



CHAPTER VI A MORNING VISIT.

I did not forget the superintendent's good advice. Immediately after the disappearance of the diamond I searched the whole of Villa Ballarat most carefully.

The servants behaved with exemplary resignation, and offered to open all their trunks. I even took the liberty of searching Mr. Howell's rooms. All his drawers and trunks were open, but contained nothing of interest. My investigations also made it clear that this gentleman had proceeded direct to the station on the day the diamond disappeared, and from there took the train to Elverum.

I don't know how it was, but I always had a misgiving that this young Englishman might have had something to do with the disappearance of the diamond. This, perhaps, was the reason that made me feel more acutely than ever, that not one of us really knew the young man, in spite of his having been several months in Villa Ballarat. His manners were free and open; but one did not learn to know him.

I soon placed Iverson, the gardener, the cook and the housemaid *hors de concours*. Iverson had for many years shown himself to be a most respectable and reliable person. He was a bachelor, had a nice little sum in the bank, and it was easy to find out about his antecedents. He was the son of well-to-do peasants in Smaleneene, and when quite young had gone into the non-commissioned officers' school and followed a military career, until he entered Frick's service. He had always borne a most irreproachable character.

Last of all, we now come to the lady-maid, Evelina; and should you have a suspicion that she is likely to play an important part in the lamentable events which now followed, one upon the other, you will not be far wrong.

From the first, or, more correctly, from the second day I entered old Frick's house, this young girl had struck me as being strange. There was something mysterious about her, perhaps on account of her reserved and even sulky manners.

Sigrid also considered her unusually silent, more so by nature than most young girls are. She thought that she was a girl of strong character, and liked her, in spite of her reticent ways.

During the latter days she had been still more reserved than before, and had not given me the impression of being in good health, although there was little change noticeable in her appearance on account of her naturally pale complexion.

The afternoon of the disappearance of the diamond, Evelina had spent in the following manner (her explanation tallied exactly with that of others): She had, soon after dinner, when the family had retired to the museum, served the coffee there. When that was finished, she had left Villa Ballarat to visit her sick mother, just before the time Jurgens had left the house. At six o'clock she had returned to the villa again to fetch something she had forgotten, and had, at the same time, put on another dress on account of a change in the weather; but she had been scarcely half an hour in the house.

It struck me as strange that Evelina had suddenly become more lively than I had ever seen her, and Sigrid also thought that she looked better and more cheerful since the day when the diamond disappeared.

As regards Evelina's mother, Madame Reierson, I found out that she made her living by washing and ironing, and by letting a couple of her rooms; but it was said that she was fond of drink, and that her principal income evidently consisted in what her daughter allowed her. Miss Frick's generosity no doubt enabled Evelina to give her mother considerable help.

Madame Reierson's specialty lay in talking of times gone by, when Reierson was alive and was a well-to-do turner in Grönland; "she, too, had had her own house and a horse and trap."

As you see, I had not gained much by my investigations, but my opinion regarding the loss of the diamond had, however, begun to take shape, which made it desirable that I should make Madame Reierson's acquaintance.

At half-past nine the next morning, when the May sun was shining warmly, a gentleman entered the courtyard of 44 Russel Street.

role I intended to play. In the courtyard a woman was standing rinsing clothes under a pump. I asked for Madame Reierson, and learned that she was living in the fourth story on the right-hand side of the staircase.

"I mean the woman who takes in washing."

"Well, I don't think there's much washing done, but there's only one Madame Reierson in this house at any rate," was the surly answer.

"I think you're right about the washing. In any case, the clothes I last got home were only half washed," I remarked.

My depreciatory remark about her neighbor's work evidently appealed to the woman; she seemed to let go the wet clothes she had in her hand, and turned round to me.

"Ah, indeed! Really! So she has been washing for you, has she, and you don't like her washing? Well, you're not the first as says that. It's a shame that such a drunken wretch should take the bread out of other people's mouths, and live in grand style, and enjoy herself."

"Well, I, for my part, have been thinking of giving her up as my washerwoman."

"Ha! ha! you give her up?" said the worthy woman, with a scornful laugh.

"A lot she'll care about that! As long as she's got that fine daughter of hers in service at old Frick's, in the Drammen Road, she can live in grand style, and enjoy herself without washing a rag. But I should say it'll all come to a terrible end some day; when people begin to run after them actors I wouldn't give you a thank you for 'em!"

And with that our short but pleasant conversation ended.

I tried to find out a little more about the actor who had suddenly been introduced upon the scene, but I was sharply sent about my business by the woman, who "did not go about telling tales, let alone to strangers."

There was nothing more to be done, so I mounted up to the fourth story. On a door with glass panes were fastened two visiting-cards. I read: Ludvig Frederiksen, actor; Tho. Herstad, medical student.

To the left I found an ordinary kitchen door. As I knocked at this a stout woman appeared. Madame Reierson was clad in what I would call a simple morning toilet. I can hardly describe the various articles of her dress; all of them, however, appeared to be too tight-fitting for her buxom figure, and to have seen better days.

I lifted my large, broad-brimmed, low-crowned, clerical hat to her, and then explained that the object of my visit was to ask Madame to do some washing for me.

She seemed greatly surprised that any one, unsolicited, should intrust his clothes to her to wash, and asked rather suspiciously who had recommended her.

"Perhaps we might go inside," said I. "I would like to sit down a little. I am not quite well, and the stairs trouble me."

She mumbled something about "she didn't mind," and showed me through the kitchen into a disorderly room, filled with foul air. This served as her parlor and her bedroom.

I sat down heavily and laid my hand on my heart.

She didn't seem, however, to be troubled with any sympathetic feelings, for I heard her mumble something about "Why do folks climb stairs when they can't manage 'em?"

"But who has shown you up to me, then?" she continued.

I could see it would be difficult for me, if not impossible, to get into conversation with this unpleasant woman, as she apparently had not yet had her "morning drop," and was therefore not amenable to any friendly approach.

I decided to come to the point at once.

"Miss Frick has recommended me to come to you, as I wanted a good washerwoman—Miss Frick, who lives in Drammen Road."

The woman sat herself down in a chair right opposite me, and looked rather astonished.

"Do you go to the Fricks?—You?" was the unflattering answer, as she critically surveyed me.

I regretted the plain attire, which I had thought would be suitable for my supposed errand; but there was no help for that now; I had to get along as best I could.

"I am studying for the church," I said with dignity, "and I am secretary to the women's mission, and we generally have the committee meetings at Miss Frick's."

"Oh, indeed! Really!" Suddenly there was a gleam in the woman's eyes. She had evidently got an idea into her head, because from that moment her manner was affable and insinuating.

"Oh, indeed! Now really! So you are going to be a parson? That was what our eldest son was also to be. Reierson wanted him to become a doctor, but I swore that he should become a parson. Well, I expect you meet a lot of grand ladies there, then! Have you seen my daughter at Miss Frick's?"

"What, your daughter?"

"Oh, well; that's no matter," she evidently did not find it very opportune to say anything about her daughter, since I myself didn't appear to know her position in Frick's house. "But, as you go to old Frick's, you have, of course, heard summat of his big diamond which he has lost."

I knew, of course, that the town had already begun to talk of the diamond affair, but it came quite unexpectedly upon me to hear this woman talking of it. Did she want to know what suspicions they had at Frick's house? Did she know anything about it? Had she her own suspicions, or was it only curiosity?

"Yes; fortunately, they have got hold of the thief."

"No! now you don't say so!"

Just at this interesting point of the conversation we heard the kitchen door open.

Madame Reierson left me, and quickly disappeared.

Then began a lively conversation in almost a whisper, but the door was rickety and my hearing sharp; it was Madame Reierson's voice and another woman's voice. I recognized it; it was her daughter's.

"Not home?—not come home yet, do you say?—been out the whole night—"

I heard the mother mumble something that "he" must soon come home.

"And he has not even left any message? He promised that I should meet him at ten o'clock to-day.—A strange gentleman, do you say, whom Miss Frick has recommended to come to you?"

The mother must have spoken of my presence, but the daughter seemed to have a legitimate suspicion about the recommendation from Miss Frick. Perhaps she was inquisitive, and wanted to see the phenomenon who came to Madame Reierson with his washing; for the door immediately opened, and I stood face to face with Evelina, the lady-maid.

She stood there, tall and erect, pretty and tastefully dressed as usual. When she recognized me, her pale face became still paler, and it seemed to me she tottered a little. She only pressed her thin lips together and looked calmly at me.

"Are you here? I did not know the police were here." She looked at my garb and smiled a little scornfully.

At these words, Madame Reierson forced herself past her daughter and surveyed me angrily.

"Police, do you say? Does he belong to the police? Well, I might have guessed it, since he sneaked in here and began to talk of the stolen diamond and suchlike."

I looked at the daughter, but her features were immovable. Either she had nothing to do with the diamond robbery, or she had a stronger will power than most people.

"You forget, Madame Reierson," said I, "that it was you who began to talk to me of the robbery at Mr. Frick's."

Was I mistaken, or was it really so? It seemed to me that the young girl's look was directed for a second or two at her mother with great displeasure.

"Well, if it was I who began the talk, it must have been because you fooled me on to do it," said Madame Reierson, jumping up from her chair; "else why did you come here? Perhaps you fancy we have stolen Frick's diamond! Be so kind as to look for yourself, and see if it is to be found in my house."

The worthy dame began to pull out her chest of drawers, and to open her cupboards, while her tongue went on with startling rapidity.

"I hadn't thought of making any investigations in your house, my dear Madame," said I, trying to pacify her; "I came really to find out a little about your lodger, the actor, Frederiksen."

This time the daughter's self-control did not serve her; for some seconds her face was overspread with a deep flush, and she went away and looked out of the window.

"Frederiksen is old enough to answer for himself," said Mrs. Reierson, curtly. "He is not at home now, and I don't know when he is likely to be."

As I had nothing further to do there, I took my hat, nodded to the woman, and left without ceremony. The young girl still stood at the window, and did not turn round when I went out. Either she did not notice it, or she did not wish to show her face.

When I had descended to the next floor, I heard the sound of heavy steps coming up. First of all a ruffled silk hat appeared on the stairs, afterward a pale, dissipated-looking face, with clean-shaven cheeks, luxuriant curly hair under the brim of the hat, a black frock coat of faultless cut but with spotted silk revers, light trousers somewhat frayed at the bottoms, and cracked patent-leather shoes with large bows.

The apparition stared at me stupidly and disappeared through the door leading to his apartments. It was Ludvig Frederiksen, who had little or no reputation as an actor, but was well known as a Don Juan, now somewhat on the decline, but worshipped, nevertheless, by the fair sex, not only of the better classes, but also of the demi-monde.

He possessed the happy gift of being able to easily forget unpleasantness, for at this moment he evidently did not recognize me, while less than a month before we had had a not very pleasant conversation at my office.

The cause of this conversation was a respectful application from the artist for a loan of some thousand of kroner, directed to one of the merchants of the town. This document the merchant in question found best to deliver into the hands of the police, although the bewitching artist had offered to deposit, as security, several pink and perfumed notes, billets doux from the merchant's own daughter to the owner of the curly locks.

"We shall probably have another interesting conversation," I thought, as my eyes followed the form of the artist as he mounted upward and disappeared; "but not now."

The fact was that in the course of the last half hour, certain ideas, which earlier had begun to dawn in my mind, now assumed a more solid form, and fitted together, so that they formed a chain.

I thought I had hold of one end of the chain, and I was determined to fumble my way to the other end; or perhaps it would be better with a resolute pull to try and grasp it without fumbling at all.

The chain had, however, begun to link itself in this way, and when I left Mrs. Reierson's parlor, I felt convinced that Evelina knew something about the diamond, and very likely her mother also.

As I had passed through the little kitchen my elbow knocked against a dirty coffee-service which stood there—a pot and two cups with dried-up grounds at the bottom. This accident was sufficient to set

going a train of thoughts when, no doubt, had already been unconsciously developing in my mind; but which would never have been started into active life if Mrs. Reierson's objectionable coffee-cups had not been standing there.

They brought to my mind an expression in Evelina's explanation the other day:

"I went home to my mother as soon as I had served the coffee in the museum."

She had served the coffee in the museum; she had seen that the diamond had been shown about; had seen Jurgens's imbecile greediness to become possessed of it; she had heard him bid ten thousand kroner for it! Later on she had passed the museum, when all were gone, and seeing the door standing open, knew she had only to stretch out her hand to become possessed of a large sum of money.

Perhaps she had some use or another for the latter, of which I, as yet, had no certain knowledge,—but of which I had a suspicion.

If this train of thought was correct, then Mr. Jurgens had now the diamond in his possession.

The improbability that this worthy old man should have become the receiver of stolen goods did not concern me. I knew that the mania for collecting sweeps away all moral considerations like chaff before the wind, especially when second childhood has already begun to obscure the mind.

(To be Continued.)

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