

CHAPTER LI.

In eight days from the date of his second interview with Mrs. Gallilee, Mr. Le Frank took possession of his new bedroom.

He had arranged to report his proceedings in writing. In Teresa's state of mind, she would certainly distrust a fellow-lodger, discovered in personal communication with Mrs. Gallilee. Mr. Le Frank employed the first day after his arrival in collecting the materials for a report. In the evening, he wrote to Mrs. Gallilee--under cover to a friend, who was instructed to forward the letter.

"Private and confidential. Dear Madam,--I have not wasted my time and my opportunities, as you will presently see.

"My bedroom is immediately above the floor of the house which is occupied by Miss Carmina and her nurse. Having some little matters of my own to settle, I was late in taking possession of my room. Before the lights on the staircase were put out, I took the liberty of looking down at the next landing.

"Do you remember, when you were a child learning to write, that one of the lines in your copy-books was, 'Virtue is its own reward'? This ridiculous assertion was actually verified in my case! Before I had been five minutes at my post, I saw the nurse open her door. She looked up the staircase (without discovering me, it is needless to say), and she looked down the staircase--and, seeing nobody about, returned to her rooms.

"Waiting till I heard her lock the door, I stole downstairs, and listened outside.

"One of my two fellow-lodgers (you know that I don't believe in Miss Carmina's illness) was lighting a fire--on such a warm autumn night, that the staircase window was left open! I am absolutely sure of what I say: I heard the crackle of burning wood--I smelt coal smoke.

"The motive of this secret proceeding it seems impossible to guess at. If they were burning documents of a dangerous and compromising kind, a candle would have answered their purpose. If they wanted hot water, surely a tin kettle and a spirit lamp must have been at hand in an invalid's bedroom? Perhaps, your superior penetration may be able to read the riddle which baffles my ingenuity.

"So much for the first night.

"This afternoon, I had some talk with the landlady. My professional avocations having trained me in the art of making myself agreeable to the sex, I may say without vanity that I produced a favourable impression. In other words, I contrived to set my fair friend talking freely about the old nurse and the interesting invalid.

"Out of the flow of words poured on me, one fact of very serious importance has risen to the surface. There is a suspicious canister in the nurse's possession. The landlady calls the powder inside, medicine. I say, poison.

"Am I rushing at a fanciful conclusion? Please wait a little.

"During the week of delay which elapsed, before the lodger in possession vacated my room, you kindly admitted me to an interview. I ventured to put some questions, relating to Teresa's life in Italy and to the persons with whom she associated. Do you remember telling me, when I asked what you knew of her husband, that he was foreman in a manufactory of artists' colours? and that you had your information from Miss Carmina herself, after she had shown you the telegram announcing his death?

"A lady, possessed of your scientific knowledge, does not require to be told that poisons are employed in making artists' colours. Remember what the priest's letter says of Teresa's feeling towards you, and then say--Is it so very unlikely that she has brought with her to England one of the poisons used by her husband in his trade? and is it quite unreasonable to suppose (when she looks at her canister) that she may be thinking of you?

"I may be right or I may be wrong. Thanks to the dilapidated condition of a lock, I can decide the question, at the first opportunity offered to me by the nurse's absence from the room.

"My next report shall tell you that I have contrived to provide myself with a sample of the powder--leaving the canister undisturbed. The sample shall be tested by a chemist. If he pronounces it to be poison, I have a bold course of action to propose.

"As soon as you are well enough to go to the house, give the nurse her chance of poisoning you.

"Dear madam, don't be alarmed! I will accompany you; and I will answer for

the result. We will pay our visit at tea-time. Let her offer you a cup--and let me (under pretence of handing it) get possession of the poisoned drink. Before she can cry Stop!--I shall be on my way to the chemist.

"The penalty for attempted murder is penal servitude. If you still object to a public exposure, we have the chemist's report, together with your own evidence, ready for your son on his return. How will he feel about his marriage-engagement, when he finds that Miss Carmina's dearest friend and companion has tried--perhaps, with her young lady's knowledge--to poison his mother?

"Before concluding, I may mention that I had a narrow escape, only two hours since, of being seen by Teresa on the stairs.

"I was of course prepared for this sort of meeting, when I engaged my room; and I have therefore not been foolish enough to enter the house under an assumed name. On the contrary, I propose (in your interests) to establish a neighbourly acquaintance--with time to help me. But the matter of the poison admits of no delay. My chance of getting at it unobserved may be seriously compromised, if the nurse remembers that she first met with me in your house, and distrusts me accordingly. Your devoted servant, L. F."

Having completed his letter, he rang for the maid, and gave it to her to post.

On her way downstairs, she was stopped on the next landing by Mr. Null. He too had a letter ready: addressed to Doctor Benjulia. The fierce old nurse followed him out, and said, "Post it instantly!" The civil maid asked if Miss Carmina was better. "Worse!"--was all the rude foreigner said. She looked at poor Mr. Null, as if it was his fault.

Left in the retirement of his room, Mr. Le Frank sat at the writing-table, frowning and biting his nails.

Were these evidences of a troubled mind connected with the infamous proposal which he had addressed to Mrs. Gallilee? Nothing of the sort! Having sent away his letter, he was now at leisure to let his personal anxieties absorb him without restraint. He was thinking of Carmina. The oftener his efforts were baffled, the more resolute he became to discover the secret of her behaviour to him. For the hundredth time he said to himself, "Her devilish malice reviles me behind my back, and asks me before my face to shake hands and be friends." The more outrageously unreasonable his suspicions became, under the exasperating influence of suspense, the more inveterately his vindictive nature held to its delusion. After meeting her in

the hall at Fairfield Gardens, he really believed Carmina's illness to have been assumed as a means of keeping out of his way. If a friend had said to him, "But what reason have you to think so?"--he would have smiled compassionately, and have given that friend up for a shallow-minded man.

He stole out again, and listened, undetected, at their door. Carmina was speaking; but the words, in those faint tones, were inaudible. Teresa's stronger voice easily reached his ears. "My darling, talking is not good for you. I'll light the night-lamp--try to sleep."

Hearing this, he went back to his bedroom to wait a little. Teresa's vigilance might relax if Carmina fell asleep. She might go downstairs for a gossip with the landlady.

After smoking a cigar, he tried again. The lights on the staircase were now put out: it was eleven o'clock.

She was not asleep: the nurse was reading to her from some devotional book. He gave it up, for that night. His head ached; the ferment of his own abominable thoughts had fevered him. A cowardly dread of the slightest signs of illness was one of his special weaknesses. The whole day, tomorrow, was before him. He felt his own pulse; and determined, in justice to himself, to go to bed.

Ten minutes later, the landlady, on her way to bed, ascended the stairs. She too heard the voice, still reading aloud--and tapped softly at the door. Teresa opened it.

"Is the poor thing not asleep yet?"

"No."

"Has she been disturbed in some way?"

"Somebody has been walking about, overhead," Teresa answered.

"That's the new lodger!" exclaimed the landlady. "I'll speak to Mr. Le Frank."

On the point of closing the door, and saying good-night, Teresa stopped, and considered for a moment.

"Is he your new lodger?" she said.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I saw him when I was last in England."

"Well?"

"Nothing more," Teresa answered. "Good-night!"