

If loth to leave the spot where Janet had once lived—as if he almost hoped to meet the phantom of her girlhood in one of those low water meadows where he wandered listlessly by the reedy trout streams.

Belle and Dessie pouted a little at this desertion, yet would not complain. Were they not fortunate in dear Geoffrey's return? And if they questioned or teased him he might take flight again.

"I hope you are not going to desert us to-morrow," said Belle, on the evening of his return from Wykhamston.

"Why do you lay such a tremendous stress upon to-morrow?" asked Geoffrey, with a comfortable yawn. He was stretched on a rustic bench outside the drawing-room windows smoking, while these damsels conversed with him from within.

"Have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?" with another yawn.

"How sleepy this country air makes one!"

"Yes, and how stupid sometimes!" exclaimed Dessie. "You might have remembered that to-morrow is the day for Lady Baker's fête."

"Ah, to be sure! She's a very nice old party, that Lady Baker of yours. I shall make a point of being in attendance upon you."

CHAPTER XII.

TROUBLES THICKEN.

There was plenty of work for Lucius in his surgery when he went home, after inducting Mr. Otranto's men in their duties at Cedar House. There were the medicines to be made up, and to be taken round to the patients that night, by the sleepy boy who looked unutterable reproaches at his master for this unwanted neglect of duty.

"Some of the places will be shut, I should think," he said with an injured air, as he ground some nauseous drug furiously with a stone pestle; "and some of the folks gone to bed. We've never been so late before."

"I don't think our neighbours hereabouts are renowned for their early habits," answered Lucius, unabashed by this reproof. "If you find people are gone to bed, you can bring the medicines home, and take them out again early to-morrow morning. You needn't go on knocking and ringing if you don't get answered quickly."

"Very well, sir," murmured the boy with a yawn. "They'll be up at all the public offices; there's the liniment for Mrs. Purdew's sprained wrist, and the lotion for Mrs. Tweak's black eye; and they'll be up at the butcher's, and at the general round the corner, where the children's down with measles, I dare say. But I expect to find the private gentlefolks gone to bed."

"Give me that rhubarb, and hold your tongue," said Lucius.

His medicines were soon made up and dispatched; and he was on the point of leaving his surgery for the night, when he put his hand in his pocket in search of a key, and found the bottle he had taken from Mr. Sivewright's bedside.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed; "are mind and memory failing me altogether that I could forget this?"

He held the bottle between him and the flame of the gas. The liquid, which had been clear enough when he sent it out of his surgery, had now a slightly clouded look.

"I wonder whether I have such a thing as a bit of copper gauze?" he thought, as he put down the bottle.

He looked in several small drawers in the table on which he made up his medicines, and finally found the object he sought for. He poured the medicine into a glass vessel and applied his test.

The experiment showed him that there was arsenic in the medicine. The quantity was of the smallest, but the poison was there. He repeated his experiment, to make assurance doubly sure. Yes, there could be no shadow of doubt. Arsenic had been introduced into the medicine since it had left his hands yesterday afternoon.

Whose was the guilty hand which had done this thing? His vague suspicion arose before him all at once in the shape of an awful fact, and the horror of it almost paralysed thought. Who could have seemed more secure than this harmless old man, lying on his sick bed, tenderly watched by loving eyes, ministered to by dutiful hands—guarded, it would seem, from the possibility of danger? Yet even there a murderer had penetrated; and by slow steps, by means so gradual as almost to defy suspicion, that feeble life was assailed.

Who could the assassin be but that old servant in whose fidelity Homer Sivewright trusted from the mere force of habit? Yes; the case seemed clear enough, looked at by the light of this new discovery. Wincher, who knew the full value of the collection, had begun a systematic course of plunder—who could tell how long it had gone on? Perhaps ever since Mr. Sivewright had taken to his bed—and, in order to escape the detection which must have been inevitable on the old man's recovery, he had taken measures to make his master's illness mortal.

"Perhaps he argues that by dropping a pinch of arsenic into his master's medicine now and then he only assists the progress of the disease, and that his crime is something less than murder," said Lucius bitterly.

He was angry with himself, because this very day—after suspecting Mr. Wincher, nay, after feeling convinced of his guilt—he had suffered himself to be hoodwinked, and had believed the

old servant to be an honest man. He remembered Mr. Otranto's dictum, so absolutely expressed, and smiled at the incapacity of a man whom the world deemed possessed of almost superhuman powers.

"Yes, the scheme is transparent. He has admitted the man I saw night after night, and has doubtless made away with all that is most valuable in the collection. He knows that his master's recovery would be his ruin, and he means to prevent that recovery. His apparent candor this morning was a profound stroke of policy. He took alarm from what I said to his wife—guessed that I had seen the entrance of his accomplice, and played his cards accordingly. Not clever enough for a thief, did you say, Mr. Otranto? Why, here is a man clever enough to carry on simultaneous robbery and murder, and yet to wear the semblance of most consummate innocence. This is evidently a development of intellectual power among the dangerous classes for which your previous experience has not prepared you."

Lucius laughed the laugh of scorn at the thought of Mr. Otranto's shortsightedness.

But what was he, Lucius, to do? That was the question. How was he to avert the danger from his patient, and yet avoid alarming him? To do that might be fatal. To tell a man almost at Death's door that he had been brought to this pass by a slow poisoner in his own household, would surely be to complete the murder. Where was the sick man with nerves strong enough to endure such a revelation?

"I must get rid of these Winchers, yet not tell Mr. Sivewright the cause of their dismissal," thought Lucius. "I can invent some plausible excuse for their disappearance. And when they are gone—Stay, might it not be better to let them stop, and to keep watch over my patient myself—so close a watch, that if foul play were attempted I must discover the delinquent?"

He meditated upon this question for some time; now leaning one way, now the other.

"No," he decided at last; "murder shall no longer lurk within the shadow of those walls! At any cost I will get rid of those wretches, with their pretence of long service and fidelity."

He thought of Mrs. Wincher, whom he had been himself induced to think one of the most well-meaning of women, completely devoted to her young mistress, faithful, affectionate.

"She may not know the extent of her husband's iniquity," he thought; for it was painful to him to believe that the woman who had hovered about Love's rosy pathway like a protecting angel was among the vilest of her sex.

"What about this night?" he asked himself with painful anxiety. He had left a guard upon the house and its treasures, but what guard had he set upon that old man's life? The doors of the sick room might be locked ever so securely, and yet the assassin might enter. Wincher and his accomplice might know of that secret staircase, in spite of the old servant's affectation of entire ignorance; and between the secret staircase and the sick chamber there was only a sliding panel.

"I'll go back to-night," said Lucius. "I should be a dastard if, with my present knowledge, I left that old man unprotected. I'll go back, and get into the garden from the creek. I shall find the detective on his beat at the back, no doubt. I'll warn him about the secret staircase; so that no one shall get to Mr. Sivewright's room that way, at any rate."

He lost no time in putting his resolve into execution. It was a few minutes past eleven, and the distance to Cedar House was about half an hour's walk. Before midnight he would be there.

Fortune favored him. The night was dark, and there was no one to observe his trespass as he walked along the deserted wharf and stepped lightly across the untenanted barges. From one of these it was easy to get upon the low wall of Mr. Sivewright's garden. He saw a light in the brewhouse, where he had found the entrance to the secret stair. The door was open, and the detective was lounging against the door-post, smoking his pipe and enjoying the night air.

"Who's there?" he demanded in cautious tones, as Lucius's light footstep sounded on the weedy gravel.

"A friend—Davoren," answered Lucius, and then told the man the reason of his return.

"This is a worse case than even I thought it," he said. "There has been an attempt to poison the old gentleman up stairs, as well as to rob him."

The man looked incredulous. Lucius briefly stated his ground for this statement.

"There has been nothing stirring here?" he asked.

"Nothing, except the beadsles. They're on short rations, and it seems to make 'em active. I've been in and out ever since you left."

"Has Wincher gone to bed?"

"Two hours ago."

"And you are sure he has never stirred since?"

"Quite sure. I've been past his door about every ten minutes or so, and have heard him and his wife snoring as peaceable as a pair of turtle-doves."

"Well, I've come to share your watch till morning, if you've no objection. After the discovery I've just told you about, I couldn't rest."

"No objections, sir. If you'd brought a case-bottle with a trifle of spirit it might have been welcome."

"I am sorry that I omitted to provide myself with such a thing," answered Lucius politely.

He showed the detective the door opening upon the secret staircase, and told him not to leave the brewhouse while he, Lucius, went upstairs to see that all was right on the upper stories.

"If the man who came last night should come again to-night, he will try to enter by that door," said Lucius, pointing to the door by which he had just come in. "Leave it open, and your light burning just where it is. He'll take that to mean that all's right, most likely. But be sure you keep in the background yourself till he's fairly inside."

"I hope I know my business, sir," replied the detective with dignity.

Lucius went through the back premises to the hall. The doors in the interior of the house had been left open for the convenience of the watchers. His footsteps, cautiously as he trod, resounded on the stone-paved floor; so at the foot of the staircase he drew off his boots, and went up-stairs noiselessly in his stockings. He thought of Mr. Sivewright's complaint of that mysterious foot-fall which had disturbed his slumbers in the deep of night—the footstep of the treacherous assassin. To-night he was surely guarded. From the lower part of the house no one could approach him without the knowledge of the watcher lying in wait below.

But how about those upper rooms, in one of whose windows he had seen the light burning last night? Was there not some mystery there? He determined to explore that topmost story, now, in the darkness of the night even, rather than leave his doubts unsatisfied.

Vain determination! The door of communication between the corridor and the upper staircase was locked. He tried it with a cautious hand, and found it firmly secured against him. Then he remembered how Lucille had locked that door and put the key in her pocket after they came down-stairs from the loft.

If that door had been locked and the key in Lucille's possession last night, how came the light in the upper window? That was a new problem for him to solve.

He crept along the passage, and listened at the old man's door. He could hear his patient's breathing, labored but regular. There was no other sound in the room.

He waited here for some time, listening; but there was nothing save the old man's breathing to disturb the stillness, nothing until from Lucille's room there came the sound of a long deep sigh—a sigh from a heart sorely oppressed.

That sound smote his own heart with unspeakable pain. It betrayed such deep unhappiness—a sorrow which could only find vent in the dead of the night, in deep heart-broken sighs.

"Is it her grandfather's danger that makes her so unhappy?" he wondered. "Strange; for the old man has never been particularly kind to her—has always kept her at arm's length, as it were. Yet, I daresay, to her tender nature the thought of approaching death is too terrible. She cannot face the inevitable doom; she lies awake and broods upon the approaching calamity. Poor child! if she but knew how baseless has been her dream of a father's love, how vainly her tenderest feelings have been wasted on a wretch who has not even the poor claim of kindred to her love!"

For more than an hour he waited, sometimes outside his patient's door, sometimes by Lucille's; but nothing happened to alarm him throughout his watch, and he knew the approach to the secret staircase was securely guarded. No intruder could reach Mr. Sivewright's room that night, at any rate.

Lucius went down-stairs at last, and smoked a cigar in the brewhouse while the detective took his round through all the lower rooms. Thus the night wore away, and in the gray dawn Lucius once more mounted the stairs, and paced the corridor. Again all was silence. This time he heard no sigh from Lucille. His heart was relieved by the thought that she was sleeping peacefully.

With the dawn—Aurora the rosy-fingered showing poorly at this east-end of London—he made his way back by the garden wall, the barges, and the wharf, and returned to his own abode, which looked sordid and cheerless enough beneath the pale light of newborn day—cold and dreary and poor, lacking the picturesqueness of a lodge in the primeval forest, and but slightly surpassing it in luxury. He laid himself down and tried his hardest to sleep, but the thought of old Homer Sivewright and his hidden enemy, the domestic poisoner, drove away slumber.

"I shall sleep no more till I have fathomed this mystery," he said to himself wearily.

But at last, when the sun was shining through the poor screen afforded by a calico blind, he did fall into a kind of sleep, or rather that feverish condition which is neither sleeping nor waking. From this state he woke with a start—that kind of shock which jars the nerves of the dreamer when his vision ends on the brink of a precipice, whence he feels himself descending to fathomless depths below. His forehead was damp with a nameless horror; he trembled as he rose in his bed.

It was as if a voice had spoken in his ear as he slept.

"What if Lucille were the poisoner?"

Great Heavens! how could so vile a thought shape itself in his mind? Yet with the thought there arose before him, as if it had been shown to him upon the open pages of a book, all those circumstances which might seem to point to this hideous conclusion. Who else, in that lonely old house, had the same power to approach the patient? In whom else would Homer Sivewright trust as blindly?

He remembered Lucille's agitation when he first hinted the possibility of poison—that whitening cheek, that sudden look of horror. Might not guilt look thus?

And then her emotion yesterday morning, when she had dropped lifeless at his feet? Could anything but guilt be thus stricken?

"O God," he cried, "I am surely going mad! Or how else could such horrible thoughts enter my mind? Do I not know her to be good and pure, loving, unselfish, compassionate? And with the conviction of her goodness firmly rooted in my heart, can I for one moment fear,—ay, even though circumstances should weave a web of proof around her, leaving not one loophole for escape?"

He wrenched his thoughts away from the facts which seemed to condemn the woman he so deeply loved, and by a great effort of will dismissed a fancy which seemed the most cruel treason against love.

"Does the evil one inspire our dreams sometimes?" he wondered. "So vile a thought could never have entered my head if a voice had not whispered the hateful suggestion into my sleeping ear. But there shall be an end at once of suspicion and of mystery. I will no longer treat Lucille as a child. I frightened her more by my hints and suggestions than I could have done had I told her the plain facts. I will trust to her firmness and fortitude, and tell her all without reserve—the discovery of the attempted poisoning, the robbery, the secret entrance of the man I watched the night before last. I will trust her most fully."

This resolve gave extreme relief to his mind. He dressed hurriedly, took a brief breakfast of his own preparation, Mrs. Babb the charwoman not yet having left her domestic circle to minister to his wants, and at half-past eight o'clock found himself once more outside the iron gate which shut in the chief object of his love. Mrs. Wincher admitted him with a solemn and mournful visage.

"Is there anything amiss?" asked Lucius anxiously.

"I don't believe there'll ever be anything more in this blessed house that isn't amiss," answered Mrs. Wincher obscurely, but with a despondent air that augured ill.

"Mr. Sivewright is worse, I suppose," said Lucius.

"Mr. Sivewright is much as usual, grumble, grumble—this here don't agree with him, and that there turns sour on his stomach, and so on—enough to worrit folks into early graves. But there's a deal more the matter than that this morning."

"For Heaven's sake, speak plainly," cried Lucius impatiently.

"Our missy is in a burning fever. She was heavy and lollypop-like all yesterday afternoon, and her cheeks, that have been as white as a chaney teaplate lately, was red and hot-looking, and she slept heavy and breathed short in her sleep, for I stood and watched her; and she moved about in a languid way that wasn't a bit like her quick light ways when she's well. But I thought it was nothink more than what you say yourself yesterday morning—want of rest. I should've thought you might've known she was sickening for a fever," added Mrs. Wincher reproachfully.

"Misfortune does not always declare itself so plainly. I could see that she was ill, and that was all. God grant the fever may not be very much, after all!"

"Not very much!" exclaimed Mrs. Wincher. "Why, when I took her a hearty cup of tea at half-past seven this morning, which was as soon as I could get my kettle boiled, she was raving like a lunatic—going on about her father, and such-like—in a dreadful way, and didn't recognise me no more nor if I'd been a stranger out of the street."

This was a bad hearing; but Lucius bore the shock calmly enough. Troubles and perplexities had rained thickly upon him of late, and there is a kind of stoicism which grows out of familiarity with sorrow.

"Take me to Miss Sivewright's room," he said quickly, "and let me see what is the matter."

"I've moved her out of the little dressing-room into her own room," said Mrs. Wincher; "me and my good gentleman carried the bed with her on it while she was asleep. I thought as how it wouldn't do for the old gentleman to hear her carrying on that wild."

"You were right enough there. Yet she was a faithful guardian, and your master is now in the power of his foes."

"Foes, sir? What foes can he have in this house?"

"The same people who found their way to the plate in the muniment chest might find their way to Mr. Sivewright's room," said Lucius.

"Lor, sir, how you do frighten one! But what harm could even thieves and robbers want to do to a harmless old man, unless he stood between 'em and the property?"

"I won't stop to discuss that question with you now, Mrs. Wincher. I shall have something to say to you and your husband presently. Have the detectives gone?"

"Yes, sir; but they're coming back the same time to-night. One of 'em left a bit of a note for you. It's on the kitchen chimbleypiece. I'll run and fetch it if you like."

"Not till you have taken me to Miss Sivewright's room. Is she alone all this time?"

"Yes, sir; but she was asleep when I left her. She dozes off every now and then."

"She must have a nurse to watch her sleeping or waking."

(To be continued.)

AN IRISHMAN writing from Philadelphia the other day to his friend in the old country, concluded a letter thus: "If iver it's me good fortune to live till I dy—and God nose whether it is so—I'll visit ould Ireland afore I lave Philadelphia."