

## Chapter LIV - The Fugitives

Tea-time, an hour short of midnight; the place, a French apartment, comprising some half-dozen rooms; - a dull cold hall or corridor, a dining-room, a drawing-room, a bed-room, and an inner drawingroom, or boudoir, smaller and more retired than the rest. All these shut in by one large pair of doors on the main staircase, but each room provided with two or three pairs of doors of its own, establishing several means of communication with the remaining portion of the apartment, or with certain small passages within the wall, leading, as is not unusual in such houses, to some back stairs with an obscure outlet below. The whole situated on the first floor of so large an Hotel, that it did not absorb one entire row of windows upon one side of the square court-yard in the centre, upon which the whole four sides of the mansion looked.

An air of splendour, sufficiently faded to be melancholy, and sufficiently dazzling to clog and embarrass the details of life with a show of state, reigned in these rooms. The walls and ceilings were gilded and painted; the floors were waxed and polished; crimson drapery hung in festoons from window, door, and mirror; and candelabra, gnarled and intertwined like the branches of trees, or horns of animals, stuck out from the panels of the wall. But in the day-time, when the lattice-blinds (now closely shut) were opened, and the light let in, traces were discernible among this finery, of wear and tear and dust, of sun and damp and smoke, and lengthened intervals of want of use and habitation, when such shows and toys of life seem sensitive like life, and waste as men shut up in prison do. Even night, and clusters of burning candles, could not wholly efface them, though the general glitter threw them in the shade.

The glitter of bright tapers, and their reflection in looking-glasses, scraps of gilding and gay colours, were confined, on this night, to one room - that smaller room within the rest, just now enumerated. Seen from the hall, where a lamp was feebly burning, through the dark perspective of open doors, it looked as shining and precious as a gem. In the heart of its radiance sat a beautiful woman - Edith.

She was alone. The same defiant, scornful woman still. The cheek a little worn, the eye a little larger in appearance, and more lustrous, but the haughty bearing just the same. No shame upon her brow; no late repentance bending her disdainful neck. Imperious and stately yet, and yet regardless of herself and of all else, she sat with her dark eyes cast down, waiting for someone.

No book, no work, no occupation of any kind but her own thought, beguiled the tardy time. Some purpose, strong enough to fill up any pause, possessed her. With her lips pressed together, and quivering if

for a moment she released them from her control; with her nostril inflated; her hands clasped in one another; and her purpose swelling in her breast; she sat, and waited.

At the sound of a key in the outer door, and a footstep in the hall, she started up, and cried 'Who's that?' The answer was in French, and two men came in with jingling trays, to make preparation for supper.

'Who had bade them to do so?' she asked.

'Monsieur had commanded it, when it was his pleasure to take the apartment. Monsieur had said, when he stayed there for an hour, en route, and left the letter for Madame - Madame had received it surely?' 'Yes.'

'A thousand pardons! The sudden apprehension that it might have been forgotten had struck him;' a bald man, with a large beard from a neighbouring restaurant; 'with despair! Monsieur had said that supper was to be ready at that hour: also that he had forewarned Madame of the commands he had given, in his letter. Monsieur had done the Golden Head the honour to request that the supper should be choice and delicate. Monsieur would find that his confidence in the Golden Head was not misplaced.'

Edith said no more, but looked on thoughtfully while they prepared the table for two persons, and set the wine upon it. She arose before they had finished, and taking a lamp, passed into the bed-chamber and into the drawing-room, where she hurriedly but narrowly examined all the doors; particularly one in the former room that opened on the passage in the wall. From this she took the key, and put it on the outer side. She then came back.

The men - the second of whom was a dark, bilious subject, in a jacket, close shaved, and with a black head of hair close cropped - had completed their preparation of the table, and were standing looking at it. He who had spoken before, inquired whether Madame thought it would be long before Monsieur arrived?

'She couldn't say. It was all one.'

'Pardon! There was the supper! It should be eaten on the instant. Monsieur (who spoke French like an Angel - or a Frenchman - it was all the same) had spoken with great emphasis of his punctuality. But the English nation had so grand a genius for punctuality. Ah! what noise! Great Heaven, here was Monsieur. Behold him!'

In effect, Monsieur, admitted by the other of the two, came, with his gleaming teeth, through the dark rooms, like a mouth; and arriving in

that sanctuary of light and colour, a figure at full length, embraced Madame, and addressed her in the French tongue as his charming wife

'My God! Madame is going to faint. Madame is overcome with joy!' The bald man with the beard observed it, and cried out.

Madame had only shrunk and shivered. Before the words were spoken, she was standing with her hand upon the velvet back of a great chair; her figure drawn up to its full height, and her face immovable.

'Francois has flown over to the Golden Head for supper. He flies on these occasions like an angel or a bird. The baggage of Monsieur is in his room. All is arranged. The supper will be here this moment.' These facts the bald man notified with bows and smiles, and presently the supper came.

The hot dishes were on a chafing-dish; the cold already set forth, with the change of service on a sideboard. Monsieur was satisfied with this arrangement. The supper table being small, it pleased him very well. Let them set the chafing-dish upon the floor, and go. He would remove the dishes with his own hands.

'Pardon!' said the bald man, politely. 'It was impossible!'

Monsieur was of another opinion. He required no further attendance that night.

'But Madame - ' the bald man hinted. 'Madame,' replied Monsieur, 'had her own maid. It was enough.'

'A million pardons! No! Madame had no maid!'

'I came here alone,' said Edith 'It was my choice to do so. I am well used to travelling; I want no attendance. They need send nobody to me.

Monsieur accordingly, persevering in his first proposed impossibility, proceeded to follow the two attendants to the outer door, and secure it after them for the night. The bald man turning round to bow, as he went out, observed that Madame still stood with her hand upon the velvet back of the great chair, and that her face was quite regardless of him, though she was looking straight before her.

As the sound of Carker's fastening the door resounded through the intermediate rooms, and seemed to come hushed and stilled into that last distant one, the sound of the Cathedral clock striking twelve

mingled with it, in Edith's ears She heard him pause, as if he heard it too and listened; and then came back towards her, laying a long train of footsteps through the silence, and shutting all the doors behind him as he came along. Her hand, for a moment, left the velvet chair to bring a knife within her reach upon the table; then she stood as she had stood before.

'How strange to come here by yourself, my love!' he said as he entered.

'What?' she returned.

Her tone was so harsh; the quick turn of her head so fierce; her attitude so repellent; and her frown so black; that he stood, with the lamp in his hand, looking at her, as if she had struck him motionless.

'I say,' he at length repeated, putting down the lamp, and smiling his most courtly smile, 'how strange to come here alone! It was unnecessary caution surely, and might have defeated itself. You were to have engaged an attendant at Havre or Rouen, and have had abundance of time for the purpose, though you had been the most capricious and difficult (as you are the most beautiful, my love) of women.'

Her eyes gleamed strangely on him, but she stood with her hand resting on the chair, and said not a word.

'I have never,' resumed Carker, 'seen you look so handsome, as you do to-night. Even the picture I have carried in my mind during this cruel probation, and which I have contemplated night and day, is exceeded by the reality.'

Not a word. Not a look Her eyes completely hidden by their drooping lashes, but her head held up.

'Hard, unrelenting terms they were!' said Carker, with a smile, 'but they are all fulfilled and passed, and make the present more delicious and more safe. Sicily shall be the Place of our retreat. In the idlest and easiest part of the world, my soul, we'll both seek compensation for old slavery.'

He was coming gaily towards her, when, in an instant, she caught the knife up from the table, and started one pace back.

'Stand still!' she said, 'or I shall murder you!'

The sudden change in her, the towering fury and intense abhorrence sparkling in her eyes and lighting up her brow, made him stop as if a fire had stopped him.

'Stand still!' she said, 'come no nearer me, upon your life!'

They both stood looking at each other. Rage and astonishment were in his face, but he controlled them, and said lightly,

'Come, come! Tush, we are alone, and out of everybody's sight and hearing. Do you think to frighten me with these tricks of virtue?'

'Do you think to frighten me,' she answered fiercely, 'from any purpose that I have, and any course I am resolved upon, by reminding me of the solitude of this place, and there being no help near? Me, who am here alone, designedly? If I feared you, should I not have avoided you? If I feared you, should I be here, in the dead of night, telling you to your face what I am going to tell?'

'And what is that,' he said, 'you handsome shrew? Handsomer so, than any other woman in her best humour?'

'I tell you nothing,' she returned, until you go back to that chair - except this, once again - Don't come near me! Not a step nearer. I tell you, if you do, as Heaven sees us, I shall murder you!'

'Do you mistake me for your husband?' he retorted, with a grin.

Disdaining to reply, she stretched her arm out, pointing to the chair. He bit his lip, frowned, laughed, and sat down in it, with a baffled, irresolute, impatient air, he was unable to conceal; and biting his nail nervously, and looking at her sideways, with bitter discomfiture, even while he feigned to be amused by her caprice.

She put the knife down upon the table, and touching her bosom with her hand, said:

'I have something lying here that is no love trinket, and sooner than endure your touch once more, I would use it on you - and you know it, while I speak - with less reluctance than I would on any other creeping thing that lives.'

He affected to laugh jestingly, and entreated her to act her play out quickly, for the supper was growing cold. But the secret look with which he regarded her, was more sullen and lowering, and he struck his foot once upon the floor with a muttered oath.

'How many times,' said Edith, bending her darkest glance upon him 'has your bold knavery assailed me with outrage and insult? How many times in your smooth manner, and mocking words and looks, have I been twitted with my courtship and my marriage? How many times have you laid bare my wound of love for that sweet, injured girl

and lacerated it? How often have you fanned the fire on which, for two years, I have writhed; and tempted me to take a desperate revenge, when it has most tortured me?'

'I have no doubt, Ma'am,' he replied, 'that you have kept a good account, and that it's pretty accurate. Come, Edith. To your husband, poor wretch, this was well enough - '

'Why, if,' she said, surveying him with a haughty contempt and disgust, that he shrunk under, let him brave it as he would, 'if all my other reasons for despising him could have been blown away like feathers, his having you for his counsellor and favourite, would have almost been enough to hold their place.'

'Is that a reason why you have run away with me?' he asked her, tauntingly.

'Yes, and why we are face to face for the last time. Wretch! We meet tonight, and part tonight. For not one moment after I have ceased to speak, will I stay here!'

He turned upon her with his ugliest look, and gripped the table with his hand; but neither rose, nor otherwise answered or threatened her.

'I am a woman,' she said, confronting him steadfastly, 'who from her childhood has been shamed and steeled. I have been offered and rejected, put up and appraised, until my very soul has sickened. I have not had an accomplishment or grace that might have been a resource to me, but it has been paraded and vended to enhance my value, as if the common crier had called it through the streets. My poor, proud friends, have looked on and approved; and every tie between us has been deadened in my breast. There is not one of them for whom I care, as I could care for a pet dog. I stand alone in the world, remembering well what a hollow world it has been to me, and what a hollow part of it I have been myself. You know this, and you know that my fame with it is worthless to me.'

'Yes; I imagined that,' he said.

'And calculated on it,' she rejoined, 'and so pursued me. Grown too indifferent for any opposition but indifference, to the daily working of the hands that had moulded me to this; and knowing that my marriage would at least prevent their hawking of me up and down; I suffered myself to be sold, as infamously as any woman with a halter round her neck is sold in any market-place. You know that.'

'Yes,' he said, showing all his teeth 'I know that.'

'And calculated on it,' she rejoined once more, 'and so pursued me. From my marriage day, I found myself exposed to such new shame - to such solicitation and pursuit (expressed as clearly as if it had been written in the coarsest words, and thrust into my hand at every turn) from one mean villain, that I felt as if I had never known humiliation till that time. This shame my husband fixed upon me; hemmed me round with, himself; steeped me in, with his own hands, and of his own act, repeated hundreds of times. And thus - forced by the two from every point of rest I had - forced by the two to yield up the last retreat of love and gentleness within me, or to be a new misfortune on its innocent object - driven from each to each, and beset by one when I escaped the other - my anger rose almost to distraction against both I do not know against which it rose higher - the master or the man!'

He watched her closely, as she stood before him in the very triumph of her indignant beauty. She was resolute, he saw; undaunted; with no more fear of him than of a worm.

'What should I say of honour or of chastity to you!' she went on. 'What meaning would it have to you; what meaning would it have from me! But if I tell you that the lightest touch of your hand makes my blood cold with antipathy; that from the hour when I first saw and hated you, to now, when my instinctive repugnance is enhanced by every minute's knowledge of you I have since had, you have been a loathsome creature to me which has not its like on earth; how then?'

He answered with a faint laugh, 'Ay! How then, my queen?'

'On that night, when, emboldened by the scene you had assisted at, you dared come to my room and speak to me,' she said, 'what passed?'

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed

'What passed?' she said.

'Your memory is so distinct,' he said, 'that I have no doubt you can recall it.'

'I can,' she said. 'Hear it! Proposing then, this flight - not this flight, but the flight you thought it - you told me that in the having given you that meeting, and leaving you to be discovered there, if you so thought fit; and in the having suffered you to be alone with me many times before, - and having made the opportunities, you said, - and in the having openly avowed to you that I had no feeling for my husband but aversion, and no care for myself - I was lost; I had given you the power to traduce my name; and I lived, in virtuous reputation, at the pleasure of your breath'

'All stratagems in love - ' he interrupted, smiling. 'The old adage - '

'On that night,' said Edith, 'and then, the struggle that I long had had with something that was not respect for my good fame - that was I know not what - perhaps the clinging to that last retreat- was ended. On that night, and then, I turned from everything but passion and resentment. I struck a blow that laid your lofty master in the dust, and set you there, before me, looking at me now, and knowing what I mean.'

He sprung up from his chair with a great oath. She put her hand into her bosom, and not a finger trembled, not a hair upon her head was stirred. He stood still: she too: the table and chair between them.~

'When I forget that this man put his lips to mine that night, and held me in his arms as he has done again to-night,' said Edith, pointing at him; 'when I forget the taint of his kiss upon my cheek - the cheek that Florence would have laid her guiltless face against - when I forget my meeting with her, while that taint was hot upon me, and in what a flood the knowledge rushed upon me when I saw her, that in releasing her from the persecution I had caused by my love, I brought a shame and degradation on her name through mine, and in all time to come should be the solitary figure representing in her mind her first avoidance of a guilty creature - then, Husband, from whom I stand divorced henceforth, I will forget these last two years, and undo what I have done, and undeceive you!'

Her flashing eyes, uplifted for a moment, lighted again on Carker, and she held some letters out in her left hand.

'See these!' she said, contemptuously. 'You have addressed these to me in the false name you go by; one here, some elsewhere on my road. The seals are unbroken. Take them back!'

She crunched them in her hand, and tossed them to his feet. And as she looked upon him now, a smile was on her face.

'We meet and part to-night,' she said. 'You have fallen on Sicilian days and sensual rest, too soon. You might have cajoled, and fawned, and played your traitor's part, a little longer, and grown richer. You purchase your voluptuous retirement dear!'

'Edith!' he retorted, menacing her with his hand. 'Sit down! Have done with this! What devil possesses you?'

'Their name is Legion,' she replied, uprearing her proud form as if she would have crushed him; 'you and your master have raised them in a fruitful house, and they shall tear you both. False to him, false to his



innocent child, false every way and everywhere, go forth and boast of me, and gnash your teeth, for once, to know that you are lying!

He stood before her, muttering and menacing, and scowling round as if for something that would help him to conquer her; but with the same indomitable spirit she opposed him, without faltering.

'In every vaunt you make,' she said, 'I have my triumph I single out in you the meanest man I know, the parasite and tool of the proud tyrant, that his wound may go the deeper, and may rankle more. Boast, and revenge me on him! You know how you came here to-night; you know how you stand cowering there; you see yourself in colours quite as despicable, if not as odious, as those in which I see you. Boast then, and revenge me on yourself.'

The foam was on his lips; the wet stood on his forehead. If she would have faltered once for only one half-moment, he would have pinioned her; but she was as firm as rock, and her searching eyes never left him.

'We don't part so,' he said. 'Do you think I am drivelling, to let you go in your mad temper?'

'Do you think,' she answered, 'that I am to be stayed?'

'I'll try, my dear,' he said with a ferocious gesture of his head.

'God's mercy on you, if you try by coming near me!' she replied.

'And what,' he said, 'if there are none of these same boasts and vaunts on my part? What if I were to turn too? Come!' and his teeth fairly shone again. 'We must make a treaty of this, or I may take some unexpected course. Sit down, sit down!'

'Too late!' she cried, with eyes that seemed to sparkle fire. 'I have thrown my fame and good name to the winds! I have resolved to bear the shame that will attach to me - resolved to know that it attaches falsely - that you know it too - and that he does not, never can, and never shall. I'll die, and make no sign. For this, I am here alone with you, at the dead of night. For this, I have met you here, in a false name, as your wife. For this, I have been seen here by those men, and left here. Nothing can save you now.'

He would have sold his soul to root her, in her beauty, to the floor, and make her arms drop at her sides, and have her at his mercy. But he could not look at her, and not be afraid of her. He saw a strength within her that was resistless. He saw that she was desperate, and that her unquenchable hatred of him would stop at nothing. His eyes

followed the hand that was put with such rugged uncongenial purpose into her white bosom, and he thought that if it struck at him, and failed, it would strike there, just as soon.

He did not venture, therefore, to advance towards her; but the door by which he had entered was behind him, and he stepped back to lock it.

'Lastly, take my warning! Look to yourself!' she said, and smiled again. 'You have been betrayed, as all betrayers are. It has been made known that you are in this place, or were to be, or have been. If I live, I saw my husband in a carriage in the street to-night!'

'Strumpet, it's false!' cried Carker.

At the moment, the bell rang loudly in the hall. He turned white, as she held her hand up like an enchantress, at whose invocation the sound had come.

'Hark! do you hear it?'

He set his back against the door; for he saw a change in her, and fancied she was coming on to pass him. But, in a moment, she was gone through the opposite doors communicating with the bed-chamber, and they shut upon her.

Once turned, once changed in her inflexible unyielding look, he felt that he could cope with her. He thought a sudden terror, occasioned by this night-alarm, had subdued her; not the less readily, for her overwrought condition. Throwing open the doors, he followed, almost instantly.

But the room was dark; and as she made no answer to his call, he was fain to go back for the lamp. He held it up, and looked round, everywhere, expecting to see her crouching in some corner; but the room was empty. So, into the drawing-room and dining-room he went, in succession, with the uncertain steps of a man in a strange place; looking fearfully about, and prying behind screens and couches; but she was not there. No, nor in the hall, which was so bare that he could see that, at a glance.

All this time, the ringing at the bell was constantly renewed, and those without were beating at the door. He put his lamp down at a distance, and going near it, listened. There were several voices talking together: at least two of them in English; and though the door was thick, and there was great confusion, he knew one of these too well to doubt whose voice it was.

He took up his lamp again, and came back quickly through all the rooms, stopping as he quitted each, and looking round for her, with the light raised above his head. He was standing thus in the bed-chamber, when the door, leading to the little passage in the wall, caught his eye. He went to it, and found it fastened on the other side; but she had dropped a veil in going through, and shut it in the door.

All this time the people on the stairs were ringing at the bell, and knocking with their hands and feet.

He was not a coward: but these sounds; what had gone before; the strangeness of the place, which had confused him, even in his return from the hall; the frustration of his schemes (for, strange to say, he would have been much bolder, if they had succeeded); the unseasonable time; the recollection of having no one near to whom he could appeal for any friendly office; above all, the sudden sense, which made even his heart beat like lead, that the man whose confidence he had outraged, and whom he had so treacherously deceived, was there to recognise and challenge him with his mask plucked off his face; struck a panic through him. He tried the door in which the veil was shut, but couldn't force it. He opened one of the windows, and looked down through the lattice of the blind, into the court-yard; but it was a high leap, and the stones were pitiless.

The ringing and knocking still continuing - his panic too - he went back to the door in the bed-chamber, and with some new efforts, each more stubborn than the last, wrenched it open. Seeing the little staircase not far off, and feeling the night-air coming up, he stole back for his hat and coat, made the door as secure after him as he could, crept down lamp in hand, extinguished it on seeing the street, and having put it in a corner, went out where the stars were shining.