

## **CHAPTER LIII.**

Left alone, Teresa went into the sitting-room: she was afraid to show herself at the bedside.

Mr. Null had destroyed the one hope which had supported her thus far--the hope of escaping from England with Carmina, before Mrs. Gallilee could interfere. Looking steadfastly at that inspiring prospect, she had forced herself to sign the humble apology and submission which the lawyers had dictated. What was the prospect now? Heavily had the merciless hand of calamity fallen on that brave old soul--and, at last, it had beaten her down! While she stood at the window, mechanically looking out, the dreary view of the back street trembled and disappeared. Teresa was crying. Happily for herself, she was unable to control her own weakness; the tears lightened her heavy heart. She waited a little, in the fear that her eyes might betray her, before she returned to Carmina. In that interval, she heard the sound of a closing door, on the floor above.

"The music-master!" she said to herself.

In an instant, she was at the sitting-room door, looking through the keyhole. It was the one safe way of watching him--and that was enough for Teresa.

His figure appeared suddenly within her narrow range of view--on the mat outside the door. If her distrust of him was without foundation, he would go on downstairs. No! He stopped on the mat to listen--he stooped--his eye would have been at the keyhole in another moment.

She seized a chair, and moved it. The sound instantly drove him away. He went on, down the stairs.

Teresa considered with herself what safest means of protection--and, if possible, of punishment as well--lay within her reach. How, and where, could the trap be set that might catch him?

She was still puzzled by that question, when the landlady made her appearance--politely anxious to hear what the doctors thought of their patient. Satisfied so far, the wearisome woman had her apologies to make next, for not having yet cautioned Mr. Le Frank.

"Thinking over it, since last night," she said confidentially, "I cannot imagine

how you heard him walking overhead. He has such a soft step that he positively takes me by surprise when he comes into my room. He has gone out for an hour; and I have done him a little favour which I am not in the habit of conferring on ordinary lodgers--I have lent him my umbrella, as it threatens rain. In his absence, I will ask you to listen while I walk about in his room. One can't be too particular, when rest is of such importance to your young lady--and it has struck me as just possible, that the floor of his room may be in fault. My dear, the boards may creak! I'm a sad fidget, I know; but, if the carpenter can set things right--without any horrid hammering, of course!--the sooner he is sent for, the more relieved I shall feel."

Through this harangue, the nurse had waited, with a patience far from characteristic of her, for an opportunity of saying a timely word. By some tortuous mental process, that she was quite unable to trace, the landlady's allusion to Mr. Le Frank had suggested the very idea of which, in her undisturbed solitude, she had been vainly in search. Never before, had the mistress of the house appeared to Teresa in such a favourable light.

"You needn't trouble yourself, ma'am," she said, as soon as she could make herself heard; "it was the creaking of the boards that told me somebody was moving overhead."

"Then I'm not a fidget after all? Oh, how you relieve me! Whatever the servants may have to do, one of them shall be sent instantly to the carpenter. So glad to be of any service to that sweet young creature!"

Teresa consulted her watch before she returned to the bedroom.

The improvement in Carmina still continued: she was able to take some of the light nourishment that was waiting for her. As Benjulia had anticipated, she asked to have the blind lowered a little. Teresa drew it completely over the window: she had her own reasons for tempting Carmina to repose. In half an hour more, the weary girl was sleeping, and the nurse was at liberty to set her trap for Mr. Le Frank.

Her first proceeding was to dip the end of a quill pen into her bottle of salad oil, and to lubricate the lock and key of the door that gave access to the bedroom from the stairs. Having satisfied herself that the key could now be used without making the slightest sound, she turned to the door of communication with the sitting-room next.

This door was covered with green baize. It had handles but no lock; and it

swung inwards, so as to allow the door of the cupboard (situated in the angle of the sitting-room wall) to open towards the bedroom freely. Teresa oiled the hinges, and the brass bolt and staple which protected the baize door on the side of the bedroom. That done, she looked again at her watch.

Mr. Le Frank's absence was expected to last for an hour. In five minutes more, the hour would expire.

After bolting the door of communication, she paused in the bedroom, and wafted a kiss to Carmina, still at rest. She left the room by the door which opened on the stairs, and locked it, taking away the key with her.

Having gone down the first flight of stairs, she stopped and went back. The one unsecured door, was the door which led into the sitting-room from the staircase. She opened it and left it invitingly ajar. "Now," she said to herself, "the trap will catch him!"

The hall clock struck the hour when she entered the landlady's room.

The woman of many words was at once charmed and annoyed. Charmed to hear that the dear invalid was resting, and to receive a visit from the nurse; annoyed by the absence of the carpenter, at work somewhere else for the whole of the day. "If my dear husband had been alive, we should have been independent of carpenters; he could turn his hand to anything. Now do sit down--I want you to taste some cherry brandy of my own making."

As Teresa took a chair, Mr. Le Frank returned. The two secret adversaries met, face to face.

"Surely I remember this lady?" he said.

Teresa encountered him, on his own ground. She made her best curtsy, and reminded him of the circumstances under which they had formerly met. The hospitable landlady produced her cherry brandy. "We are going to have a nice little chat; do sit down, sir, and join us." Mr. Le Frank made his apologies. The umbrella which had been so kindly lent to him, had not protected his shoes; his feet were wet; and he was so sadly liable to take cold that he must beg permission to put on his dry things immediately.

Having bowed himself out, he stopped in the passage, and, standing on tiptoe, peeped through a window in the wall, by which light was conveyed to the landlady's little room. The two women were comfortably seated together, with the cherry brandy and a plate of biscuits on a table between them. "In

for a good long gossip," thought Mr. Le Frank. "Now is my time!"

Not five minutes more had passed, before Teresa made an excuse for running upstairs again. She had forgotten to leave the bell rope, in case Carmina woke, within the reach of her hand. The excellent heart of the hostess made allowance for natural anxiety. "Do it, you good soul," she said; "and come back directly!" Left by herself, she filled her glass again, and smiled. Sweetness of temper (encouraged by cherry brandy) can even smile at a glass--unless it happens to be empty.

Approaching her own rooms, Teresa waited, and listened, before she showed herself. No sound reached her through the half open sitting-room door. She noiselessly entered the bedroom, and then locked the door again. Once more she listened; and once more there was nothing to be heard. Had he seen her on the stairs?

As the doubt crossed her mind, she heard the boards creak on the floor above. Mr. Le Frank was in his room.

Did this mean that her well-laid plan had failed? Or did it mean that he was really changing his shoes and stockings? The last inference was the right one.

He had made no mere excuse downstairs. The serious interests that he had at stake, were not important enough to make him forget his precious health. His chest was delicate; a cold might settle on his lungs. The temptation of the half-open door had its due effect on this prudent man; but it failed to make him forget that his feet were wet.

The boards creaked again; the door of his room was softly closed--then there was silence. Teresa only knew when he had entered the sitting-room by hearing him try the bolted baize door. After that, he must have stepped out again. He next tried the door of the bedchamber, from the stairs.

There was a quiet interval once more. Teresa noiselessly drew back the bolt; and, opening the baize door by a mere hair's-breadth, admitted sound from the sitting-room. She now heard him turning the key in a chiffonier, which only contained tradesmen's circulars, receipted bills, and a few books.

(Even with the canister in the cupboard, waiting to be opened, his uppermost idea was to discover Carmina's vindictive motive in Carmina's papers!)

The contents of the chiffonier disappointed him--judging by the tone in which he muttered to himself. The next sound startled Teresa; it was a tap against the lintel of the door behind which she was standing. He had thrown open the cupboard.

The rasping of the cover, as he took it off, told her that he was examining the canister. She had put it back on the shelf, a harmless thing now--the poison and the label having been both destroyed by fire. Nevertheless, his choosing the canister, from dozens of other things scattered invitingly about it, inspired her with a feeling of distrustful surprise. She was no longer content to find out what he was doing by means of her ears. Determined to see him, and to catch him in the fact, she pulled open the baize door--at the moment when he must have discovered that the canister was empty. A faint thump told her he had thrown it on the floor.

The view of the sitting-room was still hidden from her. She had forgotten the cupboard door.

Now that it was wide open, it covered the entrance to the bedroom, and completely screened them one from the other. For the moment she was startled, and hesitated whether to show herself or not. His voice stopped her.

"Is there another canister?" he said to himself. "The dirty old savage may have hidden it--"

Teresa heard no more. "The dirty old savage" was an insult not to be endured! She forgot her intention of stealing on him unobserved; she forgot her resolution to do nothing that could awaken Carmina. Her fierce temper urged her into furious action. With both hands outspread, she flew at the cupboard door, and banged it to in an instant.

A shriek of agony rang through the house. The swiftly closing door had caught, and crushed, the fingers of Le Frank's right hand, at the moment when he was putting it into the cupboard again.

Without stopping to help him, without even looking at him, she ran back to Carmina.

The swinging baize door fell to, and closed of itself. No second cry was heard. Nothing happened to falsify her desperate assertion that the shriek was the delusion of a vivid dream. She took Carmina in her arms, and patted and fondled her like a child. "See, my darling, I'm with you as usual;

and I have heard nothing. Don't, oh, don't tremble in that way! There--I'll wrap you up in my shawl, and read to you. No! let's talk of Ovid."

Her efforts to compose Carmina were interrupted by a muffled sound of men's footsteps and women's voices in the next room.

She hurriedly opened the door, and entreated them to whisper and be quiet. In the instant before she closed it again, she saw and heard. Le Frank lay in a swoon on the floor. The landlady was kneeling by him, looking at his injured hand; and the lodgers were saying, "Send him to the hospital."