

CHAPTER LXII.

Benjulia's servants had but a dull time of it, poor souls, in the lonely house. Towards the end of December, they subscribed among themselves to buy one of those wonderful Christmas Numbers--presenting year after year the same large-eyed ladies, long-legged lovers, corpulent children, snow landscapes, and gluttonous merry-makings--which have become a national institution: say, the pictorial plum puddings of the English nation.

The servants had plenty of time to enjoy their genial newspaper, before the dining-room bell disturbed them.

For some weeks past, the master had again begun to spend the whole of his time in the mysterious laboratory. On the rare occasions when he returned to the house, he was always out of temper. If the servants knew nothing else, they knew what these signs meant--the great man was harder at work than ever; and in spite of his industry, he was not getting on so well as usual.

On this particular evening, the bell rang at the customary time--and the cook (successor to the unfortunate creature with pretensions to beauty and sentiment) hastened to get the dinner ready.

The footman turned to the dresser, and took from it a little heap of newspapers; carefully counting them before he ventured to carry them upstairs. This was Doctor Benjulia's regular weekly supply of medical literature; and here, again, the mysterious man presented an incomprehensible problem to his fellow-creatures. He subscribed to every medical publication in England--and he never read one of them! The footman cut the leaves; and the master, with his forefinger to help him, ran his eye up and down the pages; apparently in search of some announcement that he never found--and, still more extraordinary, without showing the faintest sign of disappointment when he had done. Every week, he briskly shoved his unread periodicals into a huge basket, and sent them downstairs as waste paper.

The footman took up the newspapers and the dinner together--and was received with frowns and curses. He was abused for everything that he did in his own department, and for everything that the cook had done besides. "Whatever the master's working at," he announced, on returning to the kitchen, "he's farther away from hitting the right nail on the head than ever.

Upon my soul, I think I shall have to give warning! Let's relieve our minds. Where's the Christmas Number?"

Half an hour later, the servants were startled by a tremendous bang of the house-door which shook the whole building. The footman ran upstairs: the dining-room was empty; the master's hat was not on its peg in the hall; and the medical newspapers were scattered about in the wildest confusion. Close to the fender lay a crumpled leaf, torn out. Its position suggested that it had narrowly missed being thrown into the fire. The footman smoothed it out, and looked at it.

One side of the leaf contained a report of a lecture. This was dry reading. The footman tried the other side, and found a review of a new medical work.

This would have been dull reading too, but for an extract from a Preface, stating how the book came to be published, and what wonderful discoveries, relating to peoples' brains, it contained. There were some curious things said here--especially about a melancholy deathbed at a place called Montreal--which made the Preface almost as interesting as a story. But what was there in this to hurry the master out of the house, as if the devil had been at his heels?

Doctor Benjulia's nearest neighbour was a small farmer named Gregg. He was taking a nap that evening, when his wife bounced into the room, and said, "Here's the big doctor gone mad!" And there he was truly, at Mrs. Gregg's heels, clamouring to have the horse put to in the gig, and to be driven to London instantly. He said, "Pay yourself what you please"--and opened his pocket-book, full of bank-notes. Mr. Gregg said, "It seems, sir, this is a matter of life or death." Whereupon he looked at Mr. Gregg--and considered a little--and, becoming quiet on a sudden, answered, "Yes, it is."

On the road to London, he never once spoke--except to himself--and then only from time to time.

It seemed, judging by what fell from him now and then, that he was troubled about a man and a letter. He had suspected the man all along; but he had nevertheless given him the letter--and now it had ended in the letter turning out badly for Doctor Benjulia himself. Where he went to in London, it was not possible to say. Mr. Gregg's horse was not fast enough for him. As soon as he could find one, he took a cab.

The shopman of Mr. Barrable, the famous publisher of medical works, had just put up the shutters, and was going downstairs to his tea, when he

heard a knocking at the shop door. The person proved to be a very tall man, in a violent hurry to buy Mr. Ovid Vere's new book. He said, by way of apology, that he was in that line himself, and that his name was Benjulia. The shopman knew him by reputation, and sold him the book. He was in such a hurry to read it, that he actually began in the shop. It was necessary to tell him that business hours were over. Hearing this, he ran out, and told the cabman to drive as fast as possible to Pall Mall.

The library waiter at Doctor Benjulia's Club found him in the library, busy with a book.

He was quite alone; the members, at that hour of the evening, being generally at dinner, or in the smoking-room. The man whose business it was to attend to the fires, went in during the night, from time to time, and always found him in the same corner. It began to get late. He finished his reading; but it seemed to make no difference. There he sat--wide awake--holding his closed book on his knee, seemingly lost in his own thoughts. This went on till it was time to close the Club. They were obliged to disturb him. He said nothing; and went slowly down into the hall, leaving his book behind him. It was an awful night, raining and sleeting--but he took no notice of the weather. When they fetched a cab, the driver refused to take him to where he lived, on such a night as that. He only said, "Very well; go to the nearest hotel."

The night porter at the hotel let in a tall gentleman, and showed him into one of the bedrooms kept ready for persons arriving late. Having no luggage, he paid the charges beforehand. About eight o'clock in the morning, he rang for the waiter--who observed that his bed had not been slept in. All he wanted for breakfast was the strongest coffee that could be made. It was not strong enough to please him when he tasted it; and he had some brandy put in. He paid, and was liberal to the waiter, and went away.

The policeman on duty, that day, whose beat included the streets at the back of Fairfield Gardens, noticed in one of them, a tall gentleman walking backwards and forwards, and looking from time to time at one particular house. When he passed that way again, there was the gentleman still patrolling the street, and still looking towards the same house. The policeman waited a little, and watched. The place was a respectable lodging house, and the stranger was certainly a gentleman, though a queer one to look at. It was not the policeman's business to interfere on suspicion, except in the case of notoriously bad characters. So, though he did think it odd, he went on again.

Between twelve and one o'clock in the afternoon, Ovid left his Lodgings, to go to the neighbouring livery stables, and choose an open carriage. The sun was shining, and the air was brisk and dry, after the stormy night. It was just the day when he might venture to take Carmina out for a drive.

On his way down the street, he heard footsteps behind him, and felt himself touched on the shoulder. He turned--and discovered Benjulia. On the point of speaking resentfully, he restrained himself. There was something in the wretch's face that struck him with horror.

Benjulia said, "I won't keep you long; I want to know one thing. Will she live or die?"

"Her life is safe--I hope."

"Through your new mode of treatment?"

His eyes and his voice said more than his words. Ovid instantly knew that he had seen the book; and that the book had forestalled him in the discovery to which he had devoted his life. Was it possible to pity a man whose hardened nature never pitied others? All things are possible to a large heart. Ovid shrank from answering him.

Benjulia spoke again.

"When we met that night at my garden gate," he said, "you told me my life should answer for her life, if she died. My neglect has not killed her--and you have no need to keep your word. But I don't get off, Mr. Ovid Vere, without paying the penalty. You have taken something from me, which was dearer than life, I wished to tell you that--I have no more to say."

Ovid silently offered his hand.

Benjulia's head drooped in thought. The generous protest of the man whom he had injured, spoke in that outstretched hand. He looked at Ovid.

"No!" he said--and walked away.

Leaving the street, he went round to Fairfield Gardens, and rang the bell at Mr. Gallilee's door. The bell was answered by a polite old woman--a stranger to him among the servants.

"Is Zo in the house?" he inquired.

"Nobody's in the house, sir. It's to be let, if you please, as soon as the furniture can be moved."

"Do you know where Zo is? I mean, Mr. Gallilee's youngest child."

"I'm sorry to say, sir, I'm not acquainted with the family."

He waited at the door, apparently hesitating what to do next. "I'll go upstairs," he said suddenly; "I want to look at the house. You needn't go with me; I know my way."

"Thank you kindly, sir!"

He went straight to the schoolroom.

The repellent melancholy of an uninhabited place had fallen on it already. The plain furniture was not worth taking care of: it was battered and old, and left to dust and neglect. There were two common deal writing desks, formerly used by the two girls. One of them was covered with splashes of ink: varied here and there by barbarous caricatures of faces, in which dots and strokes represented eyes, noses, and mouths. He knew whose desk this was, and opened the cover of it. In the recess beneath were soiled tables of figures, torn maps, and dogs-eared writing books. The ragged paper cover of one of these last, bore on its inner side a grotesquely imperfect inscription:-- my cop book zo. He tore off the cover, and put it in the breast pocket of his coat.

"I should have liked to tickle her once more," he thought, as he went down stairs again. The polite old woman opened the door, curtsying deferentially. He gave her half a crown. "God bless you, sir!" she burst out, in a gush of gratitude.

He checked himself, on the point of stepping into the street, and looked at her with some curiosity. "Do you believe in God?" he asked.

The old woman was even capable of making a confession of faith politely. "Yes, sir," she said, "if you have no objection."

He stepped into the street. "I wonder whether she is right?" he thought. "It doesn't matter; I shall soon know."

The servants were honestly glad to see him, when he got home. They had

taken it in turn to sit up through the night; knowing his regular habits, and feeling the dread that some accident had happened. Never before had they seen him so fatigued. He dropped helplessly into his chair; his gigantic body shook with shivering fits. The footman begged him to take some refreshment. "Brandy, and raw eggs," he said. These being brought to him, he told them to wait until he rang--and locked the door when they went out.

After waiting until the short winter daylight was at an end, the footman ventured to knock, and ask if the master wanted lights. He replied that he had lit the candles for himself. No smell of tobacco smoke came from the room; and he had let the day pass without going to the laboratory. These were portentous signs. The footman said to his fellow servants, "There's something wrong." The women looked at each other in vague terror. One of them said, "Hadn't we better give notice to leave?" And the other whispered a question: "Do you think he's committed a crime?"

Towards ten o'clock, the bell rang at last. Immediately afterwards they heard him calling to them from the hall. "I want you, all three, up here."

They went up together--the two women anticipating a sight of horror, and keeping close to the footman.

The master was walking quietly backwards and forwards in the room: the table had pen and ink on it, and was covered with writings. He spoke to them in his customary tones; there was not the slightest appearance of agitation in his manner.

"I mean to leave this house, and go away," he began. "You are dismissed from my service, for that reason only. Take your written characters from the table; read them, and say if there is anything to complain of." There was nothing to complain of. On another part of the table there were three little heaps of money. "A month's wages for each of you," he explained, "in place of a month's warning. I wish you good luck." One of the women (the one who had suggested giving notice to leave) began to cry. He took no notice of this demonstration, and went on. "I want two of you to do me a favour before we part. You will please witness the signature of my Will." The sensitive servant drew back directly. "No!" she said, "I couldn't do it. I never heard the Death-Watch before in winter time--I heard it all last night."

The other two witnessed the signature. They observed that the Will was a very short one. It was impossible not to notice the only legacy left; the words crossed the paper, just above the signatures, and only occupied two lines: "I leave to Zoe, youngest daughter of Mr. John Gallilee, of Fairfield Gardens,

London, everything absolutely of which I die possessed." Excepting the formal introductory phrases, and the statement relating to the witnesses--both copied from a handy book of law, lying open on the table--this was the Will.

The female servants were allowed to go downstairs; after having been informed that they were to leave the next morning. The footman was detained in the dining-room.

"I am going to the laboratory," the master said; "and I want a few things carried to the door."

The big basket for waste paper, three times filled with letters and manuscripts; the books; the medicine chest; and the stone jar of oil from the kitchen--these, the master and the man removed together; setting them down at the laboratory door. It was a still cold starlight winter's night. The intermittent shriek of a railway whistle in the distance, was the only sound that disturbed the quiet of the time.

"Good night!" said the master.

The man returned the salute, and walked back to the house, closing the front door. He was now more firmly persuaded than ever that something was wrong. In the hall, the women were waiting for him. "What does it mean?" they asked. "Keep quiet," he said; "I'm going to see."

In another minute he was posted at the back of the house, behind the edge of the wall. Looking out from this place, he could see the light of the lamps in the laboratory streaming through the open door, and the dark figure of the master coming and going, as he removed the objects left outside into the building. Then the door was shut, and nothing was visible but the dim glow that found its way to the skylight, through the white blind inside.

He boldly crossed the open space of ground, resolved to try what his ears might discover, now that his eyes were useless. He posted himself at the back of the laboratory, close to one of the side walls.

Now and then, he heard--what had reached his ears when he had been listening on former occasions--the faint whining cries of animals. These were followed by new sounds. Three smothered shrieks, succeeding each other at irregular intervals, made his blood run cold. Had three death-strokes been dealt on some suffering creatures, with the same sudden and terrible certainty? Silence, horrible silence, was all that answered. In the distant

railway there was an interval of peace.

The door was opened again; the flood of light streamed out on the darkness. Suddenly the yellow glow was spotted by the black figures of small swiftly-running creatures--perhaps cats, perhaps rabbits--escaping from the laboratory. The tall form of the master followed slowly, and stood revealed watching the flight of the animals. In a moment more, the last of the liberated creatures came out--a large dog, limping as if one of its legs was injured. It stopped as it passed the master, and tried to fawn on him. He threatened it with his hand. "Be off with you, like the rest!" he said. The dog slowly crossed the flow of light, and was swallowed up in darkness.

The last of them that could move was gone. The death shrieks of the others had told their fate.

But still, there stood the master alone--a grand black figure, with its head turned up to the stars. The minutes followed one another: the servant waited, and watched him. The solitary man had a habit, well known to those about him, of speaking to himself; not a word escaped him now; his upturned head never moved; the bright wintry heaven held him spellbound.

At last, the change came. Once more the silence was broken by the scream of the railway whistle.

He started like a person suddenly roused from deep sleep, and went back into the laboratory. The last sound then followed--the locking and bolting of the door.

The servant left his hiding-place: his master's secret, was no secret now. He hated himself for eating that master's bread, and earning that master's money. One of the ignorant masses, this man! Mere sentiment had a strange hold on his stupid mind; the remembrance of the poor wounded dog, companionable and forgiving under cruel injuries, cut into his heart like a knife. His thought at that moment, was an act of treason to the royalty of Knowledge,--"I wish to God I could lame him, as he has lamed the dog!" Another fanatic! another fool! Oh, Science, be merciful to the fanatics, and the fools!

When he got back to the house, the women were still on the look-out for him. "Don't speak to me now," he said. "Get to your beds. And, mind this--let's be off to-morrow morning before he can see us."

There was no sleep for him when he went to his own bed.

The remembrance of the dog tormented him. The other lesser animals were active; capable of enjoying their liberty and finding shelter for themselves. Where had the maimed creature found a refuge, on that bitter night? Again, and again, and again, the question forced its way into his mind. He could endure it no longer. Cautiously and quickly--in dread of his extraordinary conduct being perhaps discovered by the women--he dressed himself, and opened the house door to look for the dog.

Out of the darkness on the step, there rose something dark. He put out his hand. A persuasive tongue, gently licking it, pleaded for a word of welcome. The crippled animal could only have got to the door in one way; the gate which protected the house-enclosure must have been left open. First giving the dog a refuge in the kitchen, the footman--rigidly performing his last duties--went to close the gate.

At his first step into the enclosure he stopped panic-stricken.

The starlit sky over the laboratory was veiled in murky red. Roaring flame, and spouting showers of sparks, poured through the broken skylight. Voices from the farm raised the first cry--"Fire! fire!"

At the inquest, the evidence suggested suspicion of incendiarism and suicide. The papers, the books, the oil betrayed themselves as combustible materials, carried into the place for a purpose. The medicine chest was known (by its use in cases of illness among the servants) to contain opium. Adjourned inquiry elicited that the laboratory was not insured, and that the deceased was in comfortable circumstances. Where were the motives? One intelligent man, who had drifted into the jury, was satisfied with the evidence. He held that the desperate wretch had some reason of his own for first poisoning himself, and then setting fire to the scene of his labours. Having a majority of eleven against him, the wise juryman consented to a merciful verdict of death by misadventure. The hideous remains of what had once been Benjulia, found Christian burial. His brethren of the torture-table, attended the funeral in large numbers. Vivisection had been beaten on its own field of discovery. They honoured the martyr who had fallen in their cause.