned up his pockets and refused to trust me. And, I say," pursued Old Sharon, relapsing into his customary impudence, "you're in love, you know, with that nice girl. I like her myself. When you marry her invite me to the wedding. I'll make a sacrifice; I'll brush my hair and wash my face in honor of the occasion."

Returning to his lodgings, Moody found two letters waiting on the table. One of them bore the South Morden postmark. He opened that letter first.

It was written by Miss Pink. The first lines contained an urgent entreaty to keep the circumstances connected with the loss of the five hundred pounds the strictest secret from everyone in general, and from Hardyman in particular. The reasons assigned for making the strange request were next expressed in these terms: "My niece Isabel is, I am happy to inform you, engaged to be married to Mr. Hardyman. If the slightest hint reached him of her having been associated, no matter how cruelly and unjustly, with a suspicion of theft, the marriage would be broken off, and the result to herself and to everybody connected with her, would be disgrace for the rest of our lives."

On the blank space at the foot of the page a few words were added in

Isabel's writing: "Whatever changes there may be in my life, your place in my heart is one that no other person can fill: it is the place of my dearest friend. Pray write and tell me that you are not distressed and not angry. My one anxiety is that you should remember what I have always told you about the state of my own feelings. My one wish is that you will still let me love you and value you, as I might have loved and valued a brother."

The letter dropped from Moody's hand. Not a word--not even a sigh--passed his lips. In tearless silence he submitted to the pang that wrung him. In tearless silence he contemplated the wreck of his life.