

"Good God!" cried Lucius; "and I have suffered an agony of remorse about that man, wretch as I knew him to be. I have carried the burden of a great sin on my soul day and night; my dreams have been haunted, my lonely hours miserable."

He clasped his hands before his face with a passionate gesture, and a hoarse sob broke from that breast, from which a load had been suddenly lifted. The sense of relief, of thankfulness, was keen as the keenest pain.

"Tell me," he cried eagerly—"Tell me all about it, Schanck. Was not that shot fatal? I aimed straight at his heart."

"And you hit him *zumvare*," answered the Dutchman, "for when I went out and looked about for him an hour afterwards, there were traces of blood on the snow; but it couldn't have been his heart, or he would hardly have been able to crawl away. I followed him a little way by that track of blood, and the broken snow through which he had dragged himself along; but I could not go far; I was anxious about you, and I went back to the hut. If the man lay dead in the snow, or if he was shivering under the pine trees, groaning with the pain of his wounds, I cared not."

"Was that the last you saw of him," asked Lucius—"those traces of blood on the snow?"

"It was the last for a long time. If you will be patient I will tell you all the story."

Then, with many peculiarities of expression—desperate compound substantives, and more desperate compound tenses of the subjunctive mood, which it were well to leave unrecorded—the little Dutchman told all he had to tell of that which followed Lucius Davoren's fire. How, while Geoffrey slowly mended, Lucius lay in the torments of fever, brain distracted, body enfeebled, and life and death at odds which should be master of that frail temple.

"You were still very ill when, by God's mercy, the Canadian party came our way. Geoffrey met them in the woods, while he was prowling about with his gun on the look-out for a moose, or even a martin, for we were as near starvation as men could be and not starve. We had kept ourselves alive somehow, Geoffrey and I, on the pieces of buffalo you brought home the night before your illness, and when those were gone, on a tin of arrowroot which Geoffrey had the lock to find in his travelling bag. When the Canadians offered to take us on with their party, you were very feeble, helpless as a little child. Geoffrey and I looked at each other; it seemed hard to lose such a chance. They had a spare horse, or at least a horse only laden with a little baggage—their provisions having shrunk on the journey—they offered to put you on this horse, and we accepted the offer. Geoffrey walked beside you and led the horse; we made a kind of bed for you on the animal's back, and there you lay tied safely to the saddle."

"Like Mazeppa," said Lucius. "But, for Heaven's sake, come to the other part of your story, when you saw that man alive. Never mind the journey. I have a faint memory—as if at best I had been but half conscious—of travelling on and on under everlasting pine-trees, of perpetual snow that dazzled my aching eyes, of pains in every limb, and a horrible throbbing in my head, and a parching thirst which was the worst torment of all. I am not likely to forget that journey."

"And you remember how we parted at Lytton? I left you and Geoffrey to come back to England your own way, while I went to the gold diggers. Your travels had been for pleasure; I had an eye to business. "Since I can make nothing out of furs," I said to myself, "let me see what I can do with gold. It can require no great genius to dig for gold." You buy a spade and pickaxe, and you dig; you get a bail of water, and you wash; that is all."

"But the man?" cried Lucius, in an agony of impatience. "When and where did you see him?"

"Dear heaven, how impatient he is!" exclaimed the little Dutchman, puffing stolidly at his pipe, and without the faintest intention of quickening his accustomed jog-trot pace. "It was long ways off, it was long times after I wisht you both farewell at Lytton. I leave you, and go off to San Francisco, and then to the diakens. Here I find rough savage men. I have no chance among them; the life is hart. I am knocked about; I am not strong enough for the work. I wish myself—ach, how I wish myself at home here in my snug little cuddy, or sitting to watch the sun go down on my poopdeck! I begin to feel what it is to be old. One day after I have toiled—all *zu nights*—I stretch my weary limbs to rest under my wretched shelter. I hear a loud voice in a tent near at hand—the voice of a man playing at euchre with other men—a voice I know. My heart beats fast and loud. "It is that teufel," I say to myself, "who eats his fellow-men!" I crawl out of my tent along the ground, to the tent from which I hear the sound of that voice—a tent which had been set up only that night; they are close together, my own tent and this new one, just a little pace between, in which I am hidden, in the dark night. I lift the edge of the canvas and look in. There are men playing cards on the board of a barrel by the light of a candle. The candle shines on the face of one man. He is talking, with loud voice and excited gestures. "If this new claim over here turns out as well as our claim yonder, mates, a month longer I shall go back to England," he says. "Back to England," I say to myself; "you are von vicked liar; for in the log-hut you tell us you have been never to England." I stopped to listen to no more. Vavever your bullet may have hit him—and

it did hit him somewhere, for I saw the blood—there he was."

"You have mistaken some one else for him," said Lucius, "in that doubtful light."

"Mistaken! Zen I am mistaken in myself; zis is not me, but only some you like me. Ze light was not doubtful. I see his face plain as I see yours; zis eye-vink, zis moment ze deep-set black eyes—such eyes, eyes like der teufel's—and ze little peak of hair on ze forehead. There was no mistakes. No, Daforen, *es war der mann*."

"Did you see any more of him?"

"Nein," answered the little man, shaking his head vehemently; "once was enough. I went back to San Francisco next day, and started for England in the first vessel zat would convey me. I had had enough of ze diakens."

"How long ago was this?"

"It is von year dass I am returned."

"A year!" repeated Lucius dreamily. "And I did not kill that man after all—grazed his shoulder perhaps, instead of shooting him through the heart. The wretch was wriggling in at the window like an eel when I fired, and care and famine may have made my hand unsteady. Thank God—ay, with all my heart and soul—that his blood is not on my head. He deserved to die; but I am glad he did not die by my hand."

"I do not believe he will offer die," said Mr. Schanck. "He is a deffil, and has more lifes zan a cat."

"He had made money," mused Lucius, "and was coming to England. He is in England at this very moment perhaps, and may claim his daughter, or the girl he called his daughter. It is time that I should solve the mystery of those letters."

This discovery materially altered the aspect of things. Ferdinand Sivewright living and in England meant danger. Would he leave Cedar House unassailed? Would he fail to discover sooner or later the fact that it contained valuable property? Would he not by some means or other endeavour to possess himself of that property?

He would come back to his old father with pretended affection, would act the part of the remorseful prodigal, would cajole Homer Sivewright into forgetfulness or forgiveness of the past, and thus secure the inheritance of his father's treasures.

Then a new idea flashed across Lucius Davoren's brain. What if this spirit of evil, this relentless villain, were at the bottom of the robbery? He remembered that lithe figure seen so briefly in the glare of lightning, just such a form as that of the gaunt wanderer in the pine-wood. What more likely than that Ferdinand Sivewright was the thief, and old Wincher only the accomplice? The old servant might have been bribed to betray his master by promises of future reward, or by some division of the plunder in the present.

"In any case, at the worst, I think I have securely hut the door upon this villain now and henceforward," thought Lucius.

Yet the idea of Ferdinand Sivewright possible presence in England filled him with a vague anxiety. It was an infinite relief to feel himself no longer guilty of this man's death; but it was a new source of trouble to know that he was alive. Of all men, this man was the most to be feared. His presence—were he indeed the man Lucius had seen enter Cedar House after midnight—would account for the poison. That secret staircase might have given him access to his father's room. Yet how should he be a stranger to the house, know of the secret staircase?

Here Lucius was at fault. There was now a new element in that mystery, which had so far baffled his penetration.

"I will see old Wincher, and try to get the truth out of him," he said to himself. "If he is, as I now suspect, only an accomplice, he may be willing to inform against his principal."

After the revelation, so calmly recited by the worthy Schanck, Lucius was eager to be gone. The proprietor of the sea-worthy little dwelling, having said his say, sat placidly contemplating the level Middlesex shore, now wrapped in the mists of evening. He could not sympathise with his friend's feverish condition.

"Led us have some subber," he remarked presently, as if in that suggestion there was balm for all the ills of life. "A gurried rappit would not pe pad, or a lopster varmed in a zauzeban mit some madeira."

Even these delicacies offered no temptation to Lucius.

"I must get to the City as soon as I can," he said. "Good-bye, Schanck. I'll come and see you again some day; or you, who are an idle man, might come to see me. Here's my card with the address, ever so far eastward of the wharf where you landed this afternoon. I thank Providence for our meeting to-day. It has taken a great load off my mind; but it has also given me a new source of anxiety."

This was Greek to Mr. Schanck, who only sighed, and murmured something about "subber," and "gurried rappit," strong in his supply of tinned provisions. Lucius bade him a hearty good-night, and departed from the calm flats of Battersea, eager to wend his way back to the Shadrack-road.

CHAPTER XVII.

LUCIUS SEEKS ENLIGHTENMENT.

LUCIUS was more than usually solicitous for the security of the old house in the Shadrack-road after his meeting with Absalom Schanck; locks and bolts were adjusted with an almost mathematical precision under his eyes, or even

by his own hand; and Mr. Magsby, the ex-policeman, remarked to Mrs. Magsby, in the confidence of the domestic hearth, that for a young gentleman, Mr. Davoren was the fidgettiest and worritingest he had ever had dealings with. Whereupon Mrs. Magsby, who entertained a reverential admiration for Lucius, protested that she could see no fidgettiness in taking precautions against thieves in a house which had already been robbed; and that burnt children are apt to be timid of fire; and, in short, that in her opinion, whatever Mr. Davoren did, he was always the "gentleman."

Early on the day following his visit to Battersea, Lucius went in quest of Mr. Wincher at the address which the old servant had given him at departing.

Mrs. Hickett's, Crown-and-Anchor-alley, was an abode of modest dimensions, the ground floor being comprised by a small square parlour with a corner cut off for the staircase, and an offshoot of an apartment, with a lean-to roof, in the rear, which served as a kitchen.

The parlour, into which the street-door opened directly, was, in the continental sense, Mr. and Mrs. Wincher's "apartment," since it constituted their sole and entire abode. That convenient fiction, a sofa-bedstead, with a chintz cover which frequent washing had reduced to a pale pea-soup colour, occupied one side of the apartment; a Pembroke table, a chest of drawers, and three Windsor chairs filled the remaining space, and left limited standing room for the inhabitants.

But if the domain was small, it was, in the eyes of the Crown-and-Anchor world, genteel, if not splendid. There was a looking-glass in a mahogany frame over the mantelpiece, with a pair of black-velvet kittens, and a crockery shepherd and shepherdess in front of it; a pair of fancy bellows hung from a nail on one side of the fireplace, and a fancy hearth-brush adorned the other side. Altogether, Mrs. Wincher felt that in Mrs. Hickett's ground floor she was sumptuously lodged, and could hold her head high in the Shadrack-road when, in her own phrase, she "fetched her errands," with no galling sense of having descended the social ladder.

She felt the strength of her position with peculiar force this morning when she opened the door to Lucius Davoren.

Her first sensation on beholding him was, as she informed Mrs. Hickett in a subsequent conversation, "astarickle." She fully believed he had come to announce the apprehension of the thief, or the recovery of the stolen property. But in the next moment her native dignity came to her rescue, and she received her guest with a freezing politeness and an assumption of profound indifference.

Some memory of the summer evenings when Mrs. Wincher had played the duenna, the happy talk of a bright future to which she had listened approvingly, came back to Lucius at sight of her familiar countenance. He had once thought her the soul of fidelity; even now he preferred to think her innocent of any complicity in her husband's guilt.

Mr. Wincher was sitting by the fireless grate in a somewhat despondent attitude. He had found "odd jobs" harder to get than he had supposed they would be, and enforced idleness was uncongenial. Nor was his slender stock of savings calculated to hold out long against the charges of rent and living.

"Good-morning," said Lucius with cold civility. "I should be glad to have a few minutes' talk with you alone, Mr. Wincher, if you'll allow me."

"I have no secrets from my good lady, sir. You can say what you have to say before her. You haven't found out who took that silver. I can tell as much as that from your manner," said Mr. Wincher quietly.

"I can't say that I have actually found the thief," answered Lucius; "but I have made a discovery which may help me to find him."

"Eh, sir? What discovery?"

"Mr. Wincher," said Lucius, seating himself opposite the old man and leaning across the table to look into his face, "who was the man you let into your master's house, by the brew-house door, between one and two o'clock on the seventeenth of last month?"

"Sir," said Mr. Wincher, steadily returning the questioner's steady gaze, "as surely as there is a higher Power above us both that knows and judges what we do and say, I have told you nothing but the truth. I let no one into my master's house on that night or any other night."

"What! You had no light burning long after midnight—you set no candle in one of the upper rooms for a signal—you never gave your accomplice a lodging in one of the attics? Why, I tell you, man, I found the bed he had slept in—the ashes of the fire that warmed him—his empty brandy bottle! If you want to go scot-free yourself, or to be paid handsomely for your candour, the truth will best serve you, Mr. Wincher. Who was the man you kept hidden in that upstairs room at Cedar House?"

"I can but repeat what I have said, sir. I never admitted any living creature to that house surreptitiously. I never lodged so much as a strange cat in those upstairs rooms. How could I? Miss Lucille always kept the key of the upper staircase."

"Pshaw! What was to prevent your having a duplicate key?" exclaimed Lucius impatiently.

This old man's protestations sounded like truth; but Lucius told himself they could not be truth. After all, when a man has once made things easy with his conscience—settled with himself that he will not attempt to square his life by the right angle of fair dealing—there need be nothing so very difficult in lying. It can

only be a matter of invention and self-possession.

"Come, Mr. Wincher," said Lucius, after a pause; "believe me, candour will best serve your interests. I know the name of your accomplice, and I am ready to believe that you were ignorant of the darker purpose which brought him to that house. I am ready to believe that you had no hand in the attempt to poison your old master."

"Sir," said Mr. Wincher, with another solemn appeal to the Highest of all Judges, "all that you say is incomprehensible to me. I admitted no one. I know nothing of any attempt to injure my old master, whom I have served faithfully and with affection for three-and-twenty years. I know no more of the robbery than I told you when I informed you of it. There is some mistake, sir."

"What, will you tell me that my own senses have deceived me—that I did not see the door opened and the light in the upper window that night? Who was there in the house to open that door or set that beacon light in the window except you—or Miss Sivewright?"

Or Miss Sivewright! What if it was Lucille who opened the door—Lucille who gave the man shelter in that upper room? Was she not capable of any act, however desperate, for the sake of the father she loved with such a morbid affection? If he came to her as a suppliant, entreating for shelter, pleading perhaps for her influence to bring about a reconciliation between himself and his father, would this fond confiding daughter refuse to admit him? Would she foresee the danger of his presence in that house, or could her innocent mind conceive so deep a guilt as that of the would-be paricide?

A new light broke in upon Lucius Davoren's mind. Here membered all that had been strange in Lucille's manner and conduct since the evening when they went up to the loft and he saw the opening of the attic door. He remembered her anxiety on that occasion—her agitation on every subsequent recurrence to the same subject—her impatient denial of any foundation for his suspicions about the Winchers—how she fell unconscious at his feet when he plainly declared his discovery; and last of all, that fever in which the mind rather than the body had been affected. He recalled her wandering words, in which the name of father had been so often reiterated, and, most significant of all, that strange appeal which Mrs. Milderson had repeated to him, "You couldn't be so wicked as to poison your poor old father." To whom but a son could those words have been spoken? And could delirium suggest so deep a horror if it were utterly baseless?

"No, it was memory, and not a mind distraught, that shaped those fearful words," thought Lucius.

He was silent for some time, pondering this new view of the question. Mr. Wincher waited patiently, his poor old head shaking a little from the agitation of the foregoing conversation. Mr. Wincher's good lady stood with her arms folded, like a statue of female stolidism, as if it were a point of honor with her not to move a muscle.

"Well, Mr. Wincher," said Lucius at last, "it is not for me to decide whether you are guilty or innocent. You will hardly deny that circumstances conspired to condemn you. I did what I felt to be my duty when I advised Mr. Sivewright to dismiss you."

"After three-and-twenty years, and never a fault to find with neither of us," interjected Mrs. Wincher.

"The result has in a considerable measure justified that act. The attempt to poison a helpless old man has made no further progress."

Mr. Wincher cast up his eyes in mute appeal to heaven, but said nothing.

"We could have poisoned him in Bond-street, if we'd wanted to it," protested Mrs. Wincher. "It would only 'a been to cook his bit of minced veal or Irish stew in a verding-greasy copper saucepan, and all the juries as ever 'sat couldn't have brought it home to us."

"Now, if you are, as you allege, an innocent man," pursued Lucius thoughtfully, "you will be glad to give me the utmost assistance. I have made a discovery that may in some measure affect this question. Ferdinand Sivewright is alive, and probably in England."

"Then it was he who stole that silver!" cried the old man, starting up with sudden energy.

"Is not that a hasty conclusion?"

"You would not say so, sir, if you knew that young man as well as I do. He was capable of anything—clever enough for anything in the way of wickedness. The most artful man couldn't be a match for him. He deceived me; he hoodwinked his father, over and over again. There was no lock that could keep anything from him; he robbed his father in every way that it was possible for a man to rob, and looked in his face all the time, and shammed innocence. His mother had trained him to lie and cheat before he could speak plain. If Ferdinand Sivewright is in England, Ferdinand Sivewright is the thief."

"And the poisoner?" asked Lucius.

"I don't know! Perhaps. He did not shrink from stupefying his father's senses with an opiate, when it suited his purpose. He may have grown more hardened in wickedness since then, and may be capable of trying to poison him."

"Mind, I do not say that he is in England," said Lucius, "only that he may be. Now, there is one thing very clear to me, namely, that whoever put the arsenic in that medicine must have entered your master's room by the secret staircase. Mr. Sivewright's door was kept locked