

The Crock of Gold eBook

The Crock of Gold by Martin Farquhar Tupper

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Contents

The Crock of Gold eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	7
Page 1.....	9
Page 2.....	11
Page 3.....	12
Page 4.....	13
Page 5.....	14
Page 6.....	15
Page 7.....	17
Page 8.....	18
Page 9.....	19
Page 10.....	20
Page 11.....	21
Page 12.....	23
Page 13.....	24
Page 14.....	26
Page 15.....	28
Page 16.....	29
Page 17.....	31
Page 18.....	33
Page 19.....	35
Page 20.....	36
Page 21.....	37
Page 22.....	39

Page 23.....	41
Page 24.....	43
Page 25.....	45
Page 26.....	46
Page 27.....	48
Page 28.....	49
Page 29.....	51
Page 30.....	53
Page 31.....	54
Page 32.....	55
Page 33.....	56
Page 34.....	58
Page 35.....	60
Page 36.....	61
Page 37.....	62
Page 38.....	63
Page 39.....	64
Page 40.....	66
Page 41.....	68
Page 42.....	70
Page 43.....	72
Page 44.....	74
Page 45.....	75
Page 46.....	76
Page 47.....	78
Page 48.....	79

Page 49.....	80
Page 50.....	81
Page 51.....	83
Page 52.....	85
Page 53.....	86
Page 54.....	88
Page 55.....	90
Page 56.....	92
Page 57.....	94
Page 58.....	96
Page 59.....	98
Page 60.....	100
Page 61.....	102
Page 62.....	103
Page 63.....	104
Page 64.....	106
Page 65.....	108
Page 66.....	110
Page 67.....	111
Page 68.....	113
Page 69.....	114
Page 70.....	116
Page 71.....	118
Page 72.....	119
Page 73.....	120
Page 74.....	122

Page 75.....	124
Page 76.....	126
Page 77.....	127
Page 78.....	129
Page 79.....	131
Page 80.....	133
Page 81.....	135
Page 82.....	137
Page 83.....	138
Page 84.....	140
Page 85.....	142
Page 86.....	144
Page 87.....	145
Page 88.....	147
Page 89.....	148
Page 90.....	150
Page 91.....	152
Page 92.....	154
Page 93.....	156
Page 94.....	157
Page 95.....	158
Page 96.....	159
Page 97.....	161
Page 98.....	163
Page 99.....	165
Page 100.....	167

Page 101.....	169
Page 102.....	171
Page 103.....	173
Page 104.....	174
Page 105.....	176
Page 106.....	178
Page 107.....	180
Page 108.....	181
Page 109.....	183
Page 110.....	185
Page 111.....	187
Page 112.....	188
Page 113.....	190
Page 114.....	192
Page 115.....	194

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
THE CROCK OF GOLD;	1
CHAPTER I.	1
CHAPTER II.	3
CHAPTER III.	6
CHAPTER IV.	10
CHAPTER V.	11
CHAPTER VI.	14
CHAPTER VII.	18
CHAPTER VIII.	21
CHAPTER IX.	23
CHAPTER X.	26
CHAPTER XI.	29
CHAPTER XII.	31
CHAPTER XIII.	34
CHAPTER XIV.	38
CHAPTER XV.	39
CHAPTER XVI.	43
CHAPTER XVII.	45
CHAPTER XVIII.	48
CHAPTER XIX.	51
CHAPTER XX.	53
CHAPTER XXI.	55
CHAPTER XXII.	57
CHAPTER XXIII.	60
CHAPTER XXIV.	63
CHAPTER XXV.	64
CHAPTER XXVI.	67
CHAPTER XXVII.	69
CHAPTER XXVIII.	70
CHAPTER XXIX.	71
CHAPTER XXX.	73
CHAPTER XXXI.	74
CHAPTER XXXII.	77
CHAPTER XXXIII.	78
CHAPTER XXXIV.	79
CHAPTER XXXV.	80
CHAPTER XXXVI.	81
CHAPTER XXXVII.	83
CHAPTER XXXVIII.	84

CHAPTER XXXIX.	85
CHAPTER XL.	87
CHAPTER XLI.	88
CHAPTER XLII.	90
CHAPTER XLIII.	92
CHAPTER XLIV.	94
CHAPTER XLV.	96
CHAPTER XLVI.	97
CHAPTER XLVII.	99
CHAPTER XLVIII.	105
CHAPTER XLIX.	106
CHAPTER L.	108
CHAPTER LI.	110
CHAPTER LII.	112
CHAPTER LIII.	113
CHAPTER LIV.	114

Page 1

THE CROCK OF GOLD;

A Rural Novel.

by

Martin Farquhar Tupper, ESQ., M.A.,

Author of "Proverbial Philosophy."

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1851.

CHAPTER I.

The labourer; and his dawning discontent.

Roger Acton woke at five. It was a raw March morning, still dark, and bitterly cold, while at gusty intervals the rain beat in against the crazy cottage-window. Nevertheless, from his poor pallet he must up and rouse himself, for it will be open weather by sunrise, and his work lies two miles off; Master Jennings is not the man to show him favour if he be late, and Roger cannot afford to lose an hour: so he shook off the luxury of sleep, and rose again to toil with weary effort.

"Honest Roger," as the neighbours called him, was a fair specimen of a class which has been Britain's boast for ages, and may be still again, in measure, but at present that glory appears to be departing: a class much neglected, much enduring; thoroughly English—just, industrious, and patient; true to the altar, and loyal to the throne; though haply shaken somewhat now from both those noble faiths—warped in their principles, and blunted in their feelings, by lying doctrines and harsh economies; a class—I hate the cold cant term—a race of honourable men, full of cares, pains, privations—but of pleasures next to none; whose life at its most prosperous estate is labour, and in death we count him happy who did not die a pauper. Through them, serfs of the soil, the earth yields indeed her increase, but it is for others; from the fields of plenty they glean a scanty pittance, and fill the barns to bursting, while their children cry for bread. Not that Roger for his part often wanted work; he was the best hand in the parish, and had earned of his employers long ago the name of Steady Acton; but the fair wages for a fair day's labour were quite another thing, and the times went very hard for him and his. A man himself may starve, while his industry makes others fat: and a liberal landlord all the winter through may keep his labourers in work, while a crafty, overbearing bailiff mulcts them in their wages.

For the outward man, Acton stood about five feet ten, a gaunt, spare, and sinewy figure, slightly bent; his head sprinkled with gray; his face marked with those rigid lines, which tell, if not of positive famine, at least of too much toil on far too little food; in his eye, patience and good temper; in his carriage, a mixture of the sturdy bearing, necessary to the habitual exercise of great muscular strength, together with that gait of humility—almost humiliation—which is the seal of oppression upon poverty. He might be about forty, or from that to fifty, for hunger, toil, and weather had used him the roughest; while, for all beside, the patched and well-worn smock, the heavily-clouted high-laced boots, a dingy worsted neck-tie, and an old felt hat, complete the picture of externals.

Page 2

But, for the matter of character within, Roger is quite another man. If his rank in this world is the lowest, many potentates may envy him his state elsewhere. His heart is as soft, as his hand is horny; with the wandering gipsy or the tramping beggar, thrust aside, perhaps deservedly, as impudent impostors from the rich man's gate, has he often-times shared his noon-day morsel: upright and sincere himself, he thinks as well of others: he scarcely ever heard the Gospels read in church, specially about Eastertide, but the tears would trickle down his weather-beaten face: he loves children—his neighbour's little ones as well as his own: he will serve any one for goodness' sake without reward or thanks, and is kind to the poor dumb cattle: he takes quite a pride in his little rod or two of garden, and is early and late at it, both before and after the daily sum of labour: he picks up a bit of knowledge here and there, and somehow has contrived to amass a fund of information for which few would give him credit from his common looks; and he joins to that stock of facts a natural shrewdness to use his knowledge wisely. Though with little of what is called sentiment, or poetry, or fancy in his mind (for harsh was the teaching of his childhood, and meagre the occasions of self-culture ever since), the beauty of creation is by no means lost upon him, and he notices at times its wisdom too. With a fixed habit of manly piety ever on his lips and ever in his heart, he recognises Providence in all things, just, and wise, and good. More than so; simply as a little child who endures the school-hour for the prospect of his play-time, Roger Acton bears up with noble meekness against present suffering, knowing that his work and trials and troubles are only for a little while, but his rest and his reward remain a long hereafter. He never questioned this; he knew right well Who had earned it for him; and he lived grateful and obedient, filling up the duties of his humble station. This was his faith, and his works followed it. He believed that God had placed him in his lot, to be a labourer, and till God's earth, and, when his work is done, to be sent on better service in some happier sphere: the where, or the how, did not puzzle him, any more than divers other enigmatical whys and wherefores of his present state; he only knew this, that it would all come right at last: and, barring sin (which he didn't comprehend), somehow all was right at present. What if poverty pinched him? he was a great heir still; what if oppression bruised him? it would soon be over. He trusted to his Pilot, like the landsman in a storm; to his Father, as an infant in the dark. For guilt, he had a Saviour, and he thought of him in penitence; for trouble, a Guardian, and he looked to him in peace; and as for toil, back-breaking toil, there was another Master whom he served with spade, and mattock, and a thankful heart, while he only seemed to be working for the landlord or his bailiff.

Page 3

Such a man then had been Roger Acton from his youth up till now, or, if sadness must be told, nearly until now; for, to speak truth, his heart at times would fail him, and of late he had been bitter in repinings and complaint. For a day or two, in particular, he had murmured loudly. It was hard, very hard, that an honest, industrious man, as he was, should so scantily pick a living out of this rich earth: after all said, let the parson preach as he will, it's a fine thing to have money, and that his reverence knows right well, or he wouldn't look so closely for his dues. [N.B. Poor Mr. Evans was struggling as well as he could to bring up six children, on a hundred and twenty pounds per annum.] Roger, too, was getting on in years, with a blacker prospect for the future than when he first stood behind a plough-tail. Then there were many wants unsatisfied, which a bit of gold might buy; and his wife teased him to be doing something better. Thus was it come at length to pass, that, although he had endured so many years, he now got discontented at his penury;—what human heart can blame him?—and with murmurings came doubt; with doubt of Providence, desire of lucre; so the sunshine of religion faded from his path;—what mortal mind can wonder?

CHAPTER II.

The family; the home; and more repinings.

Now, if Malthus and Martineau be verily the pundits that men think them, Roger had twice in his life done a very foolish thing: he had sinned against society, statistics, and common sense, by a two-fold marriage. The wife of his youth (I am afraid he married early) had once been kitchen-maid at the Hall; but the sudden change from living luxuriously in a great house, to the griping poverty of a cotter's hovel, had changed, in three short years, the buxom country girl into an emaciated shadow of her former self, and the sorrowing husband buried her in her second child-bed. The powers of the parish clapped their hands; political economy was glad; prudence chuckled; and a coarse-featured farmer (he meant no ill), who occasionally had given Roger work, heartlessly bade him be thankful that his cares were the fewer and his incumbrance was removed; "Ay, and Heaven take the babies also to itself," the Herodian added. But Acton's heart was broken! scarcely could he lift up his head; and his work, though sturdy as before, was more mechanical, less high-motived: and many a year of dreary widowhood he mourned a loss all the greater, though any thing but bitterer, for the infants so left motherless. To these, now grown into a strapping youth and a bright-eyed graceful girl, had he been the tenderest of nurses, and well supplied the place of her whom they had lost. Neighbours would have helped him gladly—sometimes did; and many was the hinted offer (disinterested enough, too, for in that match penury must have been the settlement, and starvation the dower), of giving

Page 4

them a mother's kindly care; but Roger could not quite so soon forget the dead: so he would carry his darlings with him to his work, and feed them with his own hard hands; the farmers winked at it, and never said a word against the tiny trespassers; their wives and daughters loved the little dears, bringing them milk and possets; and holy angels from on high may have oft-times hovered about this rude nurse, tending his soft innocents a-field, and have wept over the poor widower and his orphans, tears of happy sorrow and benevolent affection. Yea, many a good angel has shed blessings on their heads!

Within the last three years, and sixteen from the date of his first great grief, Roger had again got married. His daughter was growing into early womanhood, and his son gave him trouble at times, and the cottage wanted a ruling hand over it when he was absent, and rheumatism now and then bade him look out for a nurse before old age, and Mary Alder was a notable middle-aged careful sort of soul, and so she became Mary Acton. All went on pretty well, until Mrs. Acton began to have certain little ones of her own; and then the step-mother would break out (a contingency poor Roger hadn't thought of), separate interests crept in, and her own children fared before the others; so it came to pass that, however truly there was a ruling hand at home, and however well the rheumatism got nursed (for Mary was a good wife in the main), the grown-up son and daughter felt themselves a little jostled out. Grace, gentle and submissive, found all her comforts shrunk within the space of her father and her Bible; Thomas, self-willed and open-hearted, sought his pleasure any where but at home, and was like to be taking to wrong courses through domestic bickering: Grace had the dangerous portion, beauty, added to her lowly lot, and attracted more admiration than her father wished, or she could understand; while the frank and bold spirit of Thomas Acton exposed him to the perilous friendship of Ben Burke the poacher, and divers other questionable characters.

Of these elements, then, are our labourer and his family composed; and before Roger Acton goes abroad at earliest streak of dawn, we will take a casual peep within his dwelling. It consists of four bare rubble walls, enclosing a grouted floor, worn unevenly, and here and there in holes, and puddly. There were but two rooms in the tenement, one on the ground, and one over-head; which latter is with no small difficulty got at by scaling a ladder-like stair-case that fronts the cottage-door. This upper chamber, the common dormitory, for all but Thomas, who sleeps down stairs, has a thin partition at one end of it, to screen off the humble truckle-bed where Grace Acton forgets by night the troubles of the day; and the remainder of the little apartment, sordid enough, and overhung with the rough thatch, black with cobweb, serves for the father and mother with their recent nursery. Each room has its shattery casement,

Page 5

to let in through lincened panes, the doubtful light of summer, and the much more indubitable wind, and rain, and frost of wintry nights. A few articles of crockery and some burnished tins decorate the shelves of the lower apartment; which used to be much tidier before the children came, and trimmer still when Grace was sole manager: in a doorless cupboard are apparent sundry coarse edibles, as the half of a huge unshapely home-made loaf, some white country cheese, a mass of lumpy pudding, and so forth; beside it, on the window-sill, is better bread, a well-thumbed Bible, some tracts, and a few odd volumes picked up cheap at fairs; an old musket (occasionally Ben's companion, sometimes Tom's) is hooked to the rafters near a double rope of onions; divers gaudy little prints, tempting spoil of pedlars, in honour of George Barnwell, the Prodigal Son, the Sailor's Return, and the Death of Nelson, decorate the walls, and an illuminated Christmas carol is pasted over the mantel-piece: which, among other chattels and possessions, conspicuously bears its own burden of Albert and Victoria—two plaster heads, resplendently coloured, highly varnished, looking with arched eye-brows of astonishment on their uninviting palace, and royally contrasting with the sombre hue of poverty on all things else. The pictures had belonged to Mary, no small portion of her virgin wealth; and as for the statuary, those two busts had cost loyal Roger far more in comparison than any corporation has given to P.R.A., for majesty and consortship in full. There is, moreover, in the room, by way of household furniture, a ricketty, triangular, and tri-legged table, a bench, two old chairs with rush-bottoms, and a yard or two of matting that the sexton gave when the chancel was new laid. I don't know that there is any thing else to mention, unless it be a gaunt lurcher belonging to Ben Burke, and with all a dog's resemblance to his master, who lies stretched before the hearth where the peaty embers never quite die out, but smoulder away to a heap of white ashes; over these is hanging a black boiler, the cook of the family; and beside them, on a substratum of dry heather, and wrapped about with an old blanket, nearly companioned by his friend, the dog, snores Thomas Acton, still fast asleep, after his usual extemporaneous fashion.

As to the up-stairs apartment, it contained little or nothing but its living inmates, their bedsteads and tattered coverlids, and had an air of even more penury and discomfort than the room below; so that, what with squalling children, a scolding wife, and empty stomach, and that cold and wet March morning, it is little wonder maybe (though no small blame), that Roger Acton had not enough of religion or philosophy to rise and thank his Maker for the blessings of existence.

Page 6

He had just been dreaming of great good luck. Poor people often do so; just as Ugolino dreamt of imperial feasts, and Bruce, in his delirious thirst on the Sahara, could not banish from his mind the cool fountains of Shiraz, and the luxurious waters of old Nile. Roger had unfortunately dreamt of having found a crock of gold—I dare say he will tell us his dream anon—and just as he was counting out his treasure, that blessed beautiful heap of shining money—cruel habit roused him up before the dawn, and his wealth faded from his fancy. So he awoke at five, anything but cheerfully.

It was Grace's habit, good girl, to read to her father in the morning a few verses from the volume she best loved: she always woke betimes when she heard him getting up, and he could hear her easily from her little flock-bed behind the lath partition; and many a time had her dear religious tongue, uttering the words of peace, soothed her father's mind, and strengthened him to meet the day's affliction; many times it raised his thoughts from the heavy cares of life to the buoyant hopes of immortality. Hitherto, Roger had owed half his meek contentedness to those sweet lessons from a daughter's lips, and knew that he was reaping, as he heard, the harvest of his own paternal care, and heaven-blest instructions. However, upon this dark morning, he was full of other thoughts, murmurings, and doubts, and poverty, and riches. So, when Grace, after her usual affectionate salutations, gently began to read,

"The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory—"

Her father strangely stopped her on a sudden with—

"Enough, enough, my girl! God wot, the sufferings are grievous, and the glory long a-coming."

Then he heavily went down stairs, and left Grace crying.

CHAPTER III.

The contrast.

Thus, full of carking care, while he pushed aside the proffered consolation, Roger Acton walked abroad. There was yet but a glimmer of faint light, and the twittering of birds told more assuringly of morning than any cheerful symptom on the sky: however, it had pretty well ceased raining, that was one comfort, and, as Roger, shouldering his spade, and with the day's provision in a handkerchief, trudged out upon his daily duty, those good old thoughts of thankfulness came upon his mind, and he forgot awhile the dream that had unstrung him. Turning for a moment to look upon his hovel, and bless its inmates with a prayer, he half resolved to run back, and hear a few more words, if only not to vex his darling child: but there was now no time to spare; and then, as he gazed

upon her desolate abode—so foul a casket for so fair a jewel—his bitter thoughts returned to him again, and he strode away, repining.

Page 7

Acton's cottage was one of those doubtful domiciles, whose only recommendation it is, that they are picturesque in summer. At present we behold a reeking rotting mass of black thatch in a cheerless swamp; but, as the year wears on, those time-stained walls, though still both damp and mouldy, will be luxuriantly overspread with creeping plants—honeysuckle, woodbine, jessamine, and the everblowing monthly rose. Many was the touring artist it had charmed, and Suffolk-street had seen it often: spectators looked upon the scene as on an old familiar friend, whose face they knew full well, but whose name they had forgotten for the minute. Many were the fair hands that had immortalized its beauties in their albums, and frequent the notes of admiration uttered by attending swains: particularly if there chanced to be taken into the view a feathery elm that now creaked overhead, and dripped on the thatch like the dropping-well at Knaresborough, and (in the near distance) a large pond, or rather lake, upon whose sedgy banks, gay—not now, but soon about to be—with flowering reeds and bright green willows, the pretty cottage stood. In truth, if man were but an hibernating animal, invisible as dormice in the winter, and only to be seen with summer swallows, Acton's cottage at Hurstley might have been a cantle cut from the Elysian-fields. But there are certain other seasons in the year, and human nature cannot long exist on the merely "picturesque in summer."

Some fifty yards, or so, from the hither shore, we discern a roughly wooded ait, Pike Island to wit, a famous place for fish, and the grand rendezvous for woodcocks; which, among other useful and ornamental purposes, serves to screen out the labourer's hovel, at this the narrowest part of the lake, from a view of that fine old mansion on the opposite shore, the seat of Sir John Vincent, a baronet just of age, and the great landlord of the neighbourhood. Toward this mansion, scarcely yet revealed in the clear gray eye of morning, our humble hero, having made the long round of the lake, is now fast trudging; and it may merit a word or two of plain description, to fill up time and scene, till he gets nearer.

A smooth grassy eminence, richly studded with park-like clumps of trees, slopes up from the water's very edge to—Hurstley Hall; yonder goodly, if not grand, Elizabethan structure, full of mullioned windows, carved oak panels, stone-cut coats of arms, pinnacles, and traceries, and lozenges, and drops; and all this glory crowned by a many-gabled, high-peaked roof. A grove of evergreens and American shrubs hides the lower windows from vulgarian gaze—for, in the neighbourly feeling of our ancestors, a public way leads close along the front; while, behind the house, and inaccessible to eyes profane, are drawn terraced gardens, beautifully kept, and blooming with a perpetual succession of the choicest flowers. The woods and shrubberies around, attempted some half a century back to be spoilt by the meddlesome bad taste of Capability Brown, have been somewhat too resolutely robbed of the formal avenues, clipped hedges, and other topiarian adjuncts which comport so well with the starch prudery of things Elizabethan; but they are still replete with grotto, fountain, labyrinth, and alcove—a very paradise for the more court-bred rank of sylphs, and the gentler elves of Queen Titania.

Page 8

However, we have less to do with the gardens than, probably, the elves have; and as Roger now, just at breaking day, is approaching the windows somewhat too curiously for a poor man's manners, it may not be amiss if we bear him company. He had pretty well recovered of his fit of discontent, for morning air and exercise can soon chase gloom away; so he cheerily tramped along, thinking as he went, how that, after all, it is a middling happy world, and how that the raindrops, now that it had cleared up, hung like diamonds on the laurels, when of a sudden, as he turned a corner near the house, there broke upon his ear, at that quiet hour, such a storm of boisterous sounds—voices so loud with oaths and altercation—such a calling, clattering, and quarrelling, as he had never heard the like before. So no wonder that he stepped aside to see it.

The noise proceeded from a ground-floor window, or rather from three windows, lighted up, and hung with draperies of crimson and gold: one of the casements, flaring meretriciously in the modest eye of morn, stood wide open down to the floor, probably to cool a heated atmosphere; and when Roger Acton, with a natural curiosity, went on tiptoe, looked in, and just put aside the curtain for a peep, to know what on earth could be the matter, he saw a vision of waste and wealth, at which he stood like one amazed, for a poor man's mind could never have conceived its equal.

Evidently, he had intruded on the latter end of a long and luxurious revel. Wax-lights, guttering down in gilded chandeliers, poured their mellow radiance round in multiplied profusion—for mirrors made them infinite; crimson and gold were the rich prevailing tints in that wide and warm banqueting-room; gayly-coloured pictures, set in frames that Roger fancied massive gold, hung upon the walls at intervals; a wagon-load of silver was piled upon the sideboard; there blazed in the burnished grate such a fire as poverty might imagine on a frozen winter's night, but never can have thawed its blood beside: fruits, and wines, and costly glass were scattered in prodigal disorder on the board—just now deserted of its noisy guests, who had crowded round a certain green table, where cards and heaps of sovereigns appeared to be mingled in a mass. Roger had never so much as conceived it possible that there could be wealth like this: it was a fairy-land of Mammon in his eyes: he stood gasping like a man enchanted; and in the contemplation of these little hills of gold—in their covetous longing contemplation, he forgot the noisy quarrel he had turned aside to see, and thirsted for that rich store earnestly.

Page 9

In an instant, as he looked (after the comparative lull that must obviously have succeeded to the clamours he had first heard), the roar and riot broke out worse than ever. There were the stormy revellers, as the rabble rout of Comus and his crew, filling that luxurious room with the sounds of noisy execration and half-drunken strife. Young Sir John, a free and generous fellow, by far the best among them all, has collected about him those whom he thought friends, to celebrate his wished majority; they had now kept it up, night after night, hard upon a week; and, as well became such friends—the gambler, the duellist, the man of pleasure, and the fool of Fashion—they never yet had separated for their day-light beds, without a climax to their orgie, something like the present scene.

Henry Mynton, high in oath, and dashing down his cards, has charged Sir Richard Hunt with cheating (it was *sauter la coupe* or *couper la saut*, or some such mystery of iniquity, I really cannot tell which): Sir Richard, a stout dark man, the patriarch of the party, glossily wigged upon his head, and imperially tufted on his chin, retorts with a pungent sarcasm, calmly and coolly uttered; that hot-headed fool Silliphant, clearly quite intoxicated, backs his cousin Mynton's view of the case by the cogent argument of a dice-box at Sir Richard's head—and at once all is struggle, strife, and uproar. The other guests, young fellows of high fashion, now too much warmed with wine to remember their accustomed Mohican cold-bloodedness—those happy debtors to the prowess of a Stultz, and walking advertisers of Nugee—take eager part with the opposed belligerents: more than one decanter is sent hissing through the air; more than one bloody coxcomb witnesses to the weight of a candle-stick and its hurler's clever aim: uplifted chairs are made the weapons of the chivalric combatants; and along with divers other less distinguished victims in the melee, poor Sir John Vincent, rushing into the midst, as a well-intentioned host, to quell the drunken brawl, gets knocked down among them all; the tables are upset, the bright gold runs about the room in all directions—ha! no one heeds it—no one owns it—one little piece rolled right up to the window-sill where Roger still looked on with all his eyes; it is but to put his hand in—the window is open to the floor—nay a finger is enough: greedily, one undecided moment, did he gaze upon the gold; he saw the hideous contrast of his own dim hovel and that radiant chamber—he remembered the pining faces of his babes, and gentle Grace with all her hardships—he thought upon his poverty and well deserts—he looked upon wastefulness of wealth and wantonness of living—these reflections struck him in a moment; no one saw him, no one cared about the gold; that little blessed morsel, that could do him so much good; all was confusion, all was opportunity, and who can wonder that his fingers closed upon the sovereign, and that he picked it up?

Page 10

CHAPTER IV.

The lost theft.

Stealthily and quickly “honest Roger” crept away, for his conscience smote him on the instant: he felt he had done wrong; at any rate, the sovereign was not his—and once the thought arose in him to run back, and put it where he found it: but it was now become too precious in his sight, that little bit of gold—and they, the rioters there, could not want it, might not even miss it; and then its righteous uses—it should be well spent, even if ill-got: and thus, so many mitigations crowded in to excuse, if not to applaud the action, that within a little while his warped mind had come to call the theft a god-send.

O Roger, Roger! alas for this false thought of that wrong deed! the poisonous gold has touched thy heart, and left on it a spot of cancer: the asp has bitten thee already, simple soul. This little seed will grow into a huge black pine, that shall darken for a while thy heaven, and dig its evil roots around thy happiness. Put it away, Roger, put it away: covet not unhallowed gold.

But Roger felt far otherwise; and this sudden qualm of conscience once quelled (I will say there seemed much of palliation in the matter), a kind of inebriate feeling of delight filled his mind, and Steady Acton plodded on to the meadow yonder, half a mile a-head, in a species of delirious complacency. Here was luck indeed, filling up the promise of his dreams. His head was full of thoughts, pleasant holiday thoughts, of the many little useful things, the many small indulgences, that bit of gold should buy him. He would change it on the sly, and gradually bring the shillings home as extra pay for extra work; for, however much his wife might glory in the chance, and keep his secret, well he knew that Grace would have a world of things to say about it, and he feared to tell his daughter of the deed. However, she should have a ribbon, so she should, good girl, and the pedlar shouldn't pass the door unbidden; Mary, too, might have a cotton kerchief, and the babes a doll and a rattle, and poor Thomas a shilling to spend as he liked; and so, in happy revery, the kind father distributed his ill-got sovereign.

For a while he held it in his hand, as loth to part from the tangible possession of his treasure; but manual contact could not last all day, and, as he neared his scene of labour—he came late after all, by the by, and lost the quarter-day, but it mattered little now—he began to cogitate a place of safety; and carefully put it in his fob. Poor fellow—he had never had enough to stow so well away before: his pockets had been thought quite trust-worthy enough for any treasures hitherto: never had he used that fob for watch, or note, or gold—and his predecessor in the cast-off garment had probably been quite aware how little that false fob was worthy of the name of savings' bank; it was in the situation of the

Page 11

Irishman's illimitable rope, with the end cut off. So while Roger was brewing up vast schemes of nascent wealth, and prosperous days at last, the filched sovereign, attracted by centripetal gravity, had found a passage downwards, and had straightway rolled into a crevice of mother-earth, long before its "brief lord" had commenced his day's labour. Yes, it had been lost a good hour ere he found it out, for he had fancied that he had felt it there, and often did he feel, but his fancy was a button; and when he made the dread discovery, what a sting of momentary anguish, what a sickening fear, what an eager search! and, as the grim truth became more evident, that, indeed, beyond all remedy, his new-got, ill-got, egg of coming wealth was all clean gone—oh! this was worm-wood, this was bitter as gall, and the strong man well-nigh fainted. It was something sad to have done the ill—but misery to have done it all for nothing: the sin was not altogether pleasant to his taste, but it was aloe itself to lose the reward. And when, pale and sick, leaning on his spade, he came to his old strength again, what was the reaction? Compunction at incipient crime, and gratitude to find its punishment so mercifully speedy, so lenient, so discriminative? I fear that if ever he had these thoughts at all, he chased them wilfully away: his disappointment, far from being softened into patience, was sharpened to a feeling of revenge at fate; and all his hope now was—such another chance, gold, more gold, never mind how; more gold, he burnt for gold, he lusted after gold!

We must leave him for a time to his toil and his reflections, and touch another topic of our theme.

CHAPTER V.

The inquest.

Just a week before the baronet came of age, and a fortnight from the present time, an awful and mysterious event had happened at the Hall: the old house-keeper, Mrs. Quarles, had been found dead in her bed, under circumstances, to say the very least, of a black and suspicious appearance. The county coroner had got a jury of the neighbours impanelled together; who, after sitting patiently on the inquest, and hearing, as well as seeing, the following evidence, could arrive at no verdict more specific than the obvious fact, that the poor old creature had been "found dead." The great question lay between apoplexy and murder; and the evidence tended to a well-matched conflict of opinions.

First, there lay the body, quietly in bed, tucked in tidily and undisturbed, with no marks of struggling, none whatever—the clothes lay smooth, and the chamber orderly: yet the corpse's face was of a purple hue, the tongue swollen, the eyes starting from their sockets: it might, indeed, possibly have been an apoplectic seizure, which took her in

her sleep, and killed her as she lay; *but* that the gripe of clutching fingers had left their livid seals upon the throat, and countenanced the dreadful thought of strangulation!

Page 12

Secondly, a surgeon (one Mr. Eager, the Union doctor, a very young personage, wrong withal and radical) maintained that this actual strangulation might have been effected by the hands of the deceased herself, in the paroxysm of a rush of blood to the brain; and he fortified his wise position by the instance of a late statesman, who, he averred, cut his throat with a pen-knife, to relieve himself of pressure on the temples: while another surgeon—Stephen Cramp, he was farrier as well, and had been, until lately, time out of mind, the village AEsculapius, who looked with scorn on his pert rival, and opposed him tooth and nail on all occasions—insisted that it was not only physically impossible for poor Mrs. Quarles so to have strangled herself, but more particularly that, if she had done so, she certainly could not have laid herself out so decently afterwards; therefore, that as some one else had kindly done the latter office for her, why not the former too?

Thirdly, Sarah Stack, the still-room maid, deposed, that Mrs. Quarles always locked her door before she went to bed, but that when she (deponent) went to call her as usual on the fatal morning, the door was just ajar; and so she found her dead: while parallel with this, tending to implicate some domestic criminal, was to be placed the equally uncommon fact, that the other door of Mrs. Quarles's room, leading to the lawn, was open too:—be it known that Mrs. Quarles was a stout woman, who could'nt abide to sleep up-stairs, for fear of fire; moreover, that she was a nervous woman, who took extraordinary precautions for her safety, in case of thieves. Thus, unaccountably enough, the murderer, if there was any, was as likely to have come from the outside, as from the in.

Fourthly, the murderer in this way is commonly a thief, and does the deed for mammon-sake; but the new house-keeper, lately installed, made her deposition, that, by inventories duly kept and entered—for her honoured predecessor, rest her soul! had been a pattern of regularity—all Mrs. Quarles's goods and personal chattels were found to be safe and right in her room—some silver spoons among them too—ay, and a silver tea-pot; while, as to other property in the house, with every room full of valuables, nothing whatever was missing from the lists, except, indeed, what was scarce worth mention (unless one must be very exact), sundry crocks and gallipots of honey, not forthcoming; these, however, it appeared probable that Mrs. Quarles had herself consumed in a certain mixture she nightly was accustomed too, of rum, horehound, and other matters sweetened up with honey, for her hoarseness. It seemed therefore clear she was not murdered for her property, nor by any one intending to have robbed the house.

Against this it was contended, and really with some show of reason, that as Mrs. Quarles was thought to have a hoard, always set her face against banks, railway shares, speculations, and investments, and seemed to have left nothing behind her but her clothes and so forth, it was still possible that the murderer who took the life, might have also been the thief to take the money.

Page 13

Fifthly, Simon Jennings—butler in doors, bailiff out of doors, and general factotum every where to the Vincent interest—for he had managed to monopolize every place worth having, from the agent's book to the cellar-man's key—the said Simon deposed, that on the night in question, he heard the house-dog barking furiously, and went out to quiet him; but found no thieves, nor knew any reason why the dog should have barked so much.

Now, the awkward matter in this deposition (if Mr. Jennings had not been entirely above suspicion—the idea was quite absurd—not to mention that he was nephew to the deceased, a great favourite with her, and a man altogether of the very strictest character), the awkward matters were these: the nearest way out to the dog, indeed the only way but casement windows on that side of the house, was through Mrs. Quarles's room: she had had the dog placed there for her special safety, as she slept on the ground floor; and it was not to be thought that Mr. Jennings could do so incorrect a thing as to pass through her room after bed-time, locked or unlocked—indeed, when the question was delicately hinted to him, he was quite shocked at it—quite shocked. But if he did not go that way, which way did he go? He deposed, indeed, and his testimony was no ways to be doubted, that he went through the front door, and so round; which, under the circumstances, was at once a very brave and a very foolish thing to do; for it is, first, little wisdom to go round two sides of a square to quiet a dog, when one might have easily called to him from the men-servants' window; and secondly, albeit Mr. Jennings was a strict man, an upright man, shrewd withal, and calculating, no one had ever thought him capable of that Roman virtue, courage. Still, he had reluctantly confessed to this one heroic act, and it was a bold one, so let him take the credit of it—mainly because—

Sixthly, Jonathan Floyd, footman, after having heard the dog bark at intervals, surely for more than a couple of hours, thought he might as well turn out of his snug berth for a minute, just to see what ailed the dog, or how many thieves were really breaking in. Well, as he looked, he fancied he saw a boat moving on the lake, but as there was no moon, he might have been mistaken.

By a Juryman. It might be a punt.

By another. He did'nt know how many boats there were on the lake-side: they had a boat-house at the Hall, by the water's edge, and therefore he concluded something in it; really did'nt know; might be a boat, might be a punt, might be both—or neither.

By the Coroner. Could not swear which way it was moving; and, really, if put upon his Bible oath, wouldn't be positive about a boat at all, it was so dark, and he was so sleepy.

Not long afterwards, as the dog got still more violent, he turned his eyes from straining after shadows on the lake, to look at home, and then all at once noticed Mr. Jennings

trying to quiet the noisy animal with the usual blandishments of “Good dog, good dog—quiet, Don, quiet—down, good dog—down, Don, down!”

Page 14

By a Juryman. He would swear to the words.

But Don would not hear of being quiet. After that, knowing all must be right if Mr. Jennings was about, he (deponent) turned in again, went to sleep, and thought no more of it till he heard of Mrs. Quarles's death in the morning. If he may be so bold as to speak his mind, he thinks the house-keeper, being fat, died o' the 'plexy in a nateral way, and that the dog barking so, just as she was a-going off, is proof positive of it. He'd often heard of dogs doing so; they saw the sperit gliding away, and barked at it; his (deponent's) own grandmother—

At this juncture—for the court was getting fidgetty—the coroner cut short the opinions of Jonathan Floyd: and when Mr. Crown, summing up, presented in one focus all this evidence to the misty minds of the assembled jurymen, it puzzled them entirely; they could not see their way, fairly addled, did not know at all what to make of it. On the threshold, there was no proof it was a murder—the Union doctor was loud and staunch on this; and next, there seemed to be no motive for the deed, and no one to suspect of it: so they left the matter open, found her simply “Dead,” and troubled their heads no more about the business.

Good Mr. Evans, the vicar, preached her funeral sermon, only as last Sunday, amplifying the idea that she “was cut off in the midst of her days:” and thereby encouraging many of the simpler folks, who knew that Mrs. Quarles had long passed seventy, in the luminous notion that house-keepers in great establishments are privileged, among other undoubted perquisites, to live to a hundred and forty, unless cut off by apoplexy or murder.

Mr. Simon Jennings, as nephew and next of kin, followed the body to its last home in the capacity of chief mourner; to do him justice, he was a real mourner, bewailed her loudly, and had never been the same man since. Moreover, although aforetime not much given to indiscriminate charity, he had now gained no small credit by distributing his aunt's wardrobe among the poorer families at Hurstley. It was really very kind of him, and the more so, as being altogether unexpected: he got great praise for this, did Mr. Jennings; specially, too, because he had gained nothing whatever from his aunt's death, though her heir and probable legatee, and clearly was a disappointed man.

CHAPTER VI.

The bailiff, and A bitter trial.

Jennings—Mr. Simon Jennings—for he prided himself much both on the Mr. and the Simon, was an upright man, a very upright man indeed, literally so as well as metaphorically. He was not tall certainly, but what there was of him stood bolt upright. Many fancied that his neck was possessed of some natural infirmity, or rather firmity, of

unbendableness, some little-to-be-envied property of being a perpetual stiff-neck; and they were the more countenanced in

Page 15

this theory, from the fact that, within a few days past, Mr. Jennings had contracted an ugly knack of carrying his erect head in the comfortless position of peeping over his left shoulder; not always so, indeed, but often enough to be remarkable; and then he would occasionally start it straight again, eyes right, with a nervous twitch, any thing but pleasant to the marvelling spectator. It was as if he was momentarily expecting to look upon some vague object that affrighted him, and sometimes really did see it. Mr. Jennings had consulted high medical authority (as Hurstley judged), to wit, the Union doctor of last scene, an enterprising practitioner, glib in theory, and bold in practice—and it had been mutually agreed between them that “stomach” was the cause of these unhandsome symptoms; acidity of the gastric juice, consequent indigestion and spasm, and generally a hypochondriacal habit of body. Mr. Jennings must take certain draughts thrice a day, be very careful of his diet, and keep his mind at ease. As to Simon himself, he was, poor man, much to be pitied in this ideal visitation; for, though his looks confessed that he saw, or fancied he saw, a something, he declared himself wholly at a loss to explain what that something was: moreover, contrary to former habits of an ostentatious boldness, he seemed meekly to shrink from observation: and, as he piously acquiesced in the annoyance, would observe that his unpleasant jerking was “a little matter after all, and that, no doubt, the will of Providence.”

Independently of these new grimaces, Simon's appearance was little in his favour: not that his small dimensions signified—Caesar, and Buonaparte, and Wellington, and Nelson, all were little men—not that his dress was other than respectable—black coat and waistcoat, white stiff cravat, gray trowsers somewhat shrunk in longitude, good serviceable shoe-leather (of the shape, if not also of the size, of river barges), and plenty of unbleached cotton stocking about the gnarled region of his ankles. All this was well enough; nature was beholden to that charity of art which hides a multitude of failings; but the face, where native man looks forth in all his unadornment, that it was which so seldom pre-possessed the many who had never heard of Jennings's strict character and stern integrity. The face was a sallow face, peaked towards the nose, with head and chin receding; lit withal by small protrusive eyes, so constructed, that the whites all round were generally visible, giving them a strange and staring look; elevated eye-brows; not an inch of whisker, but all shaved sore right up to the large and prominent ear; and lank black, hair, not much of it, scantily thatching all smooth. Then his arms, oscillating as he walked (as if the pendulum by which that rigid man was made to go his regular routine), were much too long for symmetry: and altogether, to casual view, Mr. Jennings must acknowledge to a supercilious, yet sneaking air—which charity has ere now been kind enough to think a conscious rectitude towards man, and a soft-going humility with God.

Page 16

When the bailiff takes his round about the property, as we see him now, he is mounted—to say he rides would convey far too equestrian a notion—he is mounted on a rough-coated, quiet, old, white shooting-pony; the saddle strangely girded on with many bands about the belly, the stirrups astonishingly short, and straps never called upon to diminish that long whity-brown interval between shoe and trowser: Mr. Jennings sits his steed with nose aloft, and a high perch in the general, somewhat loosely, and, had the pony been a Bucephalus rather than a Rozinante, not a little perilously. Simon is jogging hitherwards toward Roger Acton, as he digs the land-drain across this marshy meadow: let us see how it fares now with our poor hero.

Occupation—yes, duteous occupation—has exerted its wholesome influences, and, thank God! Roger is himself again. He has been very sorry half the day, both for the wicked feelings of the morning, and that still more wicked theft—a bad business altogether, he cannot bear to think of it; the gold was none of his, whosoever it might be—he ought not to have touched it—vexed he did, but cannot help it now; it is well he lost it too, for ill-got money never came to any good: though, to be sure, if he could only get it honestly, money would make a man of him.

I am not sure of that, Roger, it may be so sometimes; but, in my judgment, money has unmade more men than made them.

“How now, Acton, is not this drain dug yet! You have been about it much too long, sir; I shall fine you for this.”

“Please you, Muster Jennings, I’ve stuck to it pretty tightly too, barring that I make to-day three-quarters, being late: but it’s heavy clay, you see, Mr. Simon—wet above and iron-hard below: it shall all be ready by to-morrow, Mr. Simon.”

Whether the “Mr. Simon” had its softening influence, or any other considerations lent their soothing aid, we shall see presently; for the bailiff added, in a tone unusually indulgent,

“Well, Roger, see it is done, and well done; and now I have just another word to say to you: his honour is coming round this way, and if he asks you any questions, remember to be sure and tell him this—you have got a comfortable cottage, very comfortable, just repaired, you want for nothing, and are earning twelve shillings a week.”

“God help me, Muster Jennings: why my wages are but eight, and my hovel scarcely better than a pig-pound.”

“Look you, Acton; tell Sir John what you have told me, and you are a ruined man. Make it twelve to his honour, as others shall do: who knows,” he added, half-coaxing, half-soliloquizing, “perhaps his honour may really make it twelve, instead of eight.”

“Oh, Muster Jennings! and who gets the odd four?”

“What, man! do you dare to ask me that? Remember, sir, at your peril, that you, and all the rest, *have had* twelve shillings a-week wages whenever you have worked on this estate—not a word!—and that, if you dare speak or even think to the contrary, you never earn a penny here again. But here comes John Vincent, my master, as I, Simon Jennings, am yours: be careful what you say to him.”

Page 17

Sir John Devereux Vincent, after a long minority, had at length shaken off his guardians, and become master of his own doings, and of Hurstley Hall. The property was in pretty decent order, and funds had accumulated vastly: all this notwithstanding a thousand speculations, and the suspicious incident that one of the guardians was a “highly respectable” solicitor. Sir John, like most new brooms, had with the best intentions resolved upon sweeping measures of great good; especially also upon doing a great deal with his own eyes and ears; but, like as aforesaid, he was permitted neither to hear nor see any truths at all. Just now, the usual night’s work took him a little off the hooks, and we must make allowances; really, too, he was by far the soberest of all those choice spirits, and drank and played as little as he could; and even, under existing disadvantages, he managed by four o’clock post meridiem to inspect a certain portion of the estate duly every day, under the prudential guidance of his bailiff Jennings. There, that good-looking, tall young fellow on the blood mare just cantering up to us is Sir John; the other two are a couple of the gallant youths now feasting at the Hall: ay, two of the fiercest foes in last night’s broil. Those heated little matters are easily got over.

“Hollo, Jennings! what the devil made you give that start? you couldn’t look more horrified if ghosts were at your elbow: why, your face is the picture of death; look another way, man, do, or my mare will bolt.”

“I beg your pardon, Sir John, but the spasm took me: it is my infirmity; forgive it. This meadow, you perceive, Sir John, requires drainage, and afterwards I propose to dress it with free chalk to sweeten the grass. Next field, you will take notice, the guano—”

“Well, well—Jennings—and that poor fellow there up to his knees in mud, is he pretty tolerably off now?”

“Oh, your honour,” said the bailiff, with a knowing look, “I only wish that half the little farmers hereabouts were as well to do as he is: a pretty cottage, Sir John, half an acre of garden, and twelve shillings a week, is pretty middling for a single man.”

“Aha—is it?—well; but the poor devil looks wretched enough too—I will just ask him if he wants any thing now.”

“Don’t, Sir John, pray don’t; pray permit me to advise your honour: these men are always wanting. ‘Acton’s cottage’ is a proverb; and Roger there can want for nothing honestly; nevertheless, as I know your honour’s good heart, and wish to make all happy, if you will suffer me to see to it myself—”

“Certainly, Jennings, do, do by all means, and thank you: here, just to make a beginning, as we’re all so jolly at the Hall, and that poor fellow’s up to his neck in mud, give him this from me to drink my health with.”



Acton, who had dutifully held aloof, and kept on digging steadily, was still quite near enough to hear all this; at the magical word “give,” he looked up hurriedly, and saw Sir John Vincent toss a piece of gold—yes, on his dying oath, a bright new sovereign—to Simon Jennings. O blessed vision, and gold was to be his at last!

Page 18

"Come along, Mynton; Hunt, now mind you try and lame that big beast of a raw-boned charger among these gutters, will you? I'm off, Jennings; meet me, do you hear, at the Croft to-mor—"

So the three friends galloped away; and John Vincent really felt more light-hearted and happy than at any time the week past, for having so properly got rid of a welcome bit of gold.

"Roger Acton! come up here, sir, out of that ditch: his honour has been liberal enough to give you a shilling to drink his health with."

"A shilling, Muster Jennings?" said the poor astonished man; "why I'll make oath it was a pound; I saw it myself. Come, Muster Jennings, don't break jokes upon a poor man's back."

"Jokes, Acton? sticks, sir, if you say another word: take John Vincent's shilling."

"Oh, sir!" cried Roger, quite unmanned at this most cruel disappointment; "be merciful—be generous—give me my gold, my own bit of gold! I'll swear his honour gave it for me: blessings on his head! You know he did, Mr. Simon; don't play upon me!"

"Play upon you?—generous—your gold—what is it you mean, man? We'll have no madmen about us, I can tell you; take the shilling, or else—"

"Rob not the poor, because he is poor, for the Lord shall plead his cause," was the solemn answer.

"Roger Acton!"—the bailiff gave a scared start, as usual, and, recovering himself, looked both white and stern: "you have dared to quote the Bible against me: deeply shall you rue it. Begone, man! your work on this estate is at an end."

CHAPTER VII.

Wrongs and ruin.

A very miserable man was Roger Acton now, for this last trial was the worst of all. The vapours of his discontent had almost passed away—that bright pernicious dream was being rapidly forgotten—the morning's ill-got coin, "thank the Lord, it was lost as soon as found," and penitence had washed away that blot upon his soul; but here, an honest pound, liberally bestowed by his hereditary landlord—his own bright bit of gold—the only bit but one he ever had (and how different in innocence from that one!)—a seeming sugar-drop of kindness, shed by the rich heavens on his cup of poverty—to have this meanly filched away by a grasping, grinding task-master—oh, was it not a bitter trial? What affliction as to this world's wealth can a man meet worse than this?



Acton's first impulse was to run to the Hall, and ask to see Sir John:—"Out; won't be back till seven, and then can see nobody; the baronet will be dressing for dinner, and musn't be disturbed." Then he made a vain effort to speak with Mr. Jennings, and plead with him: yes, even on his knees, if must be. Mr. Simon could not be so bad; perhaps it was a long joke after all—the bailiff always had a queer way with him. Or, if indeed the man meant robbery, loudly to threaten him, that

Page 19

all might hear, to bring the house about his ears, and force justice, if he could not fawn it. But both these conflicting expedients were vetoed. Jonathan Floyd, who took in Acton's meek message of "humbly craved leave to speak with Master Jennings," came back with the inexplicable mandate, "Warn Roger Acton from the premises." So, he must needs bide till to-morrow morning, when, come what might, he resolved to see his honour, and set some truths before him.

Acton was not the only man on the estate who knew that he had a landlord, generous, not to say prodigal—a warm-hearted, well-intentioned master, whose mere youth a career of sensuality had not yet hardened, nor a course of dissipation been prolonged enough to distort his feelings from the right. And Acton, moreover, was not the only man who wondered how, with such a landlord (ay, and the guardians before him were always well-spoken gentle-folks, kindly in their manners, and liberal in their looks), wages could be kept so low, and rents so high, and indulgences so few, and penalties so many. There were fines for every thing, and no allowances of hedgebote, or housebote, or any other time-honoured right; the very peat on the common must be paid for, and if a child picked a bit of fagot the father was mulcted in a shilling. Mr. Jennings did all this, and always pleaded his employers' orders; nay, if any grumbled, as men would now and then, he would affect to think it strange that the gentlemen guardians, with the landlord at their head, could be so hard upon the poor: he would not be so, credit him, if he had been born a gentleman; but the bailiff, men, must obey orders, like the rest of you; these are hard times for Hurstley, he would say, and we must all rub over them as best we can. According to Simon, it was as much as his own place was worth to remit one single penny of a fine, or make the least indulgence for calamity; while, as to lowering a cotter's rent, or raising a ditcher's wages, he dared not do it for his life; folks must not blame him, but look to the landlord.

Now, all this, in the long absence of any definite resident master at the Hall, sounded reasonable, if true; and Mr. Jennings punctually paid, however bad the terms; so the poor men bode their time, and looked for better days. And the days long-looked-for now were come; but were they any better? The baronet, indeed, seemed bent upon inquiry, reform, redress; but, as he never went without the right-hand man, his endeavours were always unsuccessful. At first it would appear that the bailiff had gone upon his old plan, shrugging up his shoulders to the men at the master's meanness, while he praised to the landlord the condition of his tenants; but this could not long deceive, so he turned instantler on another tack; he assumed the despot, issuing authoritative edicts, which no one dared to disobey; he made the labourer hide his needs, and intercepted at its source the lord's benevolence; he began to be found out, so the bolder spirits said, in filching with both hands from man and master; and, to the mind of more than one shrewd observer, was playing the unjust steward to admiration.

Page 20

But stop: let us hear the other side; it is possible we may have been mistaken. Bailiffs are never popular, particularly if they are too honest, and this one is a stern man with a repulsive manner. Who knows whether his advice to Acton may not have been wise and kind, and would not have conduced to a general rise of wages? Who can prove, nay, venture to insinuate, any such systematic roguery against a man hitherto so strict, so punctual, so sanctimonious? Even in the case of Sir John's golden gift, Jennings may be right after all; it is quite possible that Roger was mistaken, and had gilt a piece of silver with his longings; and the upright man might well take umbrage at so vile an imputation as that hot and silly speech; it was foolish, very foolish, to have quoted text against him, and no wonder that the labourer got dismissed for it. Then again to return to wages—who knows? it might be, all things considered, the only way of managing a rise; the bailiff must know his master's mind best, and Acton had been wise to have done as he bade him; perhaps it really was well-meant, and might have got him twelve shillings a-week, instead of eight as hitherto; perhaps Simon was a shrewd man, and arranged it cleverly; perhaps Roger was an honest man, and couldn't but think others so.

Any how, though, all was lost now, and he blamed his own rash tongue, poor fellow, for what he could not help fearing was the ruin of himself and all he loved. With a melancholy heart, he shouldered his spade, and slowly plodded homewards. How long should he have a home? How was he to get bread, to get work, if the bailiff was his enemy? How could he face his wife, and tell her all the foolish past and dreadful future? How could he bear to look on Grace, too beautiful Grace, and torture his heart by fancying her fate? Thomas, too, his own brave boy, whom utter poverty might drive to desperation? And the poor babes, his little playful pets, what on earth would become of them? There was the Union workhouse to be sure, but Acton shuddered at the thought; to be separated from every thing he loved, to give up his little all, and be made both a prisoner and a slave, all for the sake of what?—daily water-gruel, and a pauper's branded livery. Or they might perchance go beyond the seas, if some Prince Edward's Company would help him and his to emigrate; ay, thought he, and run new risks, encounter fresh dangers, lose every thing, get nothing, and all the trouble taken merely to starve three thousand miles from home. No, no; at his time of life, he could not be leaving for ever old friends, old habits, old fields, old home, old neighbourhood—where he had seen the saplings grow up trees, and the quick toppings change into a ten-foot hedge; where the very cattle knew his step, and the clods broke kindly to his ploughshare; and more than all, the dear old church, where his forefathers had worshipped from the Conquest, and the old mounds where they slept, and—and—and—that one precious grave of his dear lost Annie—could he leave it? Oh God, no! he had done no ill, he had committed no crime—why should he prefer the convict's doom, and seek to be transported for life?



Page 21

A miserable walk home was that, and full of wretched thoughts. Poor Roger Acton, tossed by much trouble, vexed with sore oppression, I wish that you had prayed in your distress; stop, he did pray, and that vehemently; but it was not for help, or guidance, or patience, or consolation—he only prayed for gold.

CHAPTER VIII.

The covetous dream.

Once at home, the sad truth soon was told. Roger's look alone spoke of some calamity, and he had but little heart or hope to keep the matter secret. True, he said not a word about the early morning's sin; why should he? he had been punished for it, and he had repented; let him be humbled before God, but not confess to man. However, all about the bailiff, and the landlord, and the thieved gift, and the sudden dismissal, the sure ruin, the dismal wayside plans, and fears, and dark alternatives, without one hope in any—these did poor Acton fluently pour forth with broken-hearted eloquence; to these Grace listened sorrowfully, with a face full of gentle trust in God's blessing on the morrow's interview; these Mary, the wife, heard to an end, with—no storm of execration on ill-fortune, no ebullition of unjust rage against a fool of a husband, no vexing sneers, no selfish apprehensions. Far from it; there really was one unlooked-for blessing come already to console poor Roger; and no little compensation for his trouble was the way his wife received the news. He, unlucky man, had expected something little short of a virago's talons, and a beldame's curse; he had experienced on less occasions something of the sort before; but now that real affliction stood upon the hearth, Mary Acton's character rose with the emergency, and she greeted her ruined husband with a kindness towards him, a solemn indignation against those who grind the poor, and a sober courage to confront evil, which he little had imagined.

"Bear up, Roger; here, goodman, take the child, and don't look quite so downcast; come what may, I'll share your cares, and you shall halve my pleasures; we will fight it out together."

Moreover, cross, and fidgety, and scolding, as Mary had been ever heretofore, to her meek step-daughter Grace, all at once, as if just to disappoint any preconcerted theory, now that actual calamity was come, she turned to be a kind good mother to her. Roger and his daughter could scarcely believe their ears.

"Grace, dear, I know you're a sensible good girl, try and cheer your father." And then the step-dame added,

"There now, just run up, fetch your prayer-book down, and read a little to us all to do us good."—The fair, affectionate girl, unused to the accents of kindness, could not forbear flinging her arms round Mary Acton's neck, and loving her, as Ruth loved Naomi.

Then with a heavenly smile upon her face, and a happy heart within her to keep the smile alight, her gentle voice read these words—it will do us good to read them too:

Page 22

"Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice.
O let thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint.
If thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss,
O Lord, who may abide it?
Because there is mercy with thee; therefore shall thou be feared.
I look for the Lord, my soul doth wait for him: in his word is my trust.
My soul fleeth unto the Lord, before the morning watch,
before the morning watch.
O Israel, trust in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy:
and with him is plenteous redemption.
And he shall redeem Israel from all his sins."

"Isn't the last word 'troubles,' child? look again; I think it's 'troubles' either there, or leastways in the Bible-psalm."

"No, father, sins, 'from all his sins;' and 'iniquities' in the Bible-version—look, father."

"Well, girl, well; I wish it had been 'troubles;' 'from all his troubles' is a better thought to my mind: God wot, I have plenty on 'em, and a little lot of gold would save us from them all."

"Gold, father? no, my father—God."

"I tell you, child," said Roger, ever vacillating in his strong temptation between habitual religion and the new-caught lust of money, "if only on a sudden I could get gold by hook or by crook, all my cares and all your troubles would be over on the instant."

"Oh, dear father, do not hope so; and do not think of troubles more than sins; there is no deliverance in Mammon; riches profit not in the day of evil, and ill-got wealth tends to worse than poverty."

"Well, any how, I only wish that dream of mine came true."

"Dream, goodman—what dream?" said his wife.

"Why, Poll, I dreamt I was a-working in my garden, hard by the celery trenches in the sedge; and I was moaning at my lot, as well I may: and a sort of angel came to me, only he looked dark and sorrowful, and kindly said, 'What would you have, Roger?' I, nothing fearful in my dream, for all the strangeness of his winged presence, answered boldly, 'Money;' he pointed with his finger, laughed aloud, and vanished away: and, as for me, I thought a minute wonderingly, turned to look where he had pointed, and, O the blessing! found a crock of gold!"

"Hush, father! that dark angel was the devil; he has dropt ill thoughts upon your heart: I would I could see you as you used to be, dear father, till within these two days."



“Whoever he were, if he brought me gold, he would bring me blessing. There’s meat and drink, and warmth and shelter, in the yellow gold—ay, and rest from labour, child, and a power of rare good gifts.”

“If God had made them good, and the gold were honest gains, still, father, even so, you forget righteousness, and happiness, and wisdom. Money gives us none of these, but it might take them all away: dear father, let your loving Grace ask you, have you been better, happier, wiser, even from the wishing it so much?”

Page 23

"Daughter, daughter, I tell you plainly, he that gives me gold, gives me all things: I wish I found the crock the de—the angel, I mean, brought me."

"O father," murmured Grace, "do not breathe the wicked wish; even if you found it without any evil angel's help, would the gold be rightfully your own?"

"Tush, girl!" said her mother; "get the gold, feed the children, and then to think about the right."

"Ay, Grace, first drive away the toils and troubles of this life," added Roger, "and then one may try with a free mind to discover the comforts of religion."

Poor Grace only looked up mournfully, and answered nothing.

CHAPTER IX.

The poacher.

A sudden knock at the door here startled the whole party, and Mary Acton, bustling up, drew the bolt to let in—first, a lurcher, one Rover to wit, our gaunt ember-loving friend of Chapter II.; secondly, Thomas Acton, full flush, who carried the old musket on his shoulder, and seemed to have something else under his smock; and thirdly, Ben Burke, a personage of no small consequence to us, and who therefore deserves some specific introduction.

Big Ben, otherwise Black Burke, according to the friendship or the enmity of those who named him, was a huge, rough, loud, good-humoured, dare-devil sort of an individual, who lived upon what he considered common rights. His dress was of the mongrel character, a well-imagined cross between a ploughman's and a sailor's; the bottle-green frock of the former, pattern-stitched about the neck as ingeniously as if a tribe of Wisconsin squaws had tailored it—and mighty fishing boots, vast as any French postillion's, acting as a triton's tail to symbolize the latter: a red cotton handkerchief (dirty-red of course, as all things else were dirty, for cleanliness had little part in Ben), occupied just now the more native region of a halter; and a rusty fur cap crowned the poacher; I repeat it—crowned the poacher; for in his own estimation, and that of many others too, Ben was, if not quite an emperor, at least an Agamemnon, a king of men, a natural human monarch; in truth, he felt as much pride in the title Burke the Poacher (and with as great justice too, for aught I know), as Ali-Hamet-Ghee-the-Thug eastwards, or William-of-Normandy-the-Conqueror westwards, may be thought respectively to have cherished, on the score of their murderous and thievish surnames.

There was no small good, after all, in poor Ben; and a mountain of allowance must be flung into the scales to counterbalance his deficiencies. However coarse, and even profane, in his talk (I hope the gentle reader will excuse me alike for eliding a few

elegant extracts from his common conversation, and also for reminding him characteristically, now and then, that Ben's language is not entirely Addisonian), however rough of tongue and dissonant in voice, Ben's heart

Page 24

will be found much about in the right place; nay, I verily believe it has more of natural justice, human kindness, and right sympathies in it, than are to be found in many of those hard and hollow cones that beat beneath the twenty-guinea waistcoats of a Burghardt or a Buckmaster. Ay, give me the fluttering inhabitant of Ben Burke's cowskin vest; it is worth a thousand of those stuffed and artificial denizens, whose usual nest is figured satin and cut velvet.

Ben stole—true—he did not deny it; but he stole naught but what he fancied was wrongfully withheld him: and, if he took from the rich, who scarcely knew he robbed them, he shared his savoury booty with the poor, and fed them by his daring. Like Robin Hood of old, he avenged himself on wanton wealth, and frequently redressed by it the wrongs of penury. Not that I intend to break a lance for either of them, nor to go any lengths in excusing; slight extenuation is the limit for prudent advocacy in these cases. Robin Hood and Benjamin Burke were both of them thieves; bold men—bad men, if any will insist upon the bad; they sinned against law, and order, and Providence; they dug rudely at the roots of social institutions; they spoke and acted in a dangerous fashion about rights of men and community of things. But set aside the statutes of Foresting and Venery, disfranchise pheasants, let it be a cogent thing that poverty and riches approach the golden mean somewhat less unequally, and we shall not find much of criminality, either in Ben or Robin.

For a general idea, then, of our poaching friend:—he is a gigantic, black-whiskered, humorous, ruddy mortal, full of strange oaths, which we really must not print, and bearded like the pard, and he tumbles in amongst our humble family party, with—

“Bless your honest heart, Roger! what makes you look so sodden? I'm a lord, if your eyes a'n't as red as a hedge-hog's; and all the rest o' you, too; why, you seem to be pretty well merry as mutes. Ha! I see what it is,” added Ben, pouring forth a benediction on their frugal supper; “it's that precious belly-ache porridge that's a-giving you all the 'flensy. Tip it down the sink, dame, will you now? and trust to me for better. Your Tom here, Roger, 's a lad o' mettle, that he is; ay, and that old iron o' yours as true as a compass; and the pheasants would come to it, all the same as if they'd been loadstoned. Here, dame, pluck the fowl, will you: drop 'em, Tom.”—And Thomas Acton flung upon the table a couple of fine cock-pheasants.

Roger, Mary, and Grace, who were well accustomed to Ben Burke's eloquent tirades, heard the end of this one with anxiety and silence; for Tom had never done the like before. Grace was first to expostulate, but was at once cut short by an oath from her brother, whose evident state of high excitement could not brook the semblance of reproof. Mary Acton's marketing glance was abstractedly fixed upon the actual *corpus delicti*; each fine plump bird, full-plumaged, young-spurred; yes, they were still warm, and would eat tender, so she mechanically began to pluck them; while, as for poor

downcast Roger, he remembered, with a conscience-sting that almost made him start, his stolen bit of money in the morning—so, how could he condemn? He only looked pityingly on Thomas, and sighed from the bottom of his heart.

Page 25

"Why, what's the matter now?" roared Ben; "one 'ud think we was bailiffs come to raise the rent, 'stead of son Tom and friendly Ben; hang it, mun, we aint here to cheat you out o' summut—no, not out o' peace o' mind neither; so, if you don't like luck, burn the fowls, or bury 'em, and let brave Tom risk limbo for nothing."

"Oh, Ben!" murmured Grace, "why will you lead him astray? Oh, brother! brother! what have you done?" she said, sorrowfully.

"Miss Grace,"—her beauty always awed the poacher, and his rugged Caliban spirit bowed in reverence before her Ariel soul—"I wish I was as good as you, but can't be: don't condemn us, Grace; leastways, first hear me, and then say where's the harm or sin on it. Twelve hundred head o' game—I heard John Gorse, the keeper, tell it at the Jerry—twelve hundred head were shot at t'other day's battew: Sir John—no blame to him for it—killed a couple o' hundred to his own gun: and though they sent away a coachful, and gave to all who asked, and feasted themselves chuckfull, and fed the cats, and all, still a mound, like a haycock, o' them fine fat fowl, rotted in a mass, and were flung upon the dungpit. Now, Miss Grace, that ere salt pea-porridge a'n't nice, a'n't wholesome; and, bless your pretty mouth, it ought to feed more sweetly. Look at Acton, isn't he half-starved. Is Tom, brave boy, full o' the fat o' the land? Who made fowl, I should like to know, and us to eat 'em? And where's the harm or sin in bringing down a bird? No, Miss, them ere beaks, dammem (beg humble pardon, Miss, indeed I won't again) them ere justices, as they call themselves, makes hard laws to hedge about their own pleasures; and if the poor man starves, he starves; but if he stays his hunger with the free, wild birds of heaven, they prison him and punish him, and call him poacher."

"Ben, those who make the laws, do so under God's permission; and they who break man's law, break His law."

"Nonsense, child,"—suddenly said Roger; "hold your silly tongue. Do you mean to tell us, God's law and man's law are the same thing! No, Grace, I can't stomach that; God makes right, and man makes might—riches go one way, and poor men's wrong's another. Money, money's the great law-maker, and a full purse frees him that has it, while it turns the jailor's key on the wretch that has it not: one of those wretches is the hopeless Roger Acton. Well, well," he added, after a despondent sigh, "say no more about it all; that's right, good-wife—why, they do look plump. And if I can't stomach Grace's text-talk there, I'm sure I can the birds; for I know what keeps crying cupboard lustily."

It was a faint effort to be gay, and it only showed his gloom the denser. Truly, he has quite enough to make him sad; but this is an unhealthy sadness: the mists of mammon-worship, rising up, meet in the mid aether of his mind, these lowering clouds of discontent: and the seeming calamity, that should be but a trial to his faith, looks too likely to wreck it.

Page 26

So, then, the embers were raked up, the trivet stuck a-top, the savoury broil made ready; and (all but Grace, who would not taste a morsel, but went up straight to bed) never had the Actons yet sate down before so rich a supper.

CHAPTER X.

Ben Burke's strange adventure.

"Take a pull, Roger, and pass the flask," was the cordial prescription of Ben Burke, intended to cure a dead silence, generated equally of eager appetites and self-accusing consciences; so saying, he produced a quart wicker-bottle, which enshrined, according to his testimony, "summut short, the right stuff, stinging strong, that had never seen the face of a wishy-washy 'ciseman." But Roger touched it sparingly, for the vaunted nectar positively burnt his swallow: till Ben, pulling at it heartily himself, by way of giving moral precept the full benefit of a good example, taught Roger not to be afraid of it, and so the flask was drained.

Under such communicative influence, Acton's tale of sorrows and oppressions, we may readily believe, was soon made known; and as readily, that it moved Ben's indignant and gigantic sympathies to an extent of imprecation on the eyes, timbers, and psychological existence of Mr. Jennings, very little edifying. One thing, however, made amends for the license of his tongue; the evident sincerity and warmth with which his coarse but kindly nature proffered instant aid, both offensive and defensive.

"It's a black and burning shame, Honest Roger, and right shall have his own, somehow, while Big Ben has a heart in the old place, and a hand to help his friend." And the poacher having dealt his own broad breast a blow that would have knocked a tailor down, stretched out to Acton the huge hand that had inflicted it.

"More than that, Roger—hark to this, man!" and, as he slapped his breeches pocket, there was the chink as of a mine of money shaken to its foundations: "hark to this, man! and more than hark, have! Here, good wife, hold your apron!" And he flung into her lap a handful of silver.

Roger gave a sudden shout of wonder, joy, and avarice: and then as instantaneously turning very pale, he slowly muttered, "Hush, Ben! is it bloody money?" and almost shrieked as he added, "and my poor boy Tom, too, with you! God-a-mercy, mun! how came ye by it?"

"Honestly, neighbour, leastways, middling honest: don't damp a good fellow's heart, when he means to serve you."

"Tell me only that my boy is innocent!—and the money—yes, yes, I'll keep the money;" for his wife seemed to be pushing it from her at the thought.



"I innocent, father! I never know'd till this minute that Ben had any blunt at all—did I, Ben?—and I only brought him and Rover here to sup, because I thought it neighbourly and kind-like."

Poor Tom had till now been very silent: some how the pheasants lay heavy on his stomach.

Page 27

"Is it true, Ben, is it true? the lad isn't a thief, the lad isn't a murderer? Oh, God! Burke, tell me the truth!"

"Blockhead!" was the courteous reply, "what, not believe your own son? Why, neighbour Acton, look at the boy: would that frank-faced, open-hearted fellow do worse, think you, than Black Burke? And would I, bad as I be, turn the bloody villain to take a man's life? No, neighbour; Ben kills game, not keepers: he sets his wire for a hare, but wouldn't go to pick a dead man's pocket. All that's wrong in me, mun, the game-laws put there; but I'm neither burglar, murderer, highwayman—no, nor a mean, sneaking thief; however the quality may think so, and even wish to drive me to it. Neither, being as I be no rogue, could I bear to live a fool; but I should be one, neighbour, and dub myself one too, if I didn't stoop to pick up money that a madman flings away."

"Madman? pick up money? tell us how it was, Ben," interposed female curiosity.

"Well, neighbours, listen: I was a-setting my night-lines round Pike Island yonder, more nor a fortnight back; it was a dark night and a mizzling, or morning rather, 'twixt three and four; by the same token, I'd caught a power of eels. All at once, while I was fixing a trimmer, a punt came quietly up: as for me, Roger, you know I always wades it through the muddy shallow: well, I listens, and a chap creeps ashore—a mad chap, with never a tile to his head, nor a sole to his feet—and when I sings out to ax him his business, the lunatic sprung at me like a tiger: I didn't wish to hurt a little weak wretch like him, specially being past all sense, poor nat'ral! so I shook him off at once, and held him straight out in this here wice." [Ben's grasp could have cracked any cocoa-nut.] "He trembled like a wicked thing; and when I peered close into his face, blow me but I thought I'd hooked a white devil—no one ever see such a face: it was horrible too look at. 'What are you arter, mun?' says I; 'burying a dead babby?' says I. 'Give us hold here—I'm bless'd if I don't see though what you've got buckled up there.' With that, the little white fool—it's sartin he was mad—all on a sudden flings at my head a precious hard bundle, gives a horrid howl, jumps into the punt, and off again, afore I could wink twice. My head a'n't a soft un, I suppose; but when a lunatic chap hurls at it with all his might a barrow-load of crockery at once, it's little wonder that my right eye flinched a minute, and that my right hand rubbed my right eye; and so he freed himself, and got clear off. Rum start this, thinks I: but any how he's flung away a summut, and means to give it me: what can it be? thinks I. Well, neighbours, if I didn't know the chap was mad afore, I was sartain of it now; what do you think of a grown man—little enough, truly, but out of long coats too—sneaking by night to Pike Island, to count out a little lot of silver, and to guzzle twelve gallipots o' honey? There it was, all hashed up in an old shawl,

Page 28

a slimy mesh like birdlime: no wonder my eye was a leetle blackish, when half-a-dozen earthen crocks were broken against it. I was angered enough, I tell you, to think any man could be such a fool as to bring honey there to eat or to hide—when at once I spied summut red among the mess; and what should it be but a pretty little China house, red-brick-like, with a split in the roof for droppings, and ticketed ‘Savings-bank:’ the chink o’ that bank you hears now: and the bank itself is in the pond, now I’ve cleaned the till out.”

“Wonderful sure! But what did you do with the honey, Ben?—some of the pots wasn’t broke,” urged notable Mrs. Acton.

“Oh, burn the slimy stuff, I warn’t going to put my mouth out o’ taste o’ bacca, for a whole jawful of tooth-aches: I’ll tell you, dame, what I did with them ere crocks, wholes, and parts. There’s never a stone on Pike Island, it’s too swampy, and I’d forgot to bring my pocketful, as usual. The heaviest fish, look you, always lie among the sedge, hereabouts and thereabouts, and needs stirring, as your Tom knows well; so I chucked the gallipots fur from me, right and left, into the shallows, and thereby druv the pike upon my hooks. A good night’s work I made of it too, say nothing of the Savings-bank; forty pound o’ pike and twelve of eel warn’t bad pickings.”

“Dear, it was a pity though to fling away the honey; but what became of the shawl, Ben?” Perhaps Mrs. Acton thought of looking for it.

“Oh, as for that, I was minded to have sunk it, with its mess of sweet-meats and potsherds; but a thought took me, dame, to be ’conomical for once: and I was half sorry too that I’d flung away the jars, for I began to fancy your little uns might ha’ liked the stuff; so I dipped the clout like any washerwoman, rinsed, and squeezed, and washed the mess away, and have worn it round my waist ever since; here, dame, I haven’t been this way for a while afore to-night; but I meant to ask you if you’d like to have it; may be ’tan’t the fashion though.”

“Good gracious, Ben! why that’s Mrs. Quarles’s shawl, I’d swear to it among a hundred; Sarah Stack, at the Hall, once took and wore it, when Mrs. Quarles was ill a-bed, and she and our Thomas walked to church together. Yes—green, edged with red, and—I thought so—a yellow circle in the middle; here’s B.Q., for Bridget Quarles, in black cotton at the corner. Lackapity! if they’d heard of all this at the Inquest! I tell you what, Big Ben, it’s kindly meant of you, and so thank you heartily, but that shawl would bring us into trouble; so please take it yourself to the Hall, and tell ’em fairly how you came by it.”

“I don’t know about that Poll Acton; perhaps they might ask me for the Saving-bank, too—eh, Roger!”

“No, no, wife; no, it’ll never do to lose the money! let a bygone be a bygone, and don’t disturb the old woman in her grave. As to the shawl, if it’s like to be a tell-tale, in my mind, this hearth’s the safest place for it.”

Page 29

So he flung it on the fire; there was a shrivelling, smouldering, guilty sort of blaze, and the shawl was burnt.

Roger Acton, you are falling quickly as a shooting star; already is your conscience warped to connive, for lucre's sake, at some one's secret crimes. You had better, for the moral of the matter, have burnt your right hand, as Scaevola did, than that shawl. Beware! your sin will bring its punishment.

CHAPTER XI.

Sleep.

Grace, in her humble truckle-bed, lay praying for her father; not about his trouble, though that was much, but for the spots of sin she could discern upon his soul.

Alas! an altered man was Roger Acton; almost since morning light, the leprosy had changed his very nature. The simple-minded Christian, toiling in contentment for his daily bread, cheerful for the passing day, and trustful for the coming morrow, this fair state was well-nigh faded away; while a bitterness of feeling against (in one word) *god*—against unequal partialities in providence, against things as they exist; and this world's inexplicable government—was gnawing at his very heart-strings, and cankering their roots by unbelief. It is a speedy process—throw away faith with its trust for the past, love for the present, hope for the future—and you throw away all that makes sorrow bearable, or joy lovely; the best of us, if God withheld his help, would apostatize like Peter, ere the cock crew thrice; and, at times, that help has wisely been withheld, to check presumptuous thoughts, and teach how true it is that the creature depends on the Creator. Just so we suffer a wilful little child, who is tottering about in leading-strings, to go alone for a minute, and have a gentle fall. And just so Roger here, deserted for a time of those angelic ministrations whose efficiency is proved by godliness and meekness, by patience and content, is harassed in his spirit as by harpies, by selfishness and pride, and fretful doublings; by a grudging hate of labour, and a fiery lust of gold. Temptation comes to teach a weak man that he was fitted for his station, and his station made for him; that fulfilment of his ignorant desires will only make his case the worse, and that

Providence alike is wise
In what he gives and what denies.

Meanwhile, gentle *Grace*, on her humble truckle-bed, is full of prayers and tears, uneasily listening to the indistinct and noisy talk, and hearing, now and then, some louder oath of Ben's that made her shudder. Yes, she heard, too, the smashing sound, when the poacher flung the money down, and she feared it was a mug or a plate—no slight domestic loss; and she heard her father's strange cry, when he gave that



wondering shout of joyous avarice, and she did not know what to fear. Was he ill? or crazed! or worse—fallen into bad excesses? How she prayed for him!

Poor Ben, too, honest-hearted Ben; she thought of him in charity, and pleaded for his good before the Throne of Mercy. Who knows but Heaven heard that saintly virgin prayer? There is love in Heaven yet for poor Ben Burke.

Page 30

And if she prayed for Ben, with what an agony of deep-felt intercession did she plead for Thomas Acton, that own only brother of hers, just a year the younger to endear him all the more, her playmate, care, and charge, her friend and boisterous protector. The many sorrowing hours she had spent for his sake, and the thousand generous actions he had done for hers! Could she forget how the stripling fought for her that day, when rude Joseph Green would help her over the stile? Could she but remember how slyly he had put aside, for more than half a year, a little heap of copper earnings—weeding-money, and errand-money, and harvest-money—and then bounteously spent it all at once in giving her a Bible on her birth-day? And when, coming across the fields with him after leasing, years ago now, that fierce black bull of Squire Ryle's was rushing down upon us both, how bravely did the noble boy attack him with a stake, as he came up bellowing, and make the dreadful monster turn away! Ah! I looked death in the face then, but for thee, my brother! Remember him, my God, for good!

"Poor father! poor father! Well, I am resolved upon one thing: I'll go, with Heaven's blessing, to the Hall myself, and see Sir John, to-morrow; he shall hear the truth, for"—And so Grace fell asleep.

Roger, when he went to bed, came to similar conclusions. He would speak up boldly, that he would, without fear or favour. Ben's most seasonable bounty, however to be questioned on the point of right, made him feel entirely independent, both of bailiffs and squires, and he had now no anxieties, but rather hopes, about to-morrow. He was as good as they, with money in his pocket; so he'd down to the Hall, and face the baronet himself, and blow his bailiff out o' water: that should be his business by noon. Another odd idea, too, possessed him, and he could not sleep at night for thinking of it: it was a foolish fancy, but the dream might have put it in his head: what if one or other of those honey-jars, so flung here and there among the rushes, were in fact another sort of "Savings-bank"—a crock of gold? It was a thrilling thought—his very dream, too; and the lot of shillings, and the shawl—ay, and the inquest, and the rumours how that Mrs. Quarles had come to her end unfairly, and no hoards found—and—and the honey-pots missing. Ha! at any rate he'd have a search to-morrow. No bugbear now should hinder him; money's money; he'd ask no questions how it got there. His own bit of garden lay the nearest to Pike Island, and who knows but Ben might have slung a crock this way? It wouldn't do to ask him, though—for Burke might look himself, and get the crock—was Roger's last and selfish thought, before he fell asleep.

Page 31

As to Mrs. Acton, she, poor woman, had her own thoughts, fearful ones, about that shawl, and Ben's mysterious adventure. No cloudy love of mammon had overspread her mind, to hide from it the hideousness of murder; in her eyes, blood was terrible, and not the less so that it covered gold. She remembered at the inquest—be sure she was there among the gossips—the facts, so little taken notice of till now, the keys in the cupboard, where the honey-pots were not, and how Jonathan Floyd had seen something on the lake, and the marks of a man's hand on the throat; and, God forgive her for saying so, but Mr. Jennings was a little, white-faced man. How wrong was it of Roger to have burnt that shawl! how dull of Ben not to have suspected something! but then the good fellow suspects nobody, and, I dare say, now doesn't know my thoughts. But Roger does, more shame for him; or why burn the shawl? Ah! thought she, with all the gossip rampart in her breast, if I could only have taken it to the Hall myself, what a stir I should have caused! Yes, she would have reaped a mighty field of glory by originating such a whirlwind of inquiries and surmises. Even now, so attractive was the mare's nest, she would go to the Hall by morning, and tell Sir John himself all about the burnt shawl, and Pike Island, and the galli—And so she fell fast asleep.

With respect to Ben, Tom, and Rover, a well-matched triad, as any Isis, Horus, and Nephthys, they all flung themselves promiscuously on the hard floor beside the hearth, "basked at the fire their hairy strength," and soon were snoring away beautifully in concert, base, tenor, and treble, like a leash of glee-singers. No thoughts troubled them, either of mammon or murder: so long before the meditative trio up-stairs, they had set a good example, and fallen asleep.

CHAPTER XII.

Love.

With the earliest peep of day arose sweet Grace, full of cheerful hope, and prayer, and happy resignation. She had a great deal to do that morning; for, innocent girl, she had no notion that it was quite possible to be too early at the Hall; her only fear was being too late. Then there were all the household cares to see to, and the dear babes to dress, and the place to tidy up, and breakfast to get ready, and, any how, she could not be abroad till half-past eight: so, to her dismay, it must be past nine before ever she can see Sir John. Let us follow her a little: for on this important day we shall have to take the adventures of our labourer's family one at a time.

By twenty minutes to nine, Grace had contrived to bustle on her things, give the rest the slip, and be tripping to the Hall. It is nearly two miles off, as we already know; and Grace is such a pretty creature that we can clearly do no better than employ our time thitherward by taking a peep at her.

Page 32

Sweet Grace Acton, we will not vex thy blushing maiden modesty by elaborate details of form, and face, and feature. Perfect womanhood at fair eighteen: let that fill all the picture up with soft and swelling charms; no wadding, or padding, or jigot, or jupe—but all those graceful undulations are herself: no pearl-powder, no carmine, no borrowed locks, no musk, or ambergris—but all those feeble helps of meretricious art excelled and superseded by their just originals in nature. It will not do to talk, as a romancer may, of velvet cheeks and silken tresses; or invoke, to the aid of our inadequate description, roses, and swans, and peaches, and lilies. Take the simple village beauty as she is. Did you ever look on prettier lips or sweeter eyes—more glossy natural curls upon a whiter neck? And how that little red-riding-hood cloak, and the simple cottage hat tied down upon her cheeks, and the homely russet gown, all too short for modern fashions, and the white, well-turned ankle, and the tidy little leather shoe, and the bunch of snow drops in her tucker, and the neat mittens contrasting darkly with her fair, bare arms—pretty Grace, how well all these become thee! There, trip along, with health upon thy cheek, and hope within thy heart; who can resist so eloquent a pleader? Haste on, haste on: save thy father in his trouble, as thou hast blest him in his sin—this rustic lane is to thee the path of duty—Heaven speed thee on it!

More slowly now, and with more anxious thoughts, more heart-weakness, more misgiving—Grace approacheth the stately mansion: and when she timidly touched the “Servants” bell, for she felt too lowly for the “Visitors’,”—and when she heard how terribly loud it was, how long it rung, and what might be the issue of her—wasn’t it ill-considered?—errand—the poor girl almost fainted at the sound.

As she leaned unconsciously for strength against the door, it opened on a sudden, and Jonathan Floyd, in mute amazement, caught her in his arms.

“Why, Grace Acton! what’s the matter with you?” Jonathan knew Grace well; they had been at dame’s-school together, and in after years attended the same Sunday class at church. There had been some talk among the gossips about Jonathan and Grace, and ere now folks had been kind enough to say they would make a pretty couple. And folks were right, too, as well as kind: for a fine young fellow was Jonathan Floyd, as any duchess’s footman; tall, well built, and twenty-five; Antinous in a livery. Well to do, withal, though his wages don’t come straight to him; for, independently of his place—and the baronet likes him for his good looks and proper manners—he is Farmer Floyd’s only son, on the hill yonder, as thriving a small tenant as any round abouts; and he is proud of his master, of his blue and silver uniform, of old Hurstley, and of all things in general, except himself.

“But what on earth’s the matter, Grace?” he was obliged to repeat, for the dear girl’s agitation was extreme.

Page 33

“Jonathan, can I see the baronet?”

“What, at nine in the morning, Grace Acton! Call again at two, and you may find him getting up. He hasn’t been three hours a-bed yet, and there’s nobody about but Sarah Stack and me. I wish those Lunnun sparks would but leave the place: they do his honour no good, I’m thinking.”

“Not till two!” was the slow and mournful ejaculation. What a damper to her buoyant hopes: and Providence had seen fit to give her ill-success. Is it so? Prosperity may come in other shapes.

“Why, Grace,” suddenly said Floyd, in a very nervous way, “what makes you call upon my master in this tidy trim?”

“To save my father,” answered Innocence.

“How? why? Oh don’t, Grace, don’t! I’ll save him—I will indeed—what is it? Oh, don’t, don’t!”

For the poor affectionate fellow conjured on the spot the black vision of a father saved by a daughter’s degradation.

“Don’t, Jonathan?—it’s my duty, and God will bless me in it. That cruel Mr. Jennings has resolved upon our ruin, and I wished to tell Sir John the truth of it.”

At this hearing, Jonathan brightened up, and glibly said, “Ah, indeed, Jennings is a trouble to us all: a sad life I’ve led of it this year past; and I’ve paid him pretty handsomely too, to let me keep the place: while, as for John Page and the grooms, and Mr. Coachman and the helpers, they don’t touch much o’ their wages on quarter-day, I know.”

“Oh, but we—we are ruined! ruined! Father is forbidden now to labour for our bread.” And then with many tears she told her tale.

“Stop, Miss Grace,” suddenly said Jonathan, for her beauty and eloquence transformed the cottager into a lady in his eyes, and no wonder; “pray, stop a minute, Miss—please to take a seat; I sha’n’t be gone an instant.”

And the good-hearted fellow, whose eyes had long been very red, broke away at a gallop; but he was back again almost as soon as gone, panting like a post-horse. “Oh, Grace! don’t be angry! do forgive me what I am going to do.”

“Do, Jonathan?” and the beauty involuntarily started—“I hope it’s nothing wrong,” she added, solemnly.



“Whether right or wrong, Grace, take it kindly; you have often bade me read my Bible, and I do so many times both for the sake of it and you; ay, and meet with many pretty sayings in it: forgive me if I act on one—’It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” With that, he thrust into her hand a brass-topped, red-leather purse, stuffed with money. Generous fellow! all the little savings, that had heretofore escaped the prying eye and filching grasp of Simon Jennings. There was some little gold in it, more silver, and a lot of bulky copper.

“Dear Jonathan!” exclaimed Grace, quite thrown off her guard of maidenly reserve, “this is too kind, too good, too much; indeed, indeed it is: I cannot take the purse.” And her bright eyes overflowed again.

Page 34

"Well, girl," said Jonathan, gulping down an apple in his throat, "I—I won't have the money, that's all. Oh, Grace, Grace!" he burst out earnestly, "let me be the blessed means of helping you in trouble—I would die to do it, Grace; indeed I would!"

The dear girl fell upon his neck, and they wept together like two loving little sisters.

"Jonathan"—her duteous spirit was the first to speak—"forgive this weakness of a foolish woman's heart: I will not put away the help which God provides us at your friendly hands: only this, kind brother—let me call you brother—keep the purse; if my father pines for want of work, and the babes at home lack food, pardon my boldness if I take the help you offer. Meanwhile, God in heaven bless you, Jonathan, as He will!"

And she turned to go away.

"Won't you take a keepsake, Grace—one little token? I wish I had any thing here but money to give you for my sake."

"It would even be ungenerous in me to refuse you, brother; one little piece will do."

Jonathan fumbled up something in a crumpled piece of paper, and said sobbingly—"Let it be this new half-crown, Grace: I won't say, keep it always; only when you want to use that and more, I humbly ask you'll please come to me."

Now a more delicate, a more unselfish act, was never done by man: along with the half-crown he had packed up two sovereigns! and thereby not only escaped thanks, concealed his own beneficence, and robbed his purse of half its little store; but actually he was, by doing so, depriving himself for a month, or maybe more, of a visit from Grace Acton. Had it been only half-a-crown, and want had pinched the family (neither Grace nor Jonathan could guess of Ben Burke's bounty, and for all they knew Roger had not enough for the morrow's meals)—had poverty come in like an armed man, and stood upon their threshold a grim sentinel—doubtless she must have run to him within a day or two. How sweet would it have been to have kept her coming day by day, and to a commoner affection how excusable! but still how selfish, how unlike the liberal and honourable feeling that filled the manly heart of Jonathan Floyd! It was a noble act, and worthy of a long parenthesis.

If Grace Acton had looked back as she hurried down the avenue, she would have seen poor Jonathan still watching her with all his eyes till she was out of sight. Perhaps, though, she might have guessed it—there is a sympathy in these things, the true animal magnetism—and I dare say that was the very reason why she did not once turn her head.

CHAPTER XIII.

The discovery.

Page 35

Roger Acton had not slept well; had not slept at all till nearly break of day, except in the feverish fashion of half dream half revery. There were thick-coming fancies all night long about what Ben had said and done: and more than once Roger had thought of the expediency of getting up, to seek without delay the realization of that one idea which now possessed him—a crock of gold. When he put together one thing and another, he considered it almost certain that Ben had flung away among the lot no mere honey-pot, but perhaps indeed a money-pot: Burke hadn't half the cunning of a child; more fool he, and maybe so much the better for me, thought money-bitten, selfish Roger. Thus, in the night's hot imaginations, he resolved to find the spoil; to will, was then to do: to do, was then to conquer. However, Nature's sweet restorer came at last, and, when he woke, the idea had sobered down—last night's fancies were preposterous. So, it was with a heavy heart he got up later than his wont—no work before him, nothing to do till the afternoon, when he might see Sir John, except it be to dig a bit in his little marshy garden. When Grace ran to the Hall, Roger was going forth to dig.

Now, I know quite well that the reader is as fully aware as I am, what is about to happen; but it is impossible to help the matter. If the heading of this chapter tells the truth, a “discovery” of some sort is inevitable. Let us preliminarize a thought or two, if thereby we can hang some shadowy veil of excuse over a too naked mystery. First and foremost, truth is strange, stranger, *et-cetera*; and this *et-cetera*, pregnant as one of Lyttleton's, intends to add the superlative strangest, to the comparative stranger of that seldom-quoted sentiment. To every one of us, in the course of our lives, something quite as extraordinary has befallen more than once. What shall we say of omens, warnings, forebodings? What of the most curious runs of luck; the most whimsical freaks of fortune; the unaccountable things that happen round us daily, and no one marvels at them, till he reads of them in print? Even as Macpherson, ingenious, if not ingenuous, gathered Ossian from the lips of Highland hussifs, and made the world with modern Attila to back it, wonder at the stores that are hived on old wives' tongues; even so might any other literary, black-smith hammer from the ore of common gossip a regular Vulcan's net of superstitious “facts.” Never yet was uttered ghost story, that did not breed four others; every one at table is eager to record his, or his aunt's, experience in that line; and the mass of queer coincidences, inexplicable incidents, indubitable seeings, hearings, doings, and sufferings; which you and I have heard of in this popular vein of talk, would amply excuse the wildest fictionist for the most extravagant adventure—the more improbable, the nearer truth. Talk of the devil, said our ancestors—let “&c.” save us from the consequence. Think of any thing

Page 36

vehemently, and it is an even chance it happens: be confident, you conquer; be obstinate in willing, and events shall bend humbly to their lord: nay, dream a dream, and if you recollect it in the morning, and it bother you next day, and you cannot get it out of your head for a week, and the matter positively haunt you, ten to one but it finds itself or makes itself fulfilled, some odd day or other. Just so, doubtless, will it prove to be with Roger's dream: I really cannot help the matter.

Again, it is more than likely that the reader is clever, very clever, and that any attempts at concealment would be merely futile. From the first page he has discovered who is the villain, and who the victim: the title alone tells him of the golden hinge on which the story turns: he can look through stone walls, if need be, or mesmerically see, without making use of eyes: no peep-holes for him, as for Pyramus and Thisbe: no initiation requisite for any hidden mysteries; all arcana are revealed to him, every sanctum is a highway. No art of mortal pen can defeat this mischief of acuteness: character is character; oaks grow of acorns, and the plan of a life may be detected in a microscopic speech. The career of Mr. Jennings is as much predestined by us to iniquity, from the first intimation that he never makes excuse, as honest Roger is to trouble and temptation from the weary effort wherewithal he woke. And, even now, pretty Grace and young Sir John, the reader thinks that he can guess at nature's consequence; while, with respect to Roger's going forth to dig this morning, he sees it straight before him, need not ask for the result. Well, if the shrewd reader has the eye of Lieuenhoeck, and can discern, cradled in the small triangular beech-mast, a noble forest-tree, with silvery trunk, branching arms, and dark-green foliage, he deserves to be complimented indeed, for his own keen skill; but, at the same time, Nature will not hurry herself for him, but will quietly educe results which he foreknew—or thought he did—a century ago. And is there not the highest Art in this unveiled simplicity: to lead the reader onwards by a straight road, with the setting sun a-blaze at the end of it, knowing his path, knowing its object, yet still borne on with spirits unexhausted and unflagging foot? Trust me, there is better praise in this, than in dazzling the distracted glance with a perpetual succession of luminous fire-flies, and dragging your fair novel-reader, harried and excited, through the mazes of a thousand incidents.

Thirdly, and lastly, in this prefatorial say, there is to be considered that inevitable defeator of all printed secrets—impatience. Nothing is easier, nothing commoner (most wise people do it, whose fate is, that they must keep up with the race of current publication, and therefore must keep down the still-increasing crowd of authorial creations), nothing is more venial, more laudable, than to read the last chapter first; and so, finding out all mysteries

Page 37

at once, to save one's self a vast deal of unnecessary trouble. And, for mere tale-telling, this may be sufficient. What need to burden memory with imaginary statements, or to weary out one's sympathies on trite fictitious woes?—come to the catastrophe at once: the uncle hanged; the heir righted; the heroine, an orange-flowered bride; and the white-headed grandmother, after all her wrongs, winding up the story with a prudent moral. Now, this may all be very well with histories that merely carry a sting in the tail, whose moral is the warning of the rattlesnake, and whose hot-exciting interest is posted with the scorpion's venom. They are the Dragon of Wantley, with one caudal point—a barbed termination: we, like Moore of Moore Hall, all point, covered with spikes: every where we boast ourselves an ethical hedge-hog, all-over-armed with keen morals—a Rumour painted full of tongues, echoing all around with revealing of secrets. The feelings of our humble hero, altered Roger Acton, are worthy to be studied by the great, to be sifted by the rich; and Grace's simple tongue may teach the sage, for its wisdom cometh from above; and Jonathan, for all his shoulder-knot and smart cockade, is worthy to give lessons to his master: that master, also, is far better than you think him; and poor Burke too, for true humanity's sake: so we get a mint of morals, set aside the story. It is not raw material, but the workmanship, that gives its value to the flowered damask; our grand-dames' sumptuous taffeties and stand-alone brocades are but spun silk-worms' interiors; the fairest statue is intrinsically but a mass of clumsy stone, until, indeed, the sculptor has rough-hewn it, and shaped it, and chiselled it, and finished all the touches with sand-paper. This story of '*The Crock of Gold*' purports to be a Dutch picture, as becometh boors, their huts, their short and simple annals; so that, after its moralities, the mass of minute detail is the only thing that gives it any value.

Now, whilst all of you have been yawning through these egotistic phrases, Roger has been digging in his garden; there he is, pecking away at what once was the celery-bed, but now are fallow trenches; celery, as we all know, is a water-loving plant, doing best in marshy-land, so no wonder the trenches open on the sedge, and the muddy shallow opposite Pike Island puddles up to them. There needs be no suspense, no mystery at all; Roger's dream had clearly sent him thither, for he should not have levelled those trenches yet awhile, it was a little too soon—bad husbandry; and, barring the appearance of a devil, Roger's dream came true. Yes, under the roots of a clump of bullrush, he lifted out with his spade—a pot of Narbonne honey!



Page 38

When first he spied the pot, his heart was in his mouth—it must be gold, and with tottering knees he raised the precious burden. But, woful disappointment! the word “Honey,” with plenty of French and Fortnum on another pasted label, stared him in the face; it was sweet and slimy too about the neck; there was no sort of jingle when he shook the crock; what though it be heavy?—honey’s heavy; and it was tied over quite in a common way with pig’s bladder, and his clumsy trembling fingers could not undo that knot; and thus, with a miserable sense of cheated poverty, he threw it down beside the path, and would, perhaps, have flung it right away in sheer disgust, but for the reflection that the little ones might like it. Once, indeed, the glorious doubt of maybe gold came back upon his mind, and he lifted up the spade to smash the baffling pot, and so make sure of what it might contain;—make sure, eh? why, you would only lose the honey, whispered domestic economy. So he left the jar to be opened by his wife when he should go in.

CHAPTER XIV.

JONATHAN’S STORE.

AND where has Mrs. Acton been all this morning? Off to the Hall, very soon after Grace had got away; and she rung at the side entrance, hard by the kitchen, most fortunately caught Sarah Stack about, and had a good long gossip with her; telling her, open-mouthed, all about Ben Burke having found a shawl of Mrs. Quarles’s on the island; and how, it being very rotten, yes, and smelling foul, Ben had been fool enough to burn it; what a pity! how could the shawl have got there? if it only could ha’ spoken what it knew! And the bereaved gossips mourned together over secrets undivulged, and their evidence destroyed. As to the crockery, for a miraculous once in life, Mrs. Acton held her tongue about a thing she knew, and said not a syllable concerning it. Roger would be mad to lose the money. Just at parting with her friend Mary Acton was going out by the wrong door, through the hall, but luckily did no more than turn the handle; or she never could have escaped bouncing in upon the lovers’ interview, and thereby occasioning a chaos of confusion. For, be it whispered, the step-dame was not a little jealous of her ready-made daughter’s beauty, persisted in calling her a child, and treated her any thing but kindly and sisterly, as her full-formed woman’s loveliness might properly have looked for. Only imagine, if the Hecate had but seen Jonathan’s lit-up looks, or Grace’s down-cast blushes; for it really slipped my observation to record that there were blushes, and probably some cause for them when the keep-sake was given and accepted; only conceive if the step-mother had heard Jonathan’s afterward soliloquy, when he was watching pretty Grace as she tripped away—and how much he seemed to think of her eyes and eye-lashes! I am reasonably fearful, had she heard and seen all this—Poll Acton’s nails might have possibly drawn blood from the cheeks of Jonathan Floyd. As it was, the little god of love kindly warded from his votaries the coming of so crabbed an antagonist.



Page 39

Grace has now reached home again, blessing her overruling stars to have escaped notice so entirely both in going and returning; for the mother was hard at washing near the well, having got in half an hour before, and father has not yet left off digging in his garden. So she crept up stairs quietly, put away her Sunday best, and is just dropping on her knees beside her truckle-bed, to speak of all her sorrows to her Heavenly friend, and to thank him for the kindness He had raised her in an earthly one. She then, with no small trepidation, took out of her tucker, just below those withered snow-drops, the crumpled bit of paper that held Jonathan's parting gift. It was surprising how her tucker heaved; she could hardly get at the parcel. She wanted to look at that half-crown; not that she feared it was a bad one, or was curious about coins, or felt any pleasure in possessing such a sum: but there was such a don't-know-what connected with that new half-crown, which made her long to look at it; so she opened the paper—and found its golden fellows! O noble heart! O kind, generous, unselfish—yes, beloved Jonathan! But what is she to do with the sovereigns? Keep them? No, she cannot keep them, however precious in her sight as proofs of deep affection; but she will call as soon as possible, and give them back, and insist upon his taking them, and keeping them too—for her, if no otherwise. And the dear innocent girl was little aware herself how glad she felt of the excuse to call so soon again at Hurstley.

Meantime, for safety, she put the money in her Bible.

What hallowed gold was that? Gained by honest industry, saved by youthful prudence, given liberally and unasked, to those who needed, and could not pay again; with a delicate consideration, an heroic essay at concealment, a voluntary sacrifice of self, of present pleasure, passion, and affection. And there it lies, the little store, hidden up in Grace's Bible. She has prayed over it, thanked over it, interceded over it, for herself, for it, for others. How different, indeed, from ordinary gold, from common sin-bought mammon; how different from that unblest store, which Roger Acton covets; how purified from meannesses, and separate from harms! This is of that money, the scarcest coins of all the world, endued with all good properties in heaven and in earth, whereof it had been written, "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts."

Such alone are truly riches—well-earned, well-saved, well-sanctified, well-spent. The wealthiest of European capitalists—the Croesus of modern civilization—may be but a pauper in that better currency, whereof a sample has been shown in the store of Jonathan Floyd.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER DISCOVERY, AND THE EARNEST OF GOOD THINGS.

"DAME, here's one o' Ben's gallipots he flung away: it's naught but honey, dame—marked so—no crock of gold; don't expect it; no such thing; luck like that isn't for such

as me: though, being as it is, the babes may like it, with their dry bread: open it, good-wife: I hope the water mayn't ha' spoilt it."

Page 40

The notable Mary Acton produced certain scissors, hanging from her pocket by a tape, and cut a knot, which to Roger had been Gordian's.

"Why, it's bran, Acton, not honey; look here, will you." She tilted it up, and, along with a cloud of saw-dust, dropped out a heavy hail-storm of—little bits of leather!

"Hallo? what's that?" said Roger, eagerly: "it's gold, gold, I'll be sworn!" It was so.

Every separate bit of money, whatever kind of coins they were, had been tidily sewn up in a shred of leather; remnants of old gloves of all colours; and the Narbonne jar contained six hundred and eighty-seven of them. These, of course, were hastily picked up from the path whereon they had first fallen, were counted out at home, and the glittering contents of most of those little leather bags ripped up were immediately discovered. Oh dear! oh dear! such a sight! Guineas and half-guineas, sovereigns and half-sovereigns, quite a little hill of bright, clean, prettily-figured gold.

"Hip, hip, hooray!" shouted Roger, in an ecstasy; "Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" and in the madness of his joy, he executed an extravagant pas seul; up went his hat, round went his heels, and he capered awkwardly like a lunatic giraffe.

"Here's an end to all our troubles, Poll: we're as good as gentle-folks now; catch me a-calling at the Hall, to bother about Jennings and Sir John: a fig for bailiffs, and baronets, parsons, and prisons, and all," and again he roared Hooray! "I tell you what though, old 'ooman, we must just try the taste of our glorious golden luck, before we do any thing else. Bide a bit, wench, and hide the hoard till I return. I'm off to the Bacchus's Arms, and I'll bring you some stingo in a minute, old gal." So off he ran hot-foot, to get an earnest of the blessing of his crock of gold.

The minute that was promised to produce the stingo, proved to be rather of a lengthened character; it might, indeed, have been a minute, or the fraction of one, in the planet Herschel, whose year is as long as eighty-five of our Terra's, but according to Greenwich calculation, it was nearer like two hours.

The little Tom and Jerry shop, that rejoiced in the classical heraldry of Bacchus's Arms, had been startled from all conventionalities by the unwonted event of the demand, "change for a sovereign?" and when it was made known to the assembled conclave that Roger Acton was the fortunate possessor, that even assumed an appearance positively miraculous.

"Why, honest Roger, how in the world could you ha' come by that?" was the troublesome inquiry of Dick the Tanner.

"Well, Acton, you're sharper than I took you for, if you can squeeze gold out of bailiff Jennings," added Solomon Snip; and Roger knew no better way of silencing their

tongues, than by profusely drenching them in liquor. So he stood treat all round, and was forced to hobnob with each; and when that was gone, he called for more to keep their curiosity employed. Now, all this caused delay; and if Mary had been waiting for the “stingo,” she would doubtless have had reasonable cause for anger and impatience: however, she, for her part, was so pleasantly occupied, like Prince Arthur’s Queen, in counting out the money, that, to say the truth, both lord and liquor were entirely forgotten.

Page 41

But another cause that lengthened out the minute, was the embarrassing business of where to find the change. Bacchus's didn't chalk up trust, where hard money was flung upon the counter; but all the accumulated wealth of Bacchus's high-priest, Tom Swipey, and of the seven worshippers now drinking in his honour, could not suffice to make up enough of change: therefore, after two gallons left behind him in libations as aforesaid, and two more bottled up for a drink-offering at home, Roger was contented to be owed seven and fourpence; a debt never likely to be liquidated. Much speculation this afforded to the gossips; and when the treater's back was turned, they touched their foreheads, for the man was clearly crazed, and they winked to each other with a gesture of significance.

Grace, while musing on her new half-crown—it was strange how long she looked at it—had heard with real amazement that uproarious huzzaing! and, just as her father had levanted for the beer, glided down from her closet, and received the wondrous tidings from her step-mother. She heard in silence, if not in sadness: intuitive good sense proclaimed to her that this sudden gush of wealth was a temptation, even if she felt no secret fears on the score of—shall we call it superstition?—that dream, this crock, that dark angel—and this so changed spirit of her once religious father: what could she think? she meekly looked to Heaven to avert all ill.

Mary Acton also was less elated and more alarmed than she cared to confess: not that she, any more than Grace, knew or thought about lords of manors, or physical troubles on the score of finding the crock: but Mrs. Quarles's shawl, and sundry fearful fancies tinged with blood, these worried her exceedingly, and made her look upon the gold with an uneasy feeling, as if it were an unclean thing, a sort of Achan's wedge.

At last, here comes Roger back, somewhat unsteadily I fear, with a stone two-gallon jar of what he was pleased to avouch to be "the down-right stingo." "Hooray, Poll!" (he had not ceased shouting all the way from Bacchus's,) "Hooray—here I be again, a gentle-folk, a lord, a king, Poll: why daughter Grace, what's come to you? I won't have no dull looks about to-day, girl. Isn't this enough to make a poor man merry? No more troubles, no more toil, no more 'humble sarvent,' no more a ragged, plodding ploughman: but a lord, daughter Grace—a great, rich, luxurious lord—isn't this enough to make a man sing out hooray?—Thank the crock of gold for this—Oh, blessed crock!"

"Hush, father, hush! that gold will be no blessing to you; Heaven send it do not bring a curse. It will be a sore temptation, even if the rights of it are not in some one else: we know not whom it may belong to, but at any rate it cannot well be ours."

"Not ours, child? whose in life is it then?"

Mary Acton, made quite meek by a superstitious dread of having money of the murdered, stepped in to Grace's help, whom her father's fierce manner had appalled,

with “Roger, it belonged to Mrs. Quarles, I’m morally sure on it—and must now be Simon Jennings’s, her heir.”

Page 42

“What?” he almost frantically shrieked, “shall that white hell-hound rob me yet again? No, dame—I’ll hang first! the crock I found, the crock I’ll keep: the money’s mine, whoever did the murder.” Then, changing his mad tone into one of reckless inebriate gayety—for he was more than half-seas over even then from the pot-house toasts and excitement—he added, “But come, wenches, down with your mugs, and help me to get through the jar: I never felt so dry in all my life. Here’s blessings on the crock, on him as sent it, him as has it, and on all the joy and comfort it’s to bring us! Come, drink, drink—we must all drink that—but where’s Tom?”

If Roger had been quite himself, he never would have asked so superfluous a question: for Tom was always in one and the same company, albeit never in one and the same place: he and his Pan-like Mentor were continually together, studying wood-craft, water-craft, and all manner of other craft connected with the antique trade of picking and stealing.

“Where’s Tom?”

Grace, glad to have to answer any reasonable question, mildly answered, “Gone away with Ben, father.”

Alas! that little word, Ben, gave occasion to reveal a depth in Roger’s fall, which few could have expected to behold so soon. To think that the liberal friend, who only last night had frankly shared his all with him, whose honest glowing heart would freely shed its blood for him, that he in recollection should be greeted with a loathing! Ben would come, and claim some portion of his treasure—he would cry halves—or, who knows? might want all—all: and take it by strong arm, or by threat to ‘peach against him:—curse that Burke! he hated him.

Oh, Steady Acton! what has made thee drink and swear? Oh, Honest Roger! what has planted guile, and suspicion, and malice in thy heart? Are these the mere first-fruits of coveting and having? Is this the earliest blessing of that luck which many long for—the finding of a crock of gold?

We would not enlarge upon the scene; a painful one at all times, when man forgets his high prerogative, and drowns his reason in the tankard: but, in a Roger Acton’s case, lately so wise, temperate, and patient, peculiarly distressing. Its chief features were these. Grace tasted nothing, but mournfully looked on: once only she attempted to expostulate, but was met—not with fierce oaths, nor coarse chidings, nor even with idiotic drivelling—oh no! worse than that she felt: he replied to her with the maudlin drunken promise, “If she’d only be a good girl, and let him bide, he’d give her a big Church-bible, bound in solid gold—that ‘ud make the book o’ some real value, Grace.” Poor broken-hearted daughter—she rushed to her closet in a torrent of tears.

As for Mary Acton, she was miraculously meek and dumb; all the scold was quelled within her; the word “blood” was the Petruchio that tamed that shrew; she could see a plenty of those crimson spots, which might

Page 43

“The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green, one red,”

dancing in the sun-beams, dotted on the cottage walls, sprinkled as unholy water, over that foul crock. Would not the money be a curse to them any how, say nothing of the danger? If things went on as they began, Mary might indeed have cause for fear: actually, she could not a-bear to look upon the crock; she quite dreaded it, as if it had contained a “bottled devil.” So there she sat ever so long—silent, thoughtful, and any thing but comfortable.

What became of Roger until next day at noon, neither he nor I can tell: true, his carcase lay upon the floor, and the two-gallon jar was empty. But, for the real man, who could answer to the name of Roger Acton, the sensitive and conscious soul—that was some where galloping away for fifteen hours in the Paradise of fools: the Paradise? no—the Maelstrom; tossed about giddily and painfully in one whirl of tumultuous drunkenness.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW THE HOME WAS BLEST THEREBY.

IT will surprise no one to be told that, however truly such an excess may have been the first, it was by no means the last exploit of our altered labourer in the same vein of heroism. Bacchus’s was quite close, and he needs must call for his change; he had to call often; drank all quits; changed another sovereign, and was owed again; but, trust him, he wasn’t going to be cheated out of that: take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves. But still it was ditto repeated; changing, being owed, grudging, grumbling: at last he found out the famous new plan of owing himself; and as Bacchus’s did not see fit to reject such wealthy customers, Roger soon chalked up a yard-long score, and grew so niggardly that they could not get a penny from him.

It is astonishing how immediately wealth brings in, as its companion, meanness: they walk together, and stand together, and kneel together, as the hectoring, prodigal Faulconbridge, the Bastard Plantagenet in *King John*, does with his white-livered, puny brother, Robert. Wherefore, no sooner was Roger blest with gold, than he resolved not to be such a fool as to lose liberally, or to give away one farthing. To give, I say, for extravagant indulgence is another thing; and it was a fine, proud pleasure to feast a lot of fellows at his sole expense. If meanness is brother to wealth, it is at any rate first cousin to extravagance.

When the dowager collects “her dear five hundred friends” to parade before the fresh young heirs her wax-light lovely daughters—when all is glory, gallopade, and Gunter—when Rubini warbles smallest, and Lablanche is heard as thunder on the stairs—speak, tradesmen, ye who best can tell, the closeness that has catered for that feast; tell it out,



ye famished milliners, ground down to sixpence on a ball-dress bill; whisper it, ye footmen, with your wages ever due; let Gath, let Askelon re-echo with the truth, that extortion is the parent of extravagance!

Page 44

Now, that episode should have been in a foot note; but no one takes the trouble to read notes; and with justice too; for if a man has any thing to say, let him put it in his text, as orderly as may be. And, if order be sometimes out of the question, as seems but clearly suitable at present to our hero's manner of life, it is wise to go boldly on, without so prim an usher; to introduce our thoughts as they reveal themselves, ignorant of "their own degrees," not "standing on the order of their coming," but, as a pit crowd on a benefit-night, bustling over one another, helter-skelter, "in most admired disorder." This will well comport with Roger's daily life: for, notwithstanding the frequent interference of an Amazon wife—regardless of poor, dear Grace's gentle voice and melancholy eyes—in spite of a conscience pricking in his breast, with the spines of a horse-chestnut, that evil crock appeared from the beginning to have been found for but one sole purpose—*videlicet*, that of keeping alight in Roger's brain the fire of mad intoxication. Yes, there were sundry other purposes, too, which may as well be told directly.

The utter dislocation of all home comforts occupied the foremost rank. True—in comparison with the homes of affluence and halls of luxury—those comforts may have formerly seemed few and far between; yet still the angel of domestic peace not seldom found a rest within the cottage. Not seldom? always: if sweet-eyed Grace be such an angel, that ever-abiding guest, full of love, duty, piety, and cheerfulness. But now, after long-enduring anguish, vexed in her righteous soul by the shocking sights and sounds of the drunkard and his parasites (for all the idle vagabonds about soon flocked around rich Acton, and were freely welcome to his reckless prodigality), Grace had been forced to steal away, and seek refuge with a neighbour. Here was one blessing the less.

Another wretched change was in the wife. Granted, Mary Acton had not ever been the pink of politeness, the violet of meekness, nor the rose of entire amiability: but if she were a scold, that scolding was well meant; and her irate energies were incessantly directed towards cleanliness, economy, quiet, and other *notabilia* of a busy house-wife. She did her best to keep the hovel tidy, to make the bravest show with their scanty chattels, to administer discreetly the stores of their frugal larder, and to recompense the good-man returning from his hard day's work, with much of rude joy and bustling kindness. But now, after the first stupor of amazement into which the crock and its consequences threw her, Poll Acton grew to be a fury: she raged and stormed, and well she might, at filth and discomfort in her home, at nauseous dregs and noisome fumes, at the orgie still kept up, day by day, and night by night, through the length of that first foul week, which succeeded the fortunate discovery. And not in vain she raged and stormed—and fought too; for she did fight—ay, and conquered: and miserable Roger, now in full possession of those joys which he had longed for at the casement of Hurstley Hall, was glad to betake himself to the bench at Bacchus's, whither he withdrew his ragged regiment. Thus, that crock had spoilt all there was to spoil in the temper and conduct of the wife.

Page 45

Look also at the pretty prattling babes, twin boys of two years old, whom Roger used to hasten home to see; who had to say their simple prayers; to be kissed, and comforted, and put to bed; to be made happier by a wild flower picked up on his path, than if the gift had been a coral with gold bells: where were they now? neglected, dirty, fretting in a corner, their red eyes full of wonder at father's altered ways, and their quick minds watching, with astonished looks, the progress of domestic discord. How the crock of gold has nipped those early blossoms as a killing frost!

Again, there used to be, till this sad week of wealth and riotous hilarity, that constantly recurring blessing of the morn and evening prayer which Roger read aloud, and Grace's psalm or chapter; and afterwards the frugal meal—too scanty, perhaps, and coarse—but still refreshing, thank the Lord, and seasoned well with health and appetite; and the heart-felt sense of satisfaction that all around was earned by honest labour; and there was content, and hope of better times, and God's good blessing over every thing.

Now, all these pleasures had departed; gold, unhallowed gold, gotten hastily in the beginning, broadcast on the rank strong soil of a heart that coveted it earnestly, had sprung up as a crop of poisonous tares, and choked the patch of wheat; gold, unhallowed gold, light come, light gone, had scared or killed the flock of unfledged loves that used to nestle in the cotter's thatch, as surely as if the cash were stones, flung wantonly by truants at a dove-cot; and forth from the crock, that egg of woe, had been hatched a red-eyed vulture, to tyrannize in this sad home, where but lately the pelican had dwelt, had spread her fostering wing, and poured out the wealth of her affections.

CHAPTER XVII.

CARE.

BUT other happy consequences soon became apparent. If Acton in his tipsy state was mad, in his intervals of soberness he was thoroughly miserable. And this, not merely on the score of sickness, exhaustion, prostrated spirits, blue-devils, or other the long catalogue of a drunkard's joys; not merely from a raging wife, and a wretched home; not merely from the stings, however sharp, however barbed, of a conscience ill at ease, that would rise up fiercely like a hissing snake, and strike the black apostate to the earth: these all, doubtless, had their pleasant influences, adding to the lucky finder's bliss: but there was another root of misery most unlooked for, and to the poor who dream of gold, entirely paradoxical.

Page 46

The possession of that crock was the heaviest of cares. Where on earth was he to hide it? how to keep it safely, secretly? What if he were robbed of it in some sly way! O, thought of utter wo! it made the fortunate possessor quiver like an aspen. Or what, if some one or more of those blustering boon companions were to come by night with a bludgeon and a knife, and—and cut his throat, and find the treasure? or, worse still, were to torture him, set him on the fire like a saucepan (he had heard of Turpin having done so with a rich old woman), and make him tell them “where” in his extremity of pains, and give up all, and then—and then murder him at last, outright, and afterwards burn the hovel over his head, babes and all, that none might live to tell the tale? These fears set him on the rack, and furnished one inciting cause to that uninterrupted orgie; he must be either mad or miserable, this lucky finder.

Also, even in his tipsy state, he could not cast off care: he might in his cups reveal the dangerous secret of having found a crock of gold. A secret still it was: Grace, his wife, and himself, were the only souls who knew it. Dear Grace feared to say a word about the business: not in apprehension of the law, for she never thought of that too probable intrusion on the finder: but simply because her unsophisticated piety believed that God, for some wise end, had allowed the Evil One to tempt her father; she, indeed, did not know the epigram,

The devil now is wiser than of yore:
He tempts by making rich—not making poor:

but she did not conceive that notion in her mind; she contrasted the wealthy patriarch Job, tried by poverty and pain, but just and patient in adversity—with the poor labourer Acton, tried by luxury and wealth, and proved to be apostate in prosperity: so she held her tongue, and hitherto had been silent on a matter of so much local wonder as her father’s sudden wealth, in the midst of urgent curiosity and extraordinary rumours.

Mary was kept quiet as we know, by superstition of a lower grade, the dread of having money of the murdered, a thought she never breathed to any but her husband; and to poor uninitiated Grace (who had not heard a word of Ben’s adventure), her answer about Mrs. Quarles and Mr. Jennings in the dawn of the crock’s first blessing, had been entirely unintelligible: Mary, then, said never a word, but looked on dreadingly to see the end.

As for Roger himself, he was too much in apprehension of a landlord’s claims, and of a task-master’s extortions, to breath a syllable about the business. So he hid his crock as best he could—we shall soon hear how and where—took out sovereign after sovereign day by day, and made his flush of instant wealth a mystery, a miracle, a legacy, good luck, any thing, every thing but the truth: and he would turn fiercely round to the frequent questioner with a “What’s that to you?—Nobody’s business but mine:” and then would coaxingly add the implied bribe to secresy, in his accustomed invitation—“And now, what’ll you take?”—a magical phrase, which could suffice to quell murmurs

for the time, and postponed curiosity to appetite. Thus the fact was still unknown, and weighed on Roger's mind as a guilty concealment, an oppressive secret. What if any found it out?

Page 47

For immediate safety—the evening after his memorable first fifteen hours of joy—he buried the crock deeply in a hole in his garden, filling all up hard with stones and brick-bats; and when he had smoothed it straight and workmanlike, remembered that he surely hadn't kept out enough to last him; so up it had to come again—five more taken out, and the crock was restored to its unquiet grave.

Scarcely had he done this, than it became dark, and he began to fancy some one might have seen him hide it; those low mean tramps (never before had he refused the wretched wayfarers his sympathy) were always sneaking about, and would come and dig it up in the night: so he went out in the dark and the rain, got at it with infinite trouble and a broken pickaxe, and exultingly brought the crock in-doors; where he buried it a third time, more securely, underneath the grouted floor, close beside the fire in the chimney-corner: it was now nearly midnight, and he went to bed.

Hardly had he tumbled in, after pulling on a nightcap of the flagon, than the dread idea overtook him that his treasure might be melted! Was there ever such a fool as he? Well, well, to think he could fling his purse on the fire! What a horrid thought! Metallurgy was a science quite unknown to Roger; he only considered gold as heavy as lead, and therefore probably as fusible: so down he bustled, made another hole, a deeper one too this time, in the floor under the dresser, where, exhausted with his toil and care, he deposited the crock by four in the morning—and so retired once more.

All in vain—nobody ever knew when Black Burke might be returning from his sporting expeditions—and that beast of a lurcher would be sure to be creeping in this morning, and would scratch it up, and his brute of a master would get it all! This fancy was the worst possible: and Roger rose again, quite sick at heart, pale, worn, and trembling with a miser's haggard joys. Where should he hide that crock—the epithet “cursed” crock escaped him this time in his vexed impatience. In the house and in the garden, it was equally unsafe.

Ha! a bright thought indeed: the hollow in the elm-tree, creaking overhead, just above the second arm: so the poor, shivering wretch, almost unclad, swarmed up that slimy elm, and dropped his treasure in the hollow. Confusion! how deep it was: he never thought of that; here was indeed something too much of safety: and then those boys of neighbour Goode's were birds'-nesting continually, specially round the lake this spring. What an idiot he was not to have remembered this! And up he climbed again, thrust in his arm to the shoulder, and managed to repossess himself a fifth time of that blessed crock.

Would that the elm had been hollow to its root, and beneath the root a chasm bottomless, and that Plutus in that Narbonne jar had served as a supper to Pluto in the shades! Better had it been for thee, my Roger.

Page 48

But he had not hid it yet; so, that night—or rather that cold morning about six, the drenched, half-frozen Fortunatus carried it to bed with him: and a precious warming-pan it made: for nothing would satisfy the finder of its presence but perpetual bodily contact:—accordingly, he placed it in his bosom, and it chilled him to the back-bone.

Yes; that was undoubtedly the safest way; to carry the spoil about with him; so, next noon—how could he get up till noon after such a woful night?—next noon he emptied the jar, and tying up its contents in a handkerchief, proceeded to wear it as a girdle; for an hour he clattered about the premises, making as much jingle as a wagoner's team of bells; laden heavily with gold, like the [Greek: ibebusto] genius in Herodotus: but he soon found out this would not do at all; for, independently of all concealment at an end, so long as his secret store was rattling as he walked, louder than military spurs or sabre-tackle, he soberly reflected that he might—possibly, possibly, though not probably—get a glass too much again, by some mere accident or other; and then to be robbed of his golden girdle, this cincture of all joy! O, terrible thought! as well [this is my fancy, not Rogers's] deprive Venus of her zone, and see how the beggared Queen of Beauty could exist without her treasury, the Cestus.

CHAPTER XVIII.

INVESTMENT.

NEXT day, the wealthy Roger had higher aspirations. Why should not he get interest for his money, like lords and gentlefolk? His gold had been lying idle too long; more fool he: it ought to breed money somehow, he knew that; for, like most poor men whose sole experience of investment is connected with the Lombard's golden balls, he took exalted views of usury. Was he to be “hiding up his talent in a napkin—?”

Ah!—he remembered and applied the holy parable, but it smote across his heart like a flash of frost, a chilling recollection of good things past and gone. What had he been doing with his talents—for he once possessed the ten? had he not squandered piety, purity, and patience? where were now his gratitude to God, his benevolence to man? the father's duteous care, the husband's industry and kindness, the labourer's faith, the Christian's hope—who had spent all these?—Till money's love came in, and money-store to feed it, the poor man had been rich: but now, rotten to the core, by lust of gold, the rich is poor indeed.

However, such considerations did not long afflict him—for we know that lookers-on see more than players—and if Roger had encouraged half our wise and sober thoughts, he might have been a better man: but Roger quelled the thoughts, and silenced them; and thoughts are tender intonations, shy little buzzing sounds, soon scared by coarser noise: Roger had no mind to cherish those small fowls; so they flew back again to Heaven's gate, homeless and uncomforted as weeping peri's.

Page 49

The bank—the county bank—Shark, Breakem, and Company—this was the specious Eldorado, the genuine gold-increaser, the hive where he would store his wealth (as honey left for the bees in winter), and was to have it soon returned fourfold. It was indeed a thought to make the rich man glad, that all his shining heap was just like a sample of seed-corn, and the pocket-full should next year fill a sack. How grudgingly he now began to mourn over past extravagance, five pieces gone within the week! how close and careful he resolved to be in future! how he would scrape and economize to get and save but one more of those sweet little seeds, that yield more gold—more gold! And if Roger had been privileged in youth to have fed upon the wisdom of the Eton Latin grammar, he could have now quoted with some experimental unction the “*Crescit Amor*” line, which every body well knows how to finish. Truly, it was growing with his growth, and rioting in strength above his weakness.

Swollen with this expanding love, he packed up his money in what were, though he knew it not, *rouleaux*, but to his plebeian eyes looked more like golden sausages: and he would take it to the bank, and they should bow to him, and Sir him, and give him forthwith more than he had brought; and if those summary gains were middling great—say twice as much, to be moderate—he thought he might afford himself a chaise coming back, and return to Hurstley Common like a nabob. Thus, full of wealthy fancies, after one glass more, off set Roger to the county town, with his treasure in a bundle.

Half-way to it, as hospitality has ordained to be the case wherever there be half-ways, occurred a public-house: and really, notwithstanding all our monied neophyte’s economical resolutions, his throat was so “uncommon dry,” that he needs must stop there to refresh the muscles of his larynx: so, putting down his bundle on the settle, he called for a foaming tankard, and thanking the crock, as his evil wont now was, sat down to drink and think. Here was prosperity indeed, a flood of astonishing good fortune: that he, but a little week ago, a dirty ditcher—so was he pleased to designate his former self—a ragged wretch, little better than a tramp, should be now progressing like a monarch, with a mighty bag of gold to enrich his county town. To enrich, and be thereby the richer; for Roger’s actions of finance were so simple, as to run the risk of being called sublimely indistinct: he took it as an axiom that “money bred money,” but in what way to draw forth its generative properties, whether or not by some new-fangled manure, he was entirely ignorant; and it clearly was his wisdom to leave all that mystery of money-making solely to the banker. All he cared about was this: to come back richer than he came—and, lo! how rich he was already. Lolling at high noon, on a Wednesday too, in the extremest mode of rustic beauism, with a bag of gold by his side, and a pot of porter in his hand—here

Page 50

was an accumulation of magnificence—all the prepositions pressed into his service. His wildest hopes exceeded, and almost nothing left to wish. Blown up with the pride and importance of the moment, and some little oblivious from the potent porter—he had paid and sallied forth, and marched a mile upon his way, full of golden fancies, a rich luxurious lord as he was—when all on a sudden the hallucination crossed his dull pellucid mind, that he had left the store behind him! O, pungent terror!—O, most exquisite torture! was it clean gone, stolen, lost, lost, lost for ever? Rushing back in an agony of fear, that made the ruddy hostess think him crazed, with his hair on end, and a face as if it had been white-washed, he flew to the tap-room, and—almost fainted for ecstasy of joy when he found it, where he had laid it, on the settle!

Better had you lost it, Roger; better had your ecstasy been sorrow: there is more trouble yet for you, from that bad crock of gold. But if your lesson is not learnt, and you still think otherwise, go on a little while exultingly as now I see you, and hug the treasure to your heart—the treasure that will bring you yet more misery.

And now the town is gained, the bank approached. What! that big barred, guarded place, looking like a mighty mouse-trap? he didn't half like to venture in. At last he pushed the door ajar, and took a peep; there were muskets over the mantel-piece, ostentatiously ticketed as "Loaded! Beware!" there were leather buckets ranged around the walls: he did not in any degree like it: was he to expose his treasure in this idiot fashion to all the avowed danger of fire and thieves? However, since he had come so far, he would get some interest for his money, that he would—so he'd just make bold to step to the counter and ask a very obsequious bald-headed gentleman, who sired him quite affably,

"How much, Master, will you be pleased to give me for my gold?"

The gentleman looked queerish, as if he did not comprehend the question, and answered, "Oh! certainly, sir—certainly—we do not object to give you our notes for it," at the same time producing an extremely dirty bundle of worn-out bits of paper.

Roger stroked his chin.

"But, Master, my meaning is, not how many o' them brown bits o' paper you'll sell me for my gold here," and he exhibited a greater store than Mr. Breakem had seen at once upon his counter for a year, "but how much more gold you'll send me back with than what I've brought? by way of interest, you know, or some such law: for I don't know much about the Funds, Master."

“Indeed, sir,” replied the civil banker, who wished by any means to catch the clodpole’s spoil—“you are very obliging; we shall be glad to allow you two-and-a-half per centum per annum for the deposit you are good enough to leave in our keeping.”

“Leave in your keeping, Master! no, I didn’t say that! by your leave, I’ll keep it myself!”

Page 51

"In that case, sir, I really do not see how I can do business with you."

True enough; and Roger would never have been such a monetary blockhead, had he not been now so generally tipsy; the fumes of beer had mingled with his plan, and all his usual shrewdness had been blunted into folly by greediness of lucre on the one side, and potent liquors on the other. The moment that the banker's parting speech had reached his ear, the absurdity of Roger's scheme was evident even to himself, and with a bare "Good day, Master," he hurriedly took his bundle from the counter, and scuttled out as quick as he could.

His feelings, walking homeward, were any thing but pleasant; the bubble of his ardent hope was burst: he never could have more than the paltry little sum he carried in that bundle: what a miser he would be of it: how mean it now seemed in his eyes—a mere sample-bag of seed, instead of the wide-waving harvest! Ah, well; he would save and scrape—ay, and go back to toil again—do any thing rather than spend.

Got home, the difficulty now recurred, where was he to hide it? The store was a greater care than ever, now those rascally bankers knew of it. He racked his brain to find a hiding-place, and, at length, really hit upon a good one. He concealed the crock, now replenished with its contents, in the thatch just over his bed's head: it was a rescued darling: so he tore a deep hole, and nested it quite snugly.

Perhaps it did not matter much, but the rain leaked in by that hole all night, and fortunate Roger woke in the morning drenched with wet, and racked by rheumatism.

CHAPTER XIX.

CALUMNY.

MORE blessings issue from the crock; Pandora's box is set wide open, and all the sweet inhabitants come forth. If apprehensions for its safety made the finder full of care, the increased whisperings of the neighbourhood gave him even deeper reason for anxiety. In vain he told lie upon lie about a legacy of some old uncle in the clouds; in vain he stuck to the foolish and transparent falsehood, with a dogged pertinacity that appealed, not to reason, but to blows; in vain he made affirmation weaker by his oath, and oaths quite unconvincing by his cudgel: no one believed him: and the mystery was rendered more inexplicable from his evidently nervous state and uneasy terror of discovery.

He had resolved at the outset, cunningly as he fancied, to change no more than one piece of gold in the same place; though Bacchus's undoubtedly proved the rule by furnishing an exception: and the consequence came to be, that there was not a single shop in the whole county town, nor a farm-house in all the neighbourhood round, where



Roger Acton had not called to change a sovereign. True, the silver had seldom been forthcoming; still, he had asked for it; and where in life could he have got the gold? Many was the rude questioner, whose curiosity had been quenched in drink; many the insufferable pryer, whom club-law had been called upon to silence. Meanwhile, Roger steadily kept on, accumulating silver where he could: for his covetous mind delighted in the mere semblance of an increase to his store, and took some untutored numismatic interest in those pretty variations of his idol—money.

Page 52

But if Roger's heap increased, so did the whispers and suspicions of the country round; they daily grew louder, and more clamorous; and soon the charitable nature of chagrined wonder assumed a shape more heart-rending to the wretched finder of that golden hoard, than any other care, or fear, or sin, that had hitherto torn him. It only was a miracle that the neighbours had not thought of it before; seldom is the world so unsuspecting; but then honest Roger's forty years of character were something—they could scarcely think the man so base; and, above all, gentle Grace was such a favourite with all, was such a pattern of purity, and kindliness, and female conduct, that the tongue would have blistered to its roots, that had uttered scorn of her till now. As things were, though, could any thing be clearer? Was charity herself to blame in putting one and one together? Sir John was rich, was young, gay, and handsome; but Grace was poor—but indisputably beautiful, and probably had once been innocent: some had seen her going to the Hall at strange times and seasons—for in truth, she often did go there; Jonathan and Sarah Stack, of course, were her dearest friends on earth: and so it came to pass, that, through the blessing of the crock, honest Roger was believed to live on the golden wages of his daughter's shame! Oh, coarse and heartless imputation! Oh, bitter price to pay for secrecy and wonderful good fortune! In vain the wretched father stormed, and swore, and knocked down more than one foul-spoken fellow that had breathed against dear Grace. None but credited the lie, and many envious wretches actually gloried in the scandal; I grieve to say that women—divers venerable virgins—rejoiced that this pert hussey was at last found out; she was too pretty to be good, too pious to be pure; now at length they were revenged upon her beauty; now they had their triumph over one that was righteous over-much. For other people, they would urge the reasonable question, how else came Roger by the cash? and getting no answer, or worse than none—a prevaricating, mystifying mere put-off—they had hardly an alternative in common exercise of judgment: therefore, "Shame on her," said the neighbours, "and the bitterest shame on him:" and the gaffers and grand-dames shook their heads virtuously.

Yet worse: there was another suggestion, by no means contradictory, though simultaneous: what had become of Tom? ay—that bold young fellow—Thomas Acton, Ben Burke's friend: why was he away so long, hiding out of the country? they wondered.

The suspected Damon and Pythias had gone a county off to certain fens, and were, during this important week, engaged in a long process of ensnaring ducks.

Old Gaffer White had muttered something to Gossip Heartley, which Dick the Tanner overheard, wherein Tom Acton and a gun, and Burke, and burglary, and throats cut, and bags of gold, were conspicuous ingredients: so that Roger Acton's own dear Tom, that eagle-eyed and handsome better image of himself, stood accused, before his quailing father's face, of robbery and murder.

Page 53

Both—both darlings, dead Annie's little orphaned pets, thus stricken by one stone to infamy! Grace, scouted as a hussey, an outcast, a bad girl, a wanton—blessed angel! Thomas—generous boy—keenly looked for, in his near return, to be seized by rude hands, manacled, and dragged away, and tried on suspicion as a felon—for what? that crock of gold. Yet Roger heard it all, knew it all, writhed at it all, as if scorpions were lashing him; but still he held on grimly, keeping that bad secret. Should he blab it out, and so be poor again, and lose the crock?

That our labourer's changed estate influenced his bodily health, under this accumulated misery and desperate excitement, began to be made manifest to all. The sturdy husbandman was transformed into a tremulous drunkard; the contented cottager, into a querulous hypochondriac; the calm, religious, patient Christian, into a tumultuous blasphemer. Could all this be, and even Roger's iron frame stand up against the battle! No, the strength of Samson has been shorn. The crock has poured a blessing on its finder's very skin, as when the devil covered Job with boils.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BAILIFF'S VISIT.

ONE day at noon, ere the first week well was over since the fortunate discovery of gold, as Roger lay upon his bed, recovering from an overnight's excess, tossed with fever, vexation, and anxiety, he was at once surprised and frightened by a visit from no less a personage than Mr. Simon Jennings. And this was the occasion of his presence:

Directly the gathering storm of rumours had collected to that focus of all calumny, the destruction of female character and murder charged upon the innocent, Grace Acton had resolved upon her course; secresy could be kept no longer; her duty now appeared to be, to publish the story of her father's lucky find.

Grace, we may observe, had never been bound to silence, but only imposed it on herself from motives of tenderness to one, whom she believed to be taken in the toils of a temptation. She, simple soul, knew nothing of manorial rights, nor wotted she that any could despoil her father of his money; but even if such thoughts had ever crossed her mind, she loathed the gold that had brought so much trouble on them all, and cared not how soon it was got rid of. Her father's health, honour, happiness, were obviously at stake; perhaps, also, her brother's very life: and, as for herself, the martyr of calumny looked piously to heaven, offered up her outraged heart, and resolved to stem this torrent of misfortune. Accordingly, with a noble indignation worthy of her, she had gone straightway to the Hall, to see the baronet, to tell the truth, fling aside a charge which she could scarcely comprehend, and openly vindicate her offended honour. She failed—many imagine happily for her own peace, if Sir John had not been better than his friends—in gaining access to the Lord of Hurstley; but she did see Mr. Jennings, who

serenely interposed, and listened to all she came to say—“her father had been unfortunate enough to find a crock of money on the lake side near his garden.”

Page 54

When Jennings heard the tale, he started as if stung by a wasp: and urging Grace to tell it no one else (though the poor girl “must,” she said, “for honour’s sake”), he took up his hat, and ran off breathlessly to Acton’s cottage. Roger was at home, in bed, and sick; there was no escape; and Simon chuckled at the lucky chance. So he crept in, carefully shut the door, put his finger on his lips to hush Roger’s note of admiration at so little wished a vision; and then, with one of his accustomed scared and fearful looks behind him, muttered under his breath,

“Man, that gold is mine: I have paid its price to the uttermost; give me the honey-pot.”

Roger’s first answer was a vulgar oath; but his tipsy courage faded soon away before old habits of subserviency, and he faltered out, “I—I—Muster Jennings! I’ve got no pot of gold!”

“Man, you lie! you have got the money! give it me at once—and—” he added in a low, hoarse voice, “we will not say a word about the murder.”

“Murder!” echoed the astonished man.

“Ay, murder, Acton:—off! off, I say!” he muttered parenthetically, then wrestled for a minute violently, as with something in the air; and recovering as from a spasm, calmly added,

“Ay, murder for the money.”

“I—I!” gasped Roger; “I did no murder, Muster Jennings!”

A new light seemed to break upon the bailiff, and he answered with a tone of fixed determination,

“Acton, you are the murderer of Bridget Quarles.”

Roger’s jaw dropped, dismay was painted on his features, and certainly he did look guilty enough. But Simon proceeded in a tenderer tone;

“Notwithstanding, give me the gold, Acton, and none shall know a word about the murder. We will keep all quiet, Roger Acton, all nice and quiet, you know;” and he added, coaxingly, “come, Roger, give me up this crock of gold.”

“Never!” with a fierce anathema, answered our hero, now himself again: the horrid accusation had entranced him for a while, but this coaxing strain roused up all the man in him: “Never!” and another oath confirmed it.

“Acton, give it up, I say!” was shouted in rejoinder, and Jennings glared over him with his round and staring eyes as he lay faint upon his bed—“Give up the crock, or else—”

“Else what? you whitened villain.”

The bailiff flung himself at Roger’s neck, and almost shrieked, “I’ll serve you as I—”

There was a tremendous struggle; attacked at unawares, for the moment he was nearly mastered; but Acton’s tall and wiry frame soon overpowered the excited Jennings, and long before you have read what I have written—he has leaped out of bed—seized—doubled up—and flung the battered bailiff headlong down the narrow stair-case to the bottom. This done, Roger, looking like Don Quixote de la Mancha in his penitential shirt, mounted into bed again, and quietly lay down; wondering, half-sober, at the strange and sudden squall.

Page 55

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CAPTURE.

HE had not long to wonder. Jennings got up instantly, despite of bruises, posted to the Hall, took a search-warrant from Sir John's study, (they were always ready signed, and Jennings filled one up,) and returned with a brace of constables to search the cottage.

Then Roger, as he lay musing, fancied he heard men's voices below, and his wife, who had just come in, talking to them; what could they want? tramps, perhaps: or Ben? he shuddered at the possibility; with Tom too; and he felt ashamed to meet his son. So he turned his face to the wall, and lay musing on—he hadn't been drinking too much over-night—Oh, no! it was sickness, and rheumatics, and care about the crock; Tom should be told that he was very ill, poor father! Just as he had planned this, and resolved to keep his secret from that poaching ruffian Burke, some one came creeping up the stairs, slided in at the door, and said to him in a deep whisper from the further end of the room,

"Acton, give me the gold, and the men shall go away; it is not yet too late; tell me where to find the crock of gold."

An oath was the reply; and, at a sign from Jennings, up came the other two.

"We have searched every where, Mr. Simon Jennings, both cot and garden; ground disturbed in two or three places, but nothing under it; in-doors too, the floor is broken by the hearth and by the dresser, but no signs of any thing there: now, Master Acton, tell us where it is, man, and save us all the trouble."

Roger's newly-learnt vocabulary of oaths was drawn upon again.

"Did you look in the ash-pit?" asked Jennings.

"No, sir."

"Well, while you two search this chamber, I will examine it myself."

Mr. Jennings apparently entertained a wholesome fear of Acton's powers of wrestling.

Up came Simon in a hurry back again, with a lot of little empty leather bags he had raked out, and—the fragment of a shawl! the edges burnt, it was a corner bit, and marked B.Q.

"What do you call this, sir?" asked the exulting bailiff.

“Curse that Burke!”—thought Roger; but he said nothing.

And the two men up stairs had searched, and pried, and hunted every where in vain; the knotty mattress had been ripped up, the chimney scrutinized, the floor examined, the bed-clothes overhauled, and as for the thatch, if it hadn't been for Roger Acton's constant glance upwards at his treasure in the roof, I am sure they never would have found it. But they did at last: there it was, the crock of gold, full proof of robbery and murder!

“Aha!” said Simon, in a complacent triumph, “Mrs. Quarles's identical honey-pot, full of her clean bright gold, and many pieces still encased in those tidy leather bags;” and his round eyes glistened again; but all at once, with a hurried look over his left shoulder, he exclaimed, involuntarily, in a very different tone, “Ha! away, I say!” Then he snatched the crock up eagerly, and nursed it like a child.

Page 56

“Come along with us, Master Acton, you’re wanted somewhere else; up, man, look alive, will you?”

And Roger dressed himself mechanically. It was no manner of use, not in the least worth while resisting, innocent though he was; his treasure had been found, and taken from him; he had nothing more to live for; his gold was gone—his god; where was the wisdom of fighting for any thing else; let them take him to prison if they would, to the jail, to the gallows, to any-whither, now his gold was gone. So he put on his clothes without a murmur, and went with them as quiet as a lamb.

Never was there a clearer case; the housekeeper’s hoard had been found in his possession, with a fragment of her shawl; and Sir John Vincent was very well aware of the mystery attending the old woman’s death; besides, he was in a great hurry to be off; for Pointer, and Silliphant, and Lord George Pypp, were to have a hurdle race with him that day, for a heavy bet; so he really had not time to go deep into the matter; and the result of five minutes’ talk before the magisterial chairs (Squire Ryle having been summoned to assist) was, that, on the accusation of Simon Jennings, Roger Acton was fully committed to the county jail, to be tried at next assizes, for Bridget Quarles’s murder.

Thank God! poor Roger, it has come to this. What other way than this was there to save thee from thy sin—to raise thee from thy fall? Where else, but in a prison, could you get the silent, solitary hours leading you again to wholesome thought and deep repentance? Where else could you escape the companionship of all those loose and low associates, sottish brawlers, ignorant and sensual unbelievers, vagabond radicals, and other lewd fellows of the baser sort, that had drank themselves drunk at your expense, and sworn to you as captain! The place, the time, the means for penitence are here. The crisis of thy destiny is come.

Honest Roger, Steady Acton, did I not see thy guardian angel—after all his many tears, aggrieved and broken spirit!—did I not see him lift his swollen eyes in gratitude to Heaven, and benevolence to thee, and smile a smile of hopeful joy when that damned crock was found?

Gladly could he thank his Lord, to behold the temptation at an end.

Did I not see the devil slink away from thee abashed, issuing like an adder from thy heart, and then, with a sudden Protean change, driven from thy hovel as a thunder-cloud dispersing, when Simon Jennings seized the jar, hugged it as his household-god—and took it home with him—and counted out the gold—and locked the bloody treasure in his iron-chest?

Fitly did the murderer lock up curses with his spoil.



And when God smote thine idol, dashing Dagon to the ground, and thy heart was sore with disappointment, and tender as a peeled fig—when hope was dead for earth, and conscience dared not look beyond it—ah! Roger, did I judge amiss when I saw, or thought I saw, those eyes full of humble shame, those lips quivering with remorseful sorrow?

Page 57

We will leave thee in the cold stone cell—with thy well-named angel Grace to comfort thee, and pray with thee, and help thee back to God again, and so repay the debt that a daughter owes her father.

Happy prison! where the air is sweetened by the frankincense of piety, and the pavement gemmed with the flowers of hope, and the ceiling arched with Heaven's bow of mercy, and the walls hung around with the dewy drapery of penitence!

Happy prison! where the talents that were lost are being found again, gathered in humility from this stone floor; where poor-making riches are banished from the postern, and rich-making poverty streameth in as light from the grated window; where care vexeth not now the labourer emptied of his gold, and calumny's black tooth no longer gnaws the heart-strings of the innocent.

Hark! it is the turnkey, coming round to leave the pittance for the day: he is bringing in something in an earthen jar. Speak, Roger Acton, which will you choose, man—a prisoner's mess of pottage—or a crock of gold?

CHAPTER XXII.

THE AUNT AND HER NEPHEW.

WHILE we leave Roger Acton in the jail, waiting for the very near assizes, and wearing every hour away in penitence and prayer, it will be needful to our story that we take a retrospective glance at certain events, of no slight importance.

I must now speak of things, of which there is no human witness; recording words, and deeds, whereof Heaven alone is cognizant, Heaven alone—and Hell! For there are secret matters, which the murdered cannot tell us, and the murderer dare not—let him confess as fully as he will. Therefore, with some omnipresent sense, some invisible ubiquity, I must note down scenes as they occurred, whether mortal eye has witnessed them or not; I must lay bare secret thoughts, unlatch the hidden chambers of the heart, and duly set out, as they successively arose, the idea which tongue had not embodied, the feeling which no action had expressed.

Hitherto, we have pretty well preserved inviolate the three grand unities—time, place, circumstance; and even now we do not sin against the first and chiefest, however we may seem so to sin; for, had it suited my purpose to have begun with the beginning, and to have placed the present revelations foremost, the strictest stickler for the unities would have only had to praise my orthodox adherence to them. As it is, I have chosen, for interest sake, to shuffle my cards a little; and two knaves happen to have turned up together just at this time and place. The time is just three weeks ago—a week before the baronet came of age, and a fortnight antecedent to the finding of the crock; which,



as we know, after blessing Roger for a se'nnight, has at last left him in jail. The place is the cozy house-keepers room at Hurstley: and the brace of thorough knaves, to enact then and there as *dramatis personae*, includes Mistress Bridget Quarles, a fat, sturdy, bluff, old woman, of a jolly laugh withal, and a noisy tongue—and our esteemed acquaintance Mister Simon Jennings. The aunt, house-keeper, had invited the nephew, butler, to take a dish of tea with her, and rum-punch had now succeeded the souchong.

Page 58

“Well, Aunt Quarles, is it your meaning to undertake a new master?”

“Don’t know, nephry—can’t say yet what he’ll be like: if he’ll leave us as we are, won’t say wont.”

“Ay, as we are, indeed; comfortable quarters, and some little to put by, too: a pretty penny you will have laid up all this while, I’ll be bound: I wager you now it is a good five hundred, aunt—come, done for a shilling.”

“Get along, foolish boy; a’n’t you o’ the tribe o’ wisdom too—ha, ha, ha!”

“I will not say,” smirked Simon, “that my nest has not a feather.”

“It’s easy work for us, Nep; we hunt in couples: you the men, and I the maids—ha, ha!”

“Tush, Aunt Bridget! that speech is not quite gallant, I fear.” And the worshipful extortioners giggled jovially.

“But it’s true enough for all that, Simon: how d’ye manage it, eh, boy? much like me, I s’pose; wages every quarter from the maids, dues from tradesmen Christmas-tide and Easter, regular as Parson Evans’s; pretty little bits tacked on weekly to the bills, beside presents from every body; and so, boy, my poor forty pounds a-year soon mounts up to a hundred.”

“Ay, ay, Aunt Bridget—but I get the start of you, though you probably were born a week before-hand: talk of parsons, look at me, a regular grand pluralist monopolist, as any bishop can be; butler in doors, bailiff out of doors, land-steward, house-steward, cellar-man, and pay-master. I am not all this for naught, Aunt Quarles: if so much goes through my fingers, it is but fair that something stick.”

“True, Simon—O certainly; but if you come to boasting, my boy, I don’t carry this big bunch o’ keys for nothing neither. Lord love you! why merely for cribbings in the linen-line for one month, John Draper swapped me that there shawl: none o’ my clothes ever cost me a penny, and I a’n’t quite as bare as a new-born baby neither. Look at them trunks, bless you!”

“Ay, ay, aunt, I’ll be bound the printer of your prayer-book has left out a ‘not,’ before the ‘steal,’ eh?—ha! ha!”

“Fie, naughty Simon, fie! them’s not stealings, them’s parquisites. Where’s the good o’ living in a great house else? But come, Si, haven’t you struck out the ‘not,’ for yourself, though the printer did his duty, eh, Nep?”

“Not a bit, aunt—not a bit: all sheer honesty and industry. Look at my pretty little truck-shop down the village. Wo betide the labourer that leaves off dealing there! not one that

works at Hurstley, but eats my bread and bacon; besides the ‘tea, coffee, tobacco, and snuff.’”

“Pretty fairish articles, eh? I never dealt with you, Si: no, Nep, no—you never saw the colour o’ my money.”

Jennings gave a start, as if a thought had pricked him; but gayly recovering himself, said,

“Oh, as to pretty fairish, I know there is one thing about the bacon good enough; ay, and the bread too—the very best of prices; ha! ha! is not that good? And for the other genuine articles, I don’t know that much of the tea comes from China—and the coffee is sold ground, because it is burnt maize—and there’s a plenty of wholesome cabbage leaf cut up in the tobacco—while as for snuff, I give them a dry, peppery, choky, sneezy dust, and I dare say that it does its duty.”

Page 59

It was astonishing how innocently the worthy couple laughed together.

“My only trouble, Aunt Quarles, is where to keep my gains—what to do with them. I am quite driven to the strong-box system, interest is so bad; and as to speculations, they are nervous things, and sicken one. I invest in the Great Western one day—a tunnel falls in, so I sell my shares the next, and send the proceeds to Australia; then, looking at the map, I see the island isn’t clean chalked out all round, and beginning to fear that the sea will get in where it a’n’t made water-tight by the Admiralty, I call the money home again. You see I don’t know what to do with gold when I get it. Where do you keep yours now, aunt, I wonder?”

“O, Nep, never mind me; you rattle on so I can’t get in never a word. I’ll only tell you where I don’t keep it. Not at Breakem’s bank, for they’re brewers, and hosiers, and chandlers, and horse-dealers—ay, and swindlers too, the whole ‘company’ on ‘em; not in mortgages, for I hate the very smell of a lawyer, with all his pounce and parchment; not in Gover’men’t ‘nuities, for I’m an old ‘ooman, boy; and not in the Three per Cents, nor any other per cents, for I’ve sense enough to know that my highest interest lies in counting out, as my first principle is dropping in.” And the fat female laughed herself purple at the venerable joke.

Simon was a courtier, and laughed too, as immoderately as possible.

“Ah! I dare say now you have got a Chubb’s patent somewhere full of gold?” he asked somewhat anxiously; “take your punch, aunt, wont you? I do not see you drink.”

“Simon, mark me; fools who want to be robbed put their money into an iron chest, that thieves may know exactly where to find it; they might as well ticket it ‘cash,’ and advertise to Newgate—come and steal. I know a little better than to be such a fool.”

“Yes, certainly—I dare say now you keep it in your work-box, or sew it up in your stays, or hide it in the mattress, or in an old tea-pot, maybe.” And Jennings eyed her narrowly.

“Nephew, what rhymes to money?”

“Money?—Well I can’t say I am a poet—stony, perhaps. At least,” added the benevolent individual, “when I have raised a wretch’s rent to gain a little more by him, stony is not a bad shield to lift against prayers, and tears, and orphans, and widows, and starvation, and all such nonsense.”

“Not bad, neither, Nep: but there’s a better rhyme than that.”

“You cannot mean honey, aunt? when I guessed stony, I thought you might have some snug little cash cellar under the flags. But honey? are you such a thorough Mrs. Rundle as to pickle and preserve your very guineas, the same as you do strawberries or apricots in syrup?”



“Oh, you clever little fool! how prettily you do talk on: your tongue’s as tidy as your cash-book: when you’ve any money to put by, come to Aunt Bridget for a crock to hide it in: mayn’t one use a honey-pot, as Teddy Rourke would say, barring the honey?”

Page 60

“Ha! and so you hide the hoard up there, aunt, eh? along with the preserves in a honey-pot, do you?”

“We’ll see—we’ll see, some o’ these long days; not that the money’s to be yours, Nep—you’re rich enough, and don’t want it; there’s your poor sister Scott with her fourteen children, and Aunt Bridget must give her a lift in life: she was a good niece to me, Simon, and never left my side before she married: maybe she’ll have cause to bless the dead.”

Jennings hardly spoke a word more; but drained his glass in silence, got up a sudden stomach-ache, and wished his aunt good-night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SCHEMES.

WE must follow Simon Jennings to his room. He felt keenly disappointed. Money was the idol of his heart, as it is of many million others. He had robbed, lied, extorted, tyrannized; he had earned scorn, ill-report, and hatred; nay, he had even diligently gone to work, and lost his own self-love and self-respect in the service of his darling idol. He was at once, for lucre’s sake, the mean, cringing fawner, and the pitiless, iron despot; to the rich he could play supple parasite, while the poor man only knew him as an unrelenting persecutor; with the good, and they were chiefly of the fairer, softer sex, he walked in meekness, the spiritual hypocrite; the while, it was his boast to over-reach the worst in low duplicity and crooked dealing. All this he was for gold. When the eye of the world was on him, and intuition warned him of the times, he was ever the serene, the correct, with a smooth tongue and an oily smile; but in the privacy of some poor hovel, where his debtor sued for indulgence, or some victim of his passions (he had more depravities than one) threw her wretched self upon his pity, then could Simon Jennings lash sternness into rage, and heat his brazen heart with the embers of inveterate malice. It was as if the serpent, that voluble, insinuating reptile, which had power to fascinate poor Eve, turned to rend her when she had fallen, erect, with flashing eyes, and bristling crest, with venomous fangs, and hissing. Behold, snake-worshippers of Mexico, the prototype of your grim idol, in Mammon’s model slave and specimen disciple!

Such a man was Simon Jennings, a soul given up to gold—exclusively to gold; for although, as we have hinted, and as hereafter may appear, he could sell himself at times to other sins, still these were but as stars in his evil firmament, while covetousness ruled it like the sun; or, if the beauteous stars and blessed sun be an image too hallowed for his wickedness, we may find a fitter in some stagnant pool, where the pestilential vapour over all is Mammonism, and the dull, fat weeds that rot beneath, are pride, craftiness, and lechery. In fact, to speak of passions in a heart such

as his, were a palpable misnomer; all was reduced to calculation; his rage was fostered to intimidate, and where the wretch seemed kinder, his kindnesses were aimed at power, as an object, rather than at pleasure—the power to obtain more gold.

Page 61

For it is a dreadful truth (which I would not dare to utter if such crimes had never been), that a reprobate of the bailiff Jennings's stamp may, by debts, or fines, or kind usurious loans, entrap a beggared creature in his toils; and then lyingly propose remission at the secret sacrifice of honour, in some one, over whom that dastard beggar has control; and having this point gained, the seducer is quite capable of using, for still more extortion, the power which a threatening of exposure gives, when the criminally weak has stooped to sin, on promises of silence and delivery from ruin. I wish there may be no poor yeoman in this broad land, of honourable name withal, he and his progenitors for ages, who can tell the tale of his own base fears, a creditor's exactions, and some dependant victim's degradation: some orphaned niece, some friendless ward, immolated in her earliest youth at the shrine of black-hearted Mammon; I wish there may be no sleek middle-man guilty of the crimes here charged upon Simon Jennings.

This worthy, then, had been introduced at Hurstley by his aunt, Mrs. Quarles, on the occurrence of a death vacancy in the lad-of-all-work department, during the long ungoverned space of young Sir John's minority. As the precious "lad" grew older, and divers in-door potentates died off, the house-keeper had power to push her nephew on to pageship, footmanship, and divers other similar crafts, even to the final post of butler; while his own endeavours, backed by his aunt's interest, managed to secure for him the rule out of doors no less than in, and the closest possible access to guardians and landlords, to the tenants—and their rent.

Now, the amiable Mrs. Quarles had contrived the elevation of her nephew, and connived at his monopolies, mainly to fit in cleverly with her own worldly weal; for it would never have done to have risked the loss of innumerable perquisites, and other peculations, by the possible advent of an honest butler. But, while the worshipful Simon, to do him only justice, fully answered Mrs. Bridget's purpose, and even added much to her emoluments; still he was no mere derivative scion, but an independent plant, and entertained views of his own. He had his own designs, and laid himself out to entrap his aunt's affections; or rather, for I cannot say he greatly valued these, to secure her good graces, and worm himself within the gilded clauses of her will; she was an old woman, rolling in gold, no doubt had a will; and as for himself, he was younger by five-and-thirty years, so he could afford to wait a little, before trying on her shoes. The petty schemes of thievery and cheating, which he in his Quotem capacities had practised, were to his eyes but as driblets of wealth in comparison with the mighty stream of his old aunt's savings. Not that he had done amiss, trust him! but then he knew the amount of his own hoard to a farthing, while of hers he was entirely ignorant; so, on the principle

Page 62

of *'omne ignotum pro mirifico,'* he pondered on its vastness with indefinite amazement, although probably it might not reach the quarter of his own. For it should in common charity be stated, that, with all her hiding and hiving propensities, Mrs. Quarles, however usually a screw, was by fits and starts an extravagant woman, and besides spending on herself, had occasionally helped her own kith and kin; poor niece Scott, in particular, had unconsciously come in for many pleasant pilferings, and had to thank her good aunt for innumerable filched groceries, and hosieries, and other largesses, which (the latter in especial) really had contributed, with sundry other more self indulgent expenses, to make no small havoc of the store.

Still, this store was Simon's one main chance, the chief prize in his hope's lottery; and it was with a pang, indeed, that he found all his endeavours to compass its possession had been vain. Was that endless cribbage nothing, and the weary Bible-lessons on a Sunday, and the constant fetchings and carryings, and the forced smiles, sham congratulations, and other hypocritical affections—fearing for his dear aunt's dropsy, and inquiring so much about her bunions—was all this dull servitude to meet with no reward? With none? worse than none! Fool that he was! had he schemed, and plotted, and flattered, and cozened—ay, and given away many pretty little presents, lost decoys, that had cost hard money, all for nothing—less than nothing—to be laughed at and postponed to his Methodist sister Scott? The impudence of deliberately telling him he “didn't want it, and was rich enough!” as if “enough” could ever be good grammar after such a monosyllable as “rich;” and “want it” indeed! of course he wanted it; if not, why had he slaved so many years? want it, indeed! if to hope by day, and to dream by night—if to leave no means untried of delicately showing how he longed for it—if to grow sick with care, and thin with coveting—if this were to want the gold, good sooth, he wanted it. Don't tell him of starving brats, his own very bowels pined for it; don't thrust in his face the necessities of others—the necessity is his; he must have it—he will have it—talk of necessity!

Wait a bit: is there no way of managing some better end to all this? no mode of giving the right turn to that wheel of fortune, round which his cares and calculations have been hovering so long? Is there no conceivable method of possessing that vast hoard?

Bless me! how huge it must be! and Simon turned whiter at the thought: only add up Mother Quarles's income for fifty-five years: she is seventy-five at least, and came here a girl of twenty. Simon's hair stood on end, and his heart went like a mill-clapper, as he mentally figured out the sum.

Is there no possibility of contriving matters so that I may be the architect of my own good luck, and no thanks at all to the old witch there? Dear—what a glorious fancy—let me think a little. Cannot I get at the huge hoard some how?

Page 63

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEVIL'S COUNSEL.

"STEAL it," said the Devil.

Simon was all of a twitter; for though he fancied his own heart said it, still his ear-drum rattled, as if somebody had spoken.

Simon—that ear-drum was to put you off your guard: the deaf can hear the devil: he needs no tympanum to commune with the spirit: listen again, Simon; your own thoughts echo every word.

"Steal it: hide in her room; you know she has a shower-bath there, which nobody has used for years, standing in a corner; two or three cloaks in it, nothing else: it locks inside, how lucky! ensconce yourself there, watch the old woman to sleep—what a fat heavy sleeper she is!—quietly take her keys, and steal the store: remember, it is a honey-pot. Nothing's easier—or safer. Who'd suspect you?"

"Splendid! and as good as done," triumphantly exclaimed the nephew, snapping his fingers, and prancing with glee;—"a glorious fancy! bless my lucky star!"

If there be a planet Lucifer, that was Simon's lucky star.

And so, Mrs Quarles the biter is going to be bit, eh? It generally is so in this world's government. You, who brought in your estimable nephew to aid and abet in your own dishonest ways, are, it seems, going to be robbed of all your knavish gains by him. This is taking the wise in their own craftiness, I reckon: and richly you deserve to lose all your ill-got hoard. At the same time, Mrs. Quarles—I will be just—there are worse people in the world than you are: in comparison with your nephew, I consider you a grosser kind of angel; and I really hope no harm may befall your old bones beyond the loss of your money. However, if you are to lose this, it is my wish that poor Mrs. Scott, or some other honest body, may get it, and not Simon; or rather, I should not object that he may get it first, and get hung for getting it, too, before the sister has the hoard.

Our friend, Simon Jennings, could not sleep that night; his reveries and scheming lasted from the rum-punch's final drop, at ten P.M., to circiter two A.M., and then, or thenabouts, the devil hinted "steal it;" and so, not till nearly four, he began to shut his eyes, and dream again, as his usual fashion was, of adding up receipts in five figures, and of counting out old Bridget's hoarded gold.

Next day, notwithstanding nocturnal semi-sleeplessness, he awoke as brisk as a bee, got up in as exhilarated a state as any gas-balloon, and was thought to be either surprisingly in spirits, or spirits surprisingly in him; none knew which, "where each

seemed either.” That whole day long, he did the awkwardest things, and acted in the most absent manner possible; Jonathan thought Mr. Simon was beside himself; Sarah Stack, foolish thing! said he was in love, and was observed to look in the glass several times herself; other people did not know what to think—it was quite a mystery. To recount only a few of his unprecedented exploits on that day of anticipative bliss:

Page 64

First, he asked the porter how his gout was, and gave him a thimble-full of whiskey from his private store.

Secondly, he paid Widow Soper one whole week's washing in full, without the smallest deduction or per centage.

Thirdly, he ordered of Richard Buckle, commonly called Dick the Tanner, a lot of cart harness, without haggling for price, or even asking it.

And, fourthly, he presented old George White, who was coming round with a subscription paper for a dead pig—actually, he presented old Gaffer White with the sum of two-pence out of his own pocket! never was such careless prodigality.

But the little world of Hurstley did not know what we know. They possessed no clue to the secret happiness wherewithal Simon Jennings hugged himself; they had no inkling of the crock of gold; they thought not he was going to be suddenly so rich; they saw no cause, as we do, why he should feel to be like a great heir on the eve of his majority; they wotted not that Sir John Devereux Vincent, Baronet, had scarcely more agreeable or triumphant feelings when his clock struck twenty-one, than Simon Jennings, butler, as the hour of his hope drew nigh.

If a destiny like this man's can ever have a crisis, the hour of his hope is that; but downward still, into a lower gulf, has been continually his bad career; there is (unless a miracle intervene) no stopping in the slope on which he glides, albeit there may be precipices. He that rushes in his sledge down the artificial ice-hills of St. Petersburg, skims along not more swiftly than Jennings, from the altitude of infant innocence, had sheered into the depths of full-grown depravity; but even he can fall, and reach, with startling suddenness, a lower deep.

As if that Russian mountain, hewn asunder midway, were fitted flush to a Norwegian cliff, beetling precipitately over the whirlpool; then tilt the sledge with its furred inmate over the slope, let it skim with quicker impetus the smoking ice, let it touch that beetling edge, and, leaping from the tangent, let it dart through the air, let it strike the eddying waters, be sucked hurriedly down that hoarse black throat, wind among the roots of the everlasting hills, and split upon the loadstone of the centre.

Even such a fate, "down, down to hell," will come to Simon Jennings; wrapped in the furs of complacency, seated in the sledge of covetousness, a-down the slippery launch of well-worn evil habit—over the precipice of crime—into the billows of impenitent remorse—to be swallowed by the vortex of Gehenna!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE AMBUSCADE.

NIGHT came, and with it all black thoughts. Not that they were black at once, any more than darkness leaps upon the back of noon, without the intervening cloak of twilight. Oh dear, no! Simon's thoughts accommodated themselves fitly to the time of day. They had been, for him, at early morning, pretty middling white, that is whity-brown; thence they passed, with the passing hour kindly, through the shades of burnt sienna, raw umber, and bistre; until, just as we may notice in the case of marking-ink; that which, five minutes ago, was as water only delicately dirtied, has become a fixed and indelible black.

Page 65

Simon was resolved upon the spoil, come what might; although his waking sensations of buoyancy, his noon-day cogitations of a calmer kind, and his even-tide determined scheming, had now given way to a nervous and unpleasant trepidation. So he poured spirits down to keep his spirits up. Very early after dark, he had watched his opportunity while Mrs. Quarles was scolding in the kitchen, had slipped shoeless and unperceived, from his pantry into the housekeeper's room, and locked himself securely in the shower bath. Hapless wight! it was very little after six yet, and there he must stand till twelve or so: his foresight had not calculated this, and the devil had already begun to cheat him. But he would go through with it now; no flinching, though his rabbit back is breaking with fatigue, and his knocked knees totter with exhaustion, and his haggard eyes swim dizzily, and his bad heart is failing him for fear.

Yes, fear, and with good reason too for fear; "nothing easier, nothing safer," said his black adviser; how easily for bodily pains, how safely for chances of detection, was he getting at the promised crock of gold!

"Mr. Jennings! Mr. Simon! where in the world was Mr. Jennings?" nobody knew; he must have gone out somewhere. Strange, too—and left his hat and great-coat.

Here's a general for an ambuscade; Oh, Simon, Simon! you have had the whole day to think of it—how is it that both you and your dark friend overlooked in your calculations the certainty of search, and the chance of a discovery? The veriest school-boy, when he hid himself, would hide his hat. I am half afraid that you are in that demented state, which befits the wretch ordained to perish.

But where is Mr. Jennings? that was the continued cry for four agonizing hours of dread and difficulty. Sarah, the still-room maid, was sitting at her work, unluckily in Mrs. Quarles's room; she had come in shortly after Simon's secret entry; there she sat, and he dared not stir. And they looked every where—except in the right place; to do the devil justice, it was a capital hiding-corner that; rooms, closets, passages, cellars, out-houses, gardens, lofts, tenements, and all the "general words," in a voluminous conveyance, were searched and searched in vain; more than one groom expected (hoped is a truer word) to find Mr. Jennings hanging by a halter from the stable-lamp; more than one exhilarated labourer, hastily summoned for the search, was sounding the waters with a rake and rope, in no slight excitement at the thought of fishing up a deceased bailiff.

It was a terrible time for the ensconced one: sometimes he thought of coming out, and treating the affair as a bit of pleasantry: but then the devil had taken off his shoes—as a Glasgow captain deals with his cargo of refractory Irishers; how could he explain that? his abominable old aunt was shrewd, and he knew how clearly she would guess at the truth; if he desired to make sure of losing every chance, he could come out now, and reveal himself; but if he nourished still the hope of counting out that crock of gold, he'll

bide where he is, and trust to—to—to fate. The wretch had “Providence” on his blistered tongue.

Page 66

If, under the circumstances, any thing could be added to Simon's gratification, such pleasing addition was afforded in overhearing, as Lord Brougham did, the effect which his rumoured death produced on the minds of those who best had known him. It so happened, Sarah was sick, and did not join the universal hunt; accordingly, being the only audience, divers ambassadors came to tell her constantly the same most welcome news, that Jennings had not yet been found.

"Lawk, Sally," said a helper, "what a blessing it'll be, if that mean old thief's dead; I'll go to town, if 'tis so, get a dozen Guy's-day rockets, tie 'em round with crape, and spin 'em over the larches: that'll be funeral fun won't it? and it'll sarve to tell the neighbours of our luck in getting rid on him."

"I doan't like your thought, Tom," said another staidier youth: "it's ill-mirth playing leap-frog over tomb-stones, and poor bravery insulting the dead. Besides, I'm thinking the bad man that's taken from us an't a going up'ards, so it's no use lending him a light. I wish we may all lie in a cooler grave than he does, and not have to go quite so deep down'ard."

"Gee up for Lady-day!" exclaimed the emancipated coachman; "why, Sall, I shall touch my whole lump of wages free for the fust time: and I only wish the gals had our luck."

"Here, Sarah," interposed a kind and ruddy stable youth, "as we're all making free with Mr. Simon's own special ale, I've thought to bring you a nogging on't: come, you're not so sick as you can't drink with all the rest on us—The bailiff, and may none on us never see his face no more!"

These, and similar testimonials to the estimation in which Simon's character was held, must have gratified not a little the hearer of his own laudations: now and then, he winced so that Sarah might have heard him move: but her ear was alive to nothing but the news-bringers, and her eyes appeared to be fixed upon the linen she was darning. That Jennings vowed vengeance, and wreaked it afterwards too, on the youths that so had shown their love, was his solitary pleasure in the shower-bath. But his critics were too numerous for him to punish all: they numbered every soul in the house, besides the summoned aiders—only excepting three: Sarah, who really had a head-ache, and made but little answers to the numerous glad envoys; Jonathan Floyd, whose charity did not altogether hate the man, and who really felt alarmed at his absence; and chiefest, Mrs. Quarles, who evinced more affection for her nephew than any thought him worthy of exciting—she wrung her hands, wept, offered rewards, bustled about every where, and kept calling blubberingly for "Simon—poor dear Simon."

At length, that fearful hue and cry began to subside—the hubbub came to be quieter: neighbour-folks went home, and inmates went to bed. Sarah Stack put aside her work, and left the room.

Page 67

What a relief to that hidden caitiff! his feet, standing on the cold, damp iron so many hours, bare of brogues, were mere ice—only that they ached intolerably: he had not dared to move, to breathe, and was all over in one cramp: he did not bring the brandy-bottle with him, as he once had planned; for calculation whispered—“Don’t, your head will be the clearer; you must not muddle your brains;” and so his caution over-reached itself, as usual; his head was in a fog, and his brains in a whirlwind, for lack of other stimulants than fear and pain.

O Simon, how your prudence cheats you! five mortal hours of anguish and anxiety in one unalterable posture, without a single drop of creature-comfort; and all this preconcerted too!

CHAPTER XXVI.

PRELIMINARIES.

AT last, just as the nephew was positively fainting from exhaustion, in came his kind old aunt to bed. She talked a good deal to herself, did Mrs. Quarles, and Simon heard her say,

“Poor fellow—poor, dear Simon, he was taken bad last night, and has seemed queerish in the head all day: pray God nothing’s amiss with the boy!”

The boy’s heart (he was forty) smote him as he heard: yes, even he was vexed that Aunt Bridget could be so foolishly fond of him. But he would go on now, and not have all his toil for nothing. “I’m in for it,” said he, “and there’s an end.”

Ay, Simon, you are, indeed, in for it; the devil has locked you in—but as to the end, we shall see, we shall see.

“I shouldn’t wonder now,” the good old soul went on to say, “if Simon’s ventured out without his hat to cool a head-ache: his grand-father—peace be with him! died, poor man, in a Lunacy ‘Sylum: alack, Si, I wish you mayn’t be going the same road. No, no, I hope not—he’s always so prudent-like, and wise, and good; so kind, too, to a poor old fool like me:” and the poor old fool began to cry again.

“Silly boy—but he’ll take cold at any rate: Sarah!” (here Mrs. Quarles rung her bell, and the still-maid answered it.) “Sarah Stack, sit up awhile for Mr. Jennings, and when he comes in, send him here to me. Poor boy,” she went on soliloquizing, “he shall have a drop or two to comfort his stomach, and keep the chill out.”

The poor boy, lying *perdu*, shuddered at the word chill, and really wished his aunt would hold her tongue. But she didn’t.

“Maybe now,” the affectionate old creature proceeded, “maybe Simon was vexed at what I let drop last night about the money. I know he loves his sister Scott, as I do: but it’ll seem hard, too, to leave him nothing. I must make my will some day, I ’spose; but don’t half like the job: it’s always so nigh death. Yes—yes, dear Si shall have a snug little corner.”

The real Simon Pure, in his own snug little corner, writhed again. Mrs. Quarles started at the noise, looked up the chimney, under the bed, tried the doors and windows, and actually went so near the mark as to turn the handle of the shower-bath; “Drat it,” said she, “Sarah must ha’ took away the key: well, there can’t be nothing there but cloaks, that’s one comfort.”

Page 68

Last of all, a thought struck her—it must have been a mouse at the preserves. And Mrs. Quarles forthwith opened the important cupboard, where Jennings now well knew the idol of his heart was shrined. Then another thought struck Mrs. Quarles, though probably no unusual one, and she seemed to have mounted on a chair, and to be bringing down some elevated piece of crockery. Simon could see nothing with his eyes, but his ears made up for them: if ever Dr. Elliotson produced clairvoyance in the sisters Okey, the same sharpened apprehensions ministered to the inner man of Simon Jennings through the instrumental magnet of his inordinately covetous desires. Therefore, though his retina bore no picture of the scene, the feelers of his mind went forth, informing him of every thing that happened.

Down came a Narbonne honey-pot—Simon saw that first, and it was as the lamp of Aladdin in his eyes: then the bladder was whipped off, and the crock set open on the table. Jennings, mad as Darius's horse at the sight of the object he so longed for, once thought of rushing from his hiding-place, taking the hoard by a *coup de main*, and running off straightway to America: but—deary me—that'll never do; I mustn't leave my own strong-box behind me, say nothing of hat and shoes: and if I stop for any thing, she'd raise the house.

While this was passing through the immaculate mind of Simon Jennings, Bridget had been cutting up an old glove, and had made one of its fingers into a very tidy little leather sacklet; into this she deposited a bright half sovereign, spoil of the day, being the *douceur* of a needy brush-maker, who wished to keep custom, and, of course, charged all these vails on the current bill for mops and stable-sponges.

“Ha!” muttered she, “it’s your last bill here, Mr. Scrubb, I can tell you; so, you were going to put me off with a crown-piece, were you? and actually that bit of gold might as well have been a drop of blood wrung from you: yes—yes, Mr. Scrubb, I could see that plainly; and so you’ve done for yourself.”

Then, having sewed up the clever little bag, she dropped it into the crock: there was no jingle, all dumby: prudent that, in his aunt—for the dear morsels of gold were worth such tender keeping, and leather would hinder them from wear and tear, set aside the clink being silenced. So, the nephew secretly thanked Bridget for the wrinkle, and thought how pleasant it would be to stuff old gloves with his own yellow store. Ah, yes, he would do that—to-morrow morning.

Meanwhile, the pig-skin is put on again, and the honey-pot stored away: and Simon instinctively stood a tip-toe to peep ideally into that wealthy corner cupboard. His mind’s eye seemed to see more honey-pots! Mammon help us! can they all be full of gold? why, any one of them would hold a thousand pounds. And Simon scratched the palms of his hands, and licked his lips at the thought of so much honey.

Page 69

But see, Mrs. Quarles has, in her peculiar fashion, undressed herself: that is to say, she has taken off her outer gown, her cap and wig—and then has *added* to the volume of her under garments, divers night habiliments, flannelled and frilled: while wrappers, manifold as a turbaned Turk's, protect ear-ache, tooth-ache, head-ache, and face-ache, from the elves of the night.

And now, that the bedstead creaks beneath her weight, (as well it may, for Bridget is a burden like Behemoth,) Simon's heart goes thump so loud, that it was a wonder the poor woman never heard it. That heart in its hard pulsations sounded to me like the carpenter hammering on her coffin-lid: I marvel that she did not take it for a death-watch tapping to warn her of her end. But no: Simon held his hand against his heart to keep it quiet: he was so very fearful the pitapating would betray him. Never mind, Simon; don't be afraid; she is fast asleep already; and her snore is to thee as it were the challenge of a trumpeter calling to the conflict.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROBBERY.

HUSH—hush—hush!

Stealthily on tiptoe, with finger on his lips, that fore-doomed man crept out.

"The key is in the cupboard still—ha! how lucky: saves time that, and trouble, and—and—risk! Oh, no—there can be no risk now," and the wretch added, "thank God!"

The devil loves such piety as this.

So Simon quietly turned the key, and set the cupboard open: it was to him a Bluebeard's chamber, a cave of the Forty Thieves, a garden of the Genius in Aladdin, a mysterious secret treasure-house of wealth uncounted and unseen.

What a galaxy of pickle-pots! tier behind tier of undoubted currant-jelly, ranged like the houses in Algiers! vasty jars of gooseberry! delicate little cupping-glasses full of syruped fruits! Yet all these candied joys, which probably enhance a Mrs. Rundle's heaven, were as nothing in the eyes of Simon—sweet trash, for all he cared they might be vulgar treacle. His ken saw nothing but the honey-pots—embarrassing array—a round dozen of them! All alike, all posted in a brown line, like stout Dutch sentinels with their hands in their breeches pockets, and set aloft on that same high-reached shelf. Must he really take them all? impracticable: a positive sack full. What's to be done?—which is he to leave behind? that old witch contrived this identity and multitude for safety's sake. But what if he left the wrong one, and got clear off with the valuable booty of two dozen pounds of honey? Confusion! that'll never do: he must take them all, or none; all, all's the word; and forthwith, as tenderly as possible, the puzzled thief took down eleven pots

of honey to his one of gold—all pig-bladdered, all Fortnumed—all slimy at the string; “Confound that cunning old aunt of mine,” said Simon, aloud; and took no notice that the snores surceased.

Page 70

Then did he spread upon the table a certain shawl, and set the crocks in order on it: and it was quite impossible to leave behind that pretty ostentatious “Savings’ Bank,” which the shrewd hoarder kept as a feint to lure thieves from her hidden gold, by an open exhibition of her silver: unluckily, though, the shillings, not being leathered up nor branned, rattled like a Mandarin toy, as the trembling hand of Jennings deposited the bank beside the crockeries—and, at the well-known sound, I observed (though Simon did not, as he was in a trance of addled triumph) or fancied I observed Mrs. Quarles’s head move: but as she said nothing, perhaps I was mistaken. Thus stood Simon at the table, surveying his extraordinary spoils.

And while he looked, the Mercy of God, which never yet hath seen the soul too guilty for salvation, spake to him kindly, and whispered in his ear, “Poor, deluded man—there is yet a moment for escape—flee from this temptation—put all back again—hasten to thy room, to thy prayers, repent, repent: even thou shalt be forgiven, and none but God, who will forgive thee, shall know of this bad crime. Turn now from all thy sins; the gate of bliss is open, if thou wilt but lift the latch.”

It was one moment of irresolute delay; on that hinge hung Eternity. The gate swung upon its pivot, that should shut out hell, or heaven!

Simon knit his brow—bit his nails—and answered quite out loud, “What! and after all to lose the crock of gold?”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MURDER.

HE had waked her!

In an instant the angel form of Mercy melted away—and there stood the devil with his arms folded.

“Murder!—fire!—rape!—thieves!—what, Nephew Jennings, is that you, with all my honey pots? Help! help! help!”

“Phew-w-w!” whistled the devil: “I tell you what, Master Simon, you must quiet the old woman, she bellows like a bull, the house’ll be about your ears in a twinkling—she’ll hang you for this!”

Yes—he must quiet her—the game was up; he threatened, he implored, but she would shriek on; she slept alone on the ground-floor, and knew she must roar loudly to be heard above the drawing-rooms; she would not be quieted—she would shriek—and she did. What must he do? she’ll raise the house!—Stop her mouth, stop her mouth, I say,

can't you?—No, she's a powerful, stout, heavy woman, and he cannot hold her: ha! she has bitten his finger to the bone, like a very tigress! look at the blood!

"Why can't you touch her throat; no teeth there, bless you! that's the way the wind comes: bravo! grasp it—tighter! tighter! tighter!"

She struggled, and writhed, and wrestled, and fought—but all was strangling silence; they rolled about the floor together, tumbled on the bed, scuffled round the room, but all in horrid silence; neither uttered a sound, neither had a shoe on—but all was earnest, wicked, death-dealing silence.

Page 71

Ha! the desperate victim has the best of it; gripe harder, Jennings; she has twisted her fingers in your neckcloth, and you yourself are choking: fool! squeeze the swallow, can't you? try to make your fingers meet in the middle—lower down, lower down, grasp the gullet, not the ears, man—that's right; I told you so: tighter, tighter, tighter! again; ha, ha, ha, bravo! bravo!—tighter, tighter, tighter!

At length the hideous fight was coming to an end—though a hungry constrictor, battling with the huge rhinoceros, and crushing his mailed ribs beneath its folds, could not have been so fierce or fearful; fewer now, and fainter are her struggles; that face is livid blue—the eyes have started out, and goggle horribly; the tongue protrudes, swollen and black. Aha! there is another convulsive effort—how strong she is still! can you hold her, Simon?—can he?—All the fiend possessed him now with savage exultation: can he?—only look! gripe, gripe still, you are conquering, strong man! she is getting weaker, weaker; here is your reward, gold! gold! a mighty store uncounted; one more grasp, and it is all your own—relent now, she hangs you. Come, make short work of it, break her neck—gripe harder—back with her, back with her against the bedstead: keep her down, down I say—she must not rise again. Crack! went a little something in her neck—did you hear it? There's the death-rattle, the last smothery complicated gasp—what, didn't you hear that?

And the devil congratulated Simon on his victory.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE REWARD.

TILL the wretch had done the deed, he scarcely knew that it was doing. It was a horrid, mad excitement, where the soul had spread its wings upon the whirlwind, and heeded not whither it was hurried. A terrible necessity had seemed to spur him onwards all the while, and one thing so succeeded to another, that he scarce could stop at any but the first. From the moment he had hidden in the shower-bath (but for God's interposing mercy), his doom appeared to have been sealed—robbery, murder, false witness, and—damnation!

Crime is the rushing rapid, which, but for some kind miracle, inevitably carries on through circling eddies, and a foamy swinging tide, to the cataract of death and woe: haste, poor fisherman of Erie, paddle hard back, stem the torrent, cling to the shore, hold on tight by this friendly bough; know you not whither the headlong current drives? hear you not the roar of many waters, the maddening rush as of an ocean disenthralled? feel you not the earth trembling at the thunder—see you not the heaven clouded o'er with spray? Helpless wretch—thy frail canoe has leapt that dizzy water-cliff, Niagara!

Page 72

But if, in doing that fell deed, madness raged upon the minutes, now that it was done—all still, all calm, all quiet, Terror held the hour-glass of Time. There lay the corpse, motionless, though coiled and cramped in the attitude of struggling agony; and the murderer gazed upon his victim with a horror most intense. Fly! fly!—he dared not stop to think: fly! fly! any whither—as you are—wait for nothing; fly! thou caitiff, for thy life! So he caught up the blood-bought spoils, and was fumbling with shaky fingers at the handle of the garden-door, when the unseen tempter whispered in his ear,

“I say, Simon, did not your aunt die of apoplexy?”

O, kind and wise suggestion! O, lightsome, tranquillizing thought! Thanks! thanks! thanks!—And if the arch fiend had revealed himself in person at the moment, Simon would have worshipped at his feet.

“But,” and as he communed with his own black heart, there needed now no devil for his prompter—“if this matter is to be believed, I must contrive a little that it may look likelier. Let me see:—yes, we must lay all tidy, and the old witch shall have died in her sleep; apoplexy! capital indeed; no tell-tales either. Well, I must set to work.”

Can mortal mind conceive that sickening office?—To face the strangled corpse, yet warm; to lift the fearful burden in his arms, and order out the heavily-yielding limbs in the ease of an innocent sleep? To arrange the bed, smooth down the tumbled coverlid, set every thing straight about the room, and erase all tokens of that dread encounter? It needed nerves of iron, a heart all stone, a cool, clear head, a strong arm, a mindful, self-protecting spirit; but all these requisites came to Simon’s aid upon the instant; frozen up with fear, his heart-strings worked that puppet-man rigidly as wires; guilt supplied a reckless energy, a wild physical power, which actuates no human frame but one saturate with crime, or madness; and in the midst of those terrific details, the murderer’s judgment was so calm and so collected, that nothing was forgotten, nothing unconsidered—unless, indeed, it were that he out-generalled himself by making all too tidy to be natural. Hence, suspicion at the inquest; for the “apoplexy” thought was really such a good one, that, but for so exact a laying out, the fat old corpse might have easily been buried without one surmise of the way she met her end. Again and again, in the history of crimes, it is seen that a “Judas hangs himself;” and albeit, as we know, the murderer has hitherto escaped detection, still his own dark hour shall arrive in its due place.

The dreadful office done, he asked himself again, or maybe took counsel of the devil (for that evil master always cheats his servants), “What shall I do with my reward, this crock—these crocks of gold? It might be easy to hide one of them, but not all; and as to leaving any behind, that I won’t do. About opening them to see which is which—”

Page 73

"I tell you what," said the tempter, as the clock struck three, "whatever you do, make haste; by morning's dawn the house and garden will be searched, no doubt, and the crocks found in your possession. Listen to me—I'm your friend, bless you! remember the apoplexy. Pike Island yonder is an unfrequented place; take the punt, hide all there now, and go at your best leisure to examine afterwards; but whatever you do, make haste, my man."

Then Jennings crept out by the lawn-door, thereby rousing the house-dog; but he skirted the laurels in their shadow, and it was dark and mizzling, so he reached the punt both quickly and easily.

The quiet, and the gloom, and the dropping rain, strangely affected him now, as he plied his punt-pole; once he could have wept in his remorse, and another time he almost shrieked in fear. How lonesome it seemed! how dreadful! and that death-dyed face behind him—ha! woman, away I say! But he neared the island, and, all shoeless as he was, crept up its muddy bank.

"Hallo! nybor, who be you a-poaching on my manor, eh? that bean't good manners, any how."

Ben Burke has told us all the rest.

But, when Burke had got his spoils—when the biter had been bitten—the robber robbed—the murderer stripped of his murdered victim's money—when the bereaved miscreant, sullenly returning in the dark, damp night, tracked again the way he came upon that lonely lake—no one yet has told us, none can rightly tell, the feelings which oppressed that God-forsaken man. He seemed to feel himself even a sponge which, the evil one had bloated with his breath, had soaked it then in blood, had squeezed it dry again, and flung away! He was Satan's broken tool—a weed pulled up by the roots, and tossed upon the fire; alone—alone in all the universe, without countenance or sympathy from God, or man, or devil; he yearned to find, were it but a fiend to back him, but in vain; they held aloof, he could see them vaguely through the gloom—he could hear them mocking him aloud among the patter of the rain-drops—ha! ha! ha—the pilfered fool!

Bitterly did he rue his crime—fearfully he thought upon its near discovery—madly did he beat his miserable breast, to find that he had been baulked of his reward, yet spent his soul to earn it.

Oh—when the house-dog bayed at him returning, how he wished he was that dog! he went to him, speaking kindly to him, for he envied that dog—"Good dog—good dog!"



But more than envy kept him lingering there: the wretched man did it for delay—yes, though morn was breaking on the hills—one more—one more moment of most precious time.

CHAPTER XXX.

SECOND THOUGHTS.

FOR—again he must go through that room!

No other entrance is open—not a window, not a door: all close as a prison: and only by the way he went, by the same must he return.

Page 74

He trembled all over, as a palsied man, when he touched the lock: with stiffening hair, and staring eyes, he peeped in at that well-remembered chamber: he entered—and crept close up to the corpse, stealthily and dreadingly—horror! what if she be alive still?

SHE WAS.

Not quite dead—not quite dead yet! a gurgling in the bruised throat—a shadowy gleam of light and life in those protruded eyes—an irregular convulsive heaving at the chest: she might recover! what a fearful hope: and, if she did, would hang him—ha! he went nearer; she was muttering something in a moanful way—it was, “Simon did it—Simon did it—Simon did it—Si—Si—Simon did—” he should be found out!

Yet once again, for the last time, the long-suffering Mercy of the Lord stood like Balaam’s angel in the way, pleading with that miserable man at the bed-side of her whom he had strangled. And even then, that Guardian Spirit came not with chiding on his tongue, but He uttered words of hope, while his eyes were streaming with sorrow and with pity.

“Most wretched of the sinful sons of men, even now there may be mercy for thee, even now plenteous forgiveness. True, thou must die, and pay the earthly penalty of crimes like thine: but do my righteous bidding, and thy soul shall live. Go to that poor, suffocating creature—cherish the spark of life—bind up the wounds which thou hast rent, pouring in oil and wine: rouse the house—seek assistance—save her life—confess thy sin—repent—and though thou diest for this before the tribunal of thy fellows, God will yet be gracious—he will raise again her whom thou hadst slain—and will cleanse thy blood-stained soul.”

Thus in Simon’s ear spake that better conscience.

But the reprobate had cast off Faith; he could not pledge the Present for the Future; he shuddered at the sword of Justice, and would not touch the ivory sceptre of Forgiveness. No: he meditated horrid iteration—and again the fiend possessed him! What! not only lose the crock of gold, but all his own bright store? and give up every thing of this world’s good for some imaginary other, and meekly confess, and meanly repent—and—and all this to resuscitate that hated old aunt of his, who would hang him, and divorce him from his gold?

No! he must do the deed again—see, she is moving—she will recover! her chest heaves visibly—she breathes—she speaks—she knows me—ha! down—down, I say!

Then, with deliberate and damning resolution—to screen off temporal danger, and count his golden hoards a little longer—that awful criminal touched the throat again: and he turned his head away not to see that horrid face, clutched the swollen gullet with his icy hands, and strangled her once more!

“This time all is safe,” said Simon. And having set all smooth as before, he stole up to his own chamber.

CHAPTER XXXI.

Page 75

MAMMON, AND CONTENTMENT.

AY, safe enough: and the murderer went to bed. To bed? No.

He tumbled about the clothes, to make it seem that he had lain there: but he dared neither lie down, nor shut his eyes. Then, the darkness terrified him: the out-door darkness he could have borne, and Mrs. Quarles's chamber always had a night-lamp burning: but the darkness of his own room, of his own thoughts, pressed him all around, as with a thick, murky, suffocating vapour. So, he stood close by the window, watching the day-break.

As for sleep, never more did wholesome sleep revisit that atrocious mind: laudanum, an ever-increasing dose of merciless laudanum, that was the only power which ever seemed to soothe him. For a horrid vision always accompanied him now: go where he might, do what he would, from that black morning to eternity, he went a haunted man—a scared, sleepless, horror-stricken wretch. That livid face with goggling eyes, stuck to him like a shadow; he always felt its presence, and sometimes, also, could perceive it as if bodily peeping over his shoulder, next his cheek; it dogged him by day, and was his incubus by night; and often he would start and wrestle, for the desperate grasp of the dying appeared to be clutching at his throat: so, in his ghostly fears, and bloody conscience, he had girded round his neck a piece of thin sheet-iron in his cravat, which he wore continually as armour against those clammy fingers: no wonder that he held his head so stiff.

O Gold—accursed Mammon! is this the state of those who love thee deepest? is this their joy, who desire thee with all their heart and soul—who serve thee with all their might—who toil for thee—plot for thee—live for thee—dare for thee—die for thee? Hast thou no better bliss to give thy martyrs—no choicer comfort for thy most consistent worshippers, no fairer fate for those, whose waking thoughts, and dreaming hopes, and intricate schemes, and desperate deeds, were only aimed at gold, more gold? God of this world, if such be thy rewards, let me ever escape them! idol of the knave, false deity of the fool, if this be thy blessing on thy votaries—come, curse me, Mammon, curse thou me!

For, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” It groweth up a little plant of coveting; presently the leaves get rank, the branches spread, and feed on petty thefts; then in their early season come the blossoms, black designs, plots, involved and undeveloped yet, of foul conspiracies, extortions on the weak, rich robberies of the wealthy, the threatened slander, the rewarded lie, malice, perjury, sacrilege; then speedily cometh on the climax, the consummate flower, dark-red murder: and the fruit bearing in itself the seeds that never die, is righteous, wrathful condemnation.

Dyed with all manner of iniquity, tinged with many colours like the Mohawk in his woods, goeth forth in a morning the covetous soul. His cheek is white with envy, his brow black

with jealous rage, his livid lips are full of lust, his thievish hands spotted over with the crimson drops of murder. "The poison of asps is under his lips; and his feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in his ways; and there is no fear of God before his eyes."

Page 76

O, ye thousands—the covetous of this world's good—behold at what a fire ye do warm yourselves! dread it: even now, ye have imagined many deaths, whereby your gains may be the greater; ye have caught, in wishful fancy, many a parting sigh; ye have closed, in a heartless revery, many a glazing eye—yea, of those your very nearest, whom your hopes have done to death: and are ye guiltless? God and conscience be your judges!

Even now ye have compassed many frauds, connived at many meannesses, trodden down the good, and set the bad on high—all for gold—hard gold; and are ye the honest—the upright? Speak out manfully your excuse, if you can find one, ye respectables of merchandise, ye traders, bartering all for cash, ye Scribes, ye Pharisees, hypocrites, all honourable men.

Even now, your dreams are full of money-bags; your cares are how to add superfluity to wealth; ye fawn upon the rich, ye scorn the poor, ye pine and toil both night and day for gold, more gold; and are ye happy? Answer me, ye covetous ones.

Yet are there righteous gains, God's blessing upon labour: yet is there rightful hope to get those righteous gains. Who can condemn the poor man's care, though Faith should make his load the lighter? And who will extenuate the rich man's coveting, whose appetite grows with what it feeds on? "Having food and raiment, be therewith content;" that is the golden mean; to that is limited the philosophy of worldliness: the man must live, by labour and its earnings; but having wherewithal for him and his temperately, let him tie the mill-stone of anxiety to the wing of Faith, and speed that burden to his God.

If Wealth come, beware of him, the smooth false friend: there is treachery in his proffered hand, his tongue is eloquent to tempt, lust of many harms is lurking in his eye, he hath a hollow heart; use him cautiously.

If Penury assail, fight against him stoutly, the gaunt grim foe: the curse of Cain is on his brow, toiling vainly; he creepeth with the worm by day, to raven with the wolf by night: diseases battle by his side, and crime followeth his footsteps. Therefore fight against him boldly, and be of a good courage, for there are many with thee; not alone the doled alms, the casual aids dropped from compassion, or wrung out by importunity; these be only temporary helps, and indulgence in them pampers the improvident; but look thou to a better host of strong allies, of resolute defenders; turn again to meet thy duties, needy one: no man ever starved, who even faintly tried to do them. Look to thy God, O sinner! use reason wisely; cherish honour; shrink not from toil, though sometime unrewarded; preserve frank bearing with thy fellows; and in spite of all thy sins—forgiven; all thy follies—flung away; all the trickeries of this world—scorned; all competitions—disregarded; all suspicions—trodden under foot; thou neediest and raggedest of labourers' labourers—Enough shall be thy portion, ere a week hath passed away.

Page 77

Well did Agur-the-Wise counsel Ithiel and Ucal his disciples, when he uttered in their ears before his God, this prayerful admonition, "Two things have I required of Thee; deny me them not before I die: remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches: feed me with food convenient for me. Lest I be full, and deny Thee, saying, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and dishonour the name of the Lord my God."

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEXT MORNING.

DAY dawned apace; and a glorious cavalcade of flaming clouds heralded the Sun their captain. From far away, round half the wide horizon, their glittering spears advanced. Heaven's highway rang with the trampling of their horse-hoofs, and the dust went up from its jewelled pavement as spray from the bottom of a cataract. Anon, he came, the chieftain of that on-spurring host! his banner blazed upon the sky; his golden crest was seen beneath, nodding with its ruddy plumes; over the south-eastern hills he arose in radiant armour. Fair Nature, waking at her bridegroom's voice, arrived so early from a distant clime, smiled upon him sleepily, gladdening him in beauty with her sweet half-opened eyelids, and kissing him in faithfulness with dew-besprinkled lips.

And he looked forth upon the world from his high chariot, holding back the coursers that must mount the steep of noon: and he heard the morning hymn of thankfulness to Heaven from the mountains, and the valleys, and the islands of the sea; the prayer of man and woman, the praise of lisping tongues, the hum of insect joy upon the air, the sheep-bell tinkling in the distance, the wild bird's carol, and the lowing kine, the mute minstrelsy of rising dews, and that stilly scarce-heard universal melody of wakeful plants and trees, hastening to turn their spring-buds to the light—this was the anthem he, the Lord of Day, now listened to—this was the song his influences had raised to bless the God who made him.

And he saw, from his bright throne of wide derivative glory, Hope flying forth upon her morning missions, visiting the lonesome, comforting the sorrowful, speaking cheerfully to Care, and singing in the ear of Labour: and he watched that ever-welcome friend, flitting with the gleams of light to every home, to every heart; none but gladly let her in; her tapping finger opened the very prison doors; the heavy head of Sloth rejoiced to hear her call; and every common Folly, every common Sin—ay, every common Crime—warmed his unconscious soul before her winning beauty.

Yet, yet was there one, who cursed that angel's coming; and the holy Eye of day wept pityingly to see an awful child of man who dared not look on Hope.

The murderer stood beside his casement, watching that tranquil scene: with bloodshot eyes and haggard stare, he gazed upon the waking world; for one strange minute he forgot, entranced by innocence and beauty; but when the stunning tide of memory, that had ebbed that one strange minute, rolled back its mighty flood upon his mind, the murderer swooned away.

Page 78

And he came to himself again all too soon; for when he arose, building up his weak, weak limbs, as if he were a column of sand, the cruel giant, Guilt, lifted up his club, and felled the wretch once more.

How long he lay fainting, he knew not then; if any one had vowed it was a century, Simon, as he gradually woke, could not have gainsaid the man; but he only lay four seconds in that white oblivious trance—for Fear, Fear knocked at his heart:—Up, man, up!—you need have all your wits about you now;—see, it is broad day—the house will be roused before you know where you are, and then will be shouted out that awful name—Simon Jennings! Simon Jennings!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ALARM.

HE arose, held up on either hand that day as if fighting against Amalek;—despair buttressed him on one side, and secrecy shored him on the other: behind that wall of stone his heart had strength to beat.

He arose; and listened at the key-hole anxiously: all silent, quiet, quiet still; the whole house asleep: nothing found out yet. And he bit his nails to the quick, that they bled again: but he never felt the pain.

Hush!—yes, somebody's about: it is Jonathan's step; and hark, he is humming merrily, "Hail, smiling morn, that opes the gates of day?" Wo, wo—what a dismal gulph between Jonathan and me! And he beat his breast miserably. But, Jonathan cannot find it out—he never goes to Mrs. Quarles's room. Oh! this suspense is horrible: haste, haste, some kind soul, to make the dread discovery! And he tore his hair away by handfuls.

"Hark!—somebody else—unlatching shutters; it will be Sarah—ha! she is tapping at the housekeeper's room—yes, yes, and she will make it known, O terrible joy!—A scream! it is Sarah's voice—she has seen her dead, dead, dead;—but is she indeed dead?"

The miscreant quivered with new fears; she might still mutter "Simon did it!"

And now the house is thoroughly astir; running about in all directions; and shouting for help; and many knocking loudly at the murderer's own door—"Mr. Jennings! Mr. Jennings!—quick—get up—come down—quick, quick—your aunt's found dead in her bed!"

What a relief to the trembling wretch!—she was dead. He could have blessed the voice that told him his dread secret was so safe. But his parched tongue may never bless again: curses, curses are all its blessings now.



And Jennings came out calmly from his chamber, a white, stern, sanctimonious man, lulling the storm with his wise presence:—"God's will be done," said he; "what can poor weak mortals answer Him?" And he played cleverly the pious elder, the dignified official, the affectionate nephew: "Ah, well, my humble friends, behold what life is: the best of us must come to this; my poor, dear aunt, the late house-keeper, rest her soul—I feared it might be this way some night or other: she was a stout woman, was our dear, deceased Bridget—and, though a good kind soul, lived much on meat and beer: ah well, ah well!" And he concealed his sentimental hypocrisy in a cotton pocket-handkerchief.

Page 79

"Alas, and well-a-day! that it should have come to this. Apoplexy—you see, apoplexy caught her as she slept: we may as well get her buried at once: it is unfortunately too clear a case for any necessity to open the body; and our young master is coming down on Tuesday, and I could not allow my aunt's corpse to be so disrespectful as to stop till it became offensive. I will go to the vicar myself immediately."

"Begging pardon, Mr. Jennings," urged Jonathan Floyd, "there's a strange mark here about the throat, poor old 'ooman."

"Ay," added Sarah, "and now I come to think of it, Mrs. Quarles's room-door was ajar; and bless me, the lawn-door's not locked neither! Who could have murdered her?"

"Murdered? there's no murder here, silly wench," said Jennings, with a nervous sneer.

"I don't know that, Mr. Simon," gruffly interposed the coachman; "it's a case for a coroner, I'll be bail; so here I goes to bring him: let all bide as it is, fellow-sarvents; murder will out, they say."

And off he set directly—not without a shrewd remark from Mr. Jennings, about letting him escape that way; which seemed all very sage and likely, till the honest man came back within the hour, and a *posse comitatus* at his heels.

We all know the issue of that inquest.

Now, if any one requests to be informed how Jennings came to be looked for as usual in his room, after that unavailing search last night, I reply, this newer, stronger excitement for the minute made the house oblivious of that mystery; and if people further will persist to know, how that mystery of his absence was afterwards explained (though I for my part would gladly have said nothing of the bailiff's own excuse), let it be enough to hint, that Jennings winked with a knowing and gallant expression of face; alluded to his private key, and a secret return at two in the morning from some disreputable society in the neighbourhood; made the men laugh, and the women blush; and, altogether, as he might well have other hats and coats, the delicate affair was not unlikely.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DOUBTS.

AND so, this crock of gold—gained through extortion, by the frauds of every day, the meannesses of every hour—this concrete oppression to the hireling in his wages—this mass of petty pilferings from poverty—this continuous obstruction to the charities of wealth—this cockatrice's egg—this offspring of iniquity—had already been baptized in blood before poor Acton found it, and slain its earthly victim ere it wrecked his faith;

already had it been perfected by crime, and destroyed the murderer's soul, before it had endangered the life of slandered innocence.

Is there yet more blessing in the crock? more fearful interest still, to carry on its story to an end? Must another sacrifice bleed before the shrine of Mammon, and another head lie crushed beneath the heel of that monster—his disciple?

Page 80

Come on with me, and see the end; push further still, there is a labyrinth ahead to attract and to excite; from mind to mind crackles the electric spark: and when the heart thrillingly conceives, its children-thoughts are as arrows from the hand of the giant, flying through that mental world—the hearts of other men. Fervent still from its hot internal source, this fountain gushes up; no sluggish Lethe-stream is here, dull, forgetful, and forgotten; but liker to the burning waves of Phlegethon, mingling at times (though its fire is still unquenched), with the pastoral rills of Tempe, and the River from the Mount of God.

Lower the sail—let it flap idly on the wind—helm a-port—and so to smoother waters: return to common life and humbler thoughts.

It may yet go hard with Roger Acton. Jennings is a man of character, especially the farther from his home; the county round take him for a model of propriety, a sample of the strictest conduct. We know the bad man better; but who dare breathe against the bailiff in his power—against the caitiff in his sleek hypocrisy—that, while he makes a show of both humilities, he fears not God nor man? What shall hinder, that the perjured wretch offer up to the manes of the murdered the life-blood of the false-accused? May he not live yet many years, heaping up gold and crime? And may not sweet Grace Acton—her now repentant father—the kindly Jonathan—his generous master, and if there be any other of the Hurstley folk we love, may they not all meet destruction at his hands, as a handful of corn before the reaper's sickle? I say not that they shall, but that they might. Acton's criminal state of mind, and his hunger after gold—gold any how—have earned some righteous retribution, unless Providence in mercy interpose; and young Sir John, in nowise unblameable himself, with wealth to tempt the spoiler, lives in the spoiler's very den; and as to Jonathan and Grace, this world has many martyrs. If Heaven in its wisdom use the wicked as a sword, Heaven is but just; but if in its vengeance that sword of the wicked is turned against himself, Heaven showeth mercy all unmerited. To a criminal like Jennings, let loose upon the world, without the clog of conscience to retard him, and with the spur of covetousness ever urging on, any thing in crime is possible—is probable: none can sound those depths: and when we raise our eyes on high to the Mighty Moral Governor, and note the clouds of mystery that thunder round his Throne—He may permit, or he may control; who shall reach those heights?

CHAPTER XXXV.

FEARS.

MOREOVER, innocent of blood, as we know Roger Acton to be, appearances are strongly against him: and in such a deed as secret, midnight murder, which none but God can witness, multiplied appearances justify the world in condemning one who seems so guilty.

The first impression against Roger is a bad one, for all the neighbours know how strangely his character had been changing for the worse of late: he is not like the same man; sullen and insubordinate, he was turned away from work for his bold and free demeanor; as to church, though he had worn that little path these forty years, all at once he seems to have entirely forgotten the way hither.

Page 81

He lives, nobody knows how—on bright, clean gold, nobody knows whence: his daughter says, indeed, that her father found a crock of gold in his garden—but she needs not have held her tongue so long, and borne so many insults, if that were all the truth; and, mark this! even though she says it, and declares it on her Bible-oath, Acton himself most strenuously denied all such findings—but went about with impudent tales of legacy, luck, nobody knows what; the man prevaricated continually, and got angry when asked about it—cudgelling folks, and swearing like—like any one but old-time “honest Roger.”

Only look, too, where he lives: in a lone cottage opposite Pike Island, on the other side of which is Hurstley Hall, the scene of robbery and murder: was not a boat seen that night upon the lake? and was not the lawn-door open? How strangely stupid in the coroner and jury not to have imagined this before! how dull it was of every body round not to have suspected murder rather more strongly, with those finger-marks about the throat, and not to have opened their eyes a little wider, when the murderer’s cottage was within five hundred yards of that open lawn-door!

Then again—when Mr. Jennings, in his strict and searching way, accused the culprit, he never saw a man so confused in all his life! and on repeating the charge before those two constables, they all witnessed his guilty consternation: experienced men, too, they were, and never saw a felon if Acton wasn’t one; the dogged manner in which he went with them so quietly was quite sufficient; innocent men don’t go to jail in that sort of way, as if they well deserved it.

But, strongest of all, if any shadow of a doubt remained, the most fearful proof of Roger’s guilt lay in the scrap of shawl—the little leather bags—and the very identical crock of gold! There it was, nestled in the thatch within a yard of his head, as he lay in bed at noon-day guarding it.

One proof, weaker than the weakest of all these banded together, has ere now sufficed to hang the guilty; and many, many fears have I that this multitude of seeming facts, conspiring in a focus against Roger Acton, will be quite enough to overwhelm the innocent. “Nothing lies like a fact,” said Dr. Johnson: and statistics prove it, at least as well as circumstantial evidence.

The matter was as clear as day-light, and long before the trial came about, our poor labourer had been hanged outright in the just judgment of Hurstley-cum-Piggesworth.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PRISON COMFORTS.



MANY blessings, more than he had skill to count, had visited poor Acton in his cell. His gentle daughter Grace, sweet minister of good thoughts—she, like a loving angel, had been God's instrument of penitence and peace to him. He had come to himself again, in solitude, by nights, as a man awakened from a feverish dream; and the hallowing ministrations of her company by day had blest reflective solitude with sympathy and counsel.

Page 82

Good-wife Mary, too, had been his comforting and cheering friend. Immediately the crock of gold had been taken from its ambush in the thatch, it seemed as if the chill which had frozen up her heart had been melted by a sudden thaw. Roger Acton was no longer the selfish prodigal, but the guiltless, persecuted penitent; her care was now to soothe his griefs, not to scold him for excesses; and indignation at the false and bloody charge made him appear a martyr in her eyes. As to his accuser, Jennings, Mary had indeed her own vague fancies and suspicions, but there being no evidence, nor even likelihood to support them, she did not dare to breathe a word; she might herself accuse him falsely. Ben, who alone could have thrown a light upon the matter, had always been comparatively a stranger at Hurstley; he was no native of the place, and had no ties there beyond wire and whip-cord: he would appear in that locality now and then in his eccentric orbit, like a comet, and, soon departing thence, would take away Tom as his tail; but even when there, he was mainly a night-prowler, seldom seen by day, and so little versed in village lore, so rarely mingling with its natives, that neither Jennings nor Burke knew one another by sight. His fame indeed was known, but not his person. At present, he and Tom were still fowling in some distant fens, nobody could tell where; so that Roger's only witness, who might have accounted for the crock and its finding, was as good as dead to him; to make Ben's absence more unusually prolonged, and his reappearance quite incalculable, he had talked of going with his cargo of wild ducks "either to London or to Liverpool, he didn't rightly know which."

Nevertheless, Mary comforted her husband, and more especially herself, by the hope of his return as a saving witness; though it was always doubtful how far Burke's numerous peccadilloes against property would either find him at large, or authorize the poacher in walking straight before the judges. Still Ben's possible interposition was one source of hope and cheerful expectation. Then the good wife would leave her babes at home, safely in a neighbour's charge, and stay and sit many long hours with poor Roger, taking turns with Grace in talking to him tenderly, making little of home-troubles past, encouraging him to wear a stout heart, and filling him with gratitude for all her kindly care. Thus did she bless, and thus was made a blessing, through the loss and absence of that crock of gold.

For Roger himself, he had repented; bitterly and deeply, as became his headlong fall: no sweet luxuries of grief, no soothing sorrow, no chastened meditative melancholy—such mild penitence as this, he thought, could be but a soberer sort of joy for virgins, saints, and martyrs: no—he, bad man, was unworthy of those melting pleasures, and in sturdy self-revenge he flung them from him, choosing rather to feel overwhelmed with shame, contrition, and reproaches. A humbled man with a broken heart

Page 83

within him—such was our labourer, penitent in prison; and when he contrasted his peaceful, pure, and Christian course those forty years of poverty, with his blasphemous and infidel career for the one bad week of wealth, he had no patience with himself—only felt his fall the greater; and his judgment of his own guilt, with a natural exaggeration, went the length of saying—I am scarcely less guilty before God and man, than if, indeed, my hands were red with murder, and my casual finding had been robbery. He would make no strong appeals to the bar of justice, as an innocent condemned; not he—not he: innocent, indeed? his wicked, wicked courses—(an old man, too—gray-headed, with no young blood in him to excuse, no inexperience to extenuate), these deserved—did he say hanging? it was a harsher syllable—hell: and the contrite sinner gladly would have welcomed all the terrors of the gibbet, in hope to take full vengeance on himself for his wicked thirst for gold and all its bitter consequences.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

GOOD COUNSEL.

BUT Grace advised him better. “Be humbled as you may before God, my father, but stand up boldly before man: for in his sight, and by his law, you are little short of blameless. I would not, dearest father, speak to you of sins, except for consolation under them; for it ill becomes a child to see the failings of a parent. But when I know at once how innocent you are in one sense, and how not quite guiltless in another, I wish my words may comfort you, if you will hear them, father. Covetousness, not robbery—excess, not murder—these were your only sins; and concealment was not wise, neither was a false report befitting. Money, the idol of millions, was your temptation: its earnest love, your fault; its possession, your misfortune. Forgive me, father, if I speak too freely. Good Mr. Evans, who has been so kind to us for years, (never kinder than since you were in prison,) can speak better than I may, of sins forgiven, and a Friend to raise the fallen: it is not for poor Grace to school her dear and honoured father. If you feel yourself guilty of much evil in the sight of Him before whom the angels bow in meekness—I need not tell you that your sorrow is most wise, and well-becoming. But this must not harm your cause with men: though tired of life, though hopeless in one’s self, though bad, and weak, and like to fall again, we are still God’s servants upon earth, bound to guard the life he gives us. Neither must you lightly allow the guilt of unrighteous condemnation to fall upon the judge who tries you; nor let your innocent blood cry to God for vengeance on your native land. Manfully confront the false accuser, tell openly the truth, plead your own cause firmly, warmly, wisely:—so, God defend the right!”

And as Grace Acton said these words, in all the fervour of a daughter's love, with a flushed cheek, parted lips, and her right hand raised to Him whom she invoked, she looked like an inspired prophetess, or the fair maid of Orleans leading on to battle.

Page 84

In an instant afterwards, she humbly added,

“Forgive me any thing I may have said, that seems to chide my father.”

“Bless you, bless you, dearest one!” was Roger’s sobbing prayer, who had listened to her wisdom breathlessly. “Ah, daughter,” then exclaimed the humbled, happy man, “I’ll try to do all you ask me, Grace; but it is a hard thing to feel myself so wicked, and to have to speak up boldly like a Christian man.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

EXPERIENCE.

THEN, with disjointed sentences, suited to the turmoil of his thoughts, half in a soliloquy, half as talking to his daughter, Roger Acton gave his hostile testimony to the worth of wealth.

“Oh, fool, fool that I have been, to set so high a price on gold! To have hungered and thirsted for it—to have coveted earnestly so bad a gift—to have longed for Mammon’s friendship, which is enmity with God! What has not money cost me? Happiness:—ay, wasn’t it to have given me happiness? and the little that I had (it was much, Grace, not little, very much—too much—God be praised for it!) all, all the happiness I had, gold took away. Look at our dear old home—shattered and scattered, as now I wish that crock had been. Health, too; were it not for gold, and all gold gave, I had been sturdy still, and capable; but my nights maddened with anxieties, my days worried with care, my head feverish with drink, my heart rent by conscience—ah, my girl, my girl, when I thought much of poverty and its hardships, of toil, and hunger, and rheumatics, I little imagined that wealth had heavier cares and pains: I envied them their wanton life of pleasure at the Hall, and little knew how hard it was: well are they called hard-livers who drink, and game, and have nothing to do, except to do wickedness continually. Religion—can it bide with money, child? I never knew my wicked heart, till fortune made me rich; not until then did I guess how base, lying, false, and bad was ‘honest Roger;’ how sensual, coarse, and brutal, was that hypocrite ‘steady Acton’. Money is a devil, child, or pretty near akin. Then I complained of toil, too, didn’t I?—Ah, what are all the aches I ever felt—labouring with spade and spud in cold and rain, hungry belike, and faint withal—what are they all at their worst (and the worst was very seldom after all), to the gnawing cares, the hideous fears, the sins—the sins, my girl, that tore your poor old father? Wasn’t it to be an end of troubles, too, this precious crock of gold? Wo’s me, I never knew real trouble till I had it! Look at me, and judge; what has made me live like a beast, sin like a heathen, and lie down here like a felon? what has made me curse Ben Burke—kind, hearty, friendly Ben?—and given my poor good boy an ill-report as having stolen and slain? all this crock of gold. But O, my Grace, to think that the crock’s curses touched thee, too! didn’t it madden me to hear them? Dear, pure,

patient child, my darling, injured daughter, here upon my knees I pray, forgive that wrong!" And he fell at her feet beseechingly.

Page 85

“My father,” said the noble girl, lifting up his head, and passionately kissing it; “when they whispered so against me, and Jonathan heard the wicked things men said, I would have borne it all, all in silence, and let them all believe me bad, father, if I could have guessed that by uttering the truth, I should have seen thee here, in a dungeon, treated as a—murderer! How was I to tell that men could be so base, as to charge such crimes upon the innocent, when his only fault, or his misfortune, was to find a crock of gold? Oh! forgive me, too, this wrong, my father!”

And they wept in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JONATHAN’S TROTH.

GRACE had been all but an inmate of the prison, ever since her father had been placed there on suspicion. Early and late, and often in the day, was the duteous daughter at his cell, for the governor and the turn-keys favoured her. Who could resist such beauty and affection, entreating to stay with a father about to stand on trial for his life, and making every effort to be allowed only to pray with him? Thus did Grace spend all the week before those dread assizes.

As to her daily maintenance, ever since that bitter morning when the crock was found, her spiritual fears had obliged her to abstain from touching so much as one penny of that unblest store; and, seeing that honest pride would not let her be supported by grudging and common charity, she had thankfully suffered the wages of her now betrothed Jonathan to serve as means whereon she lived, and (what cost more than all her humble wants) whereby she could administer many little comforts to her father in his prison. When she was not in the cell, Grace was generally at the Hall, to the scandal of more than one Hurstleyan gossip; but perhaps they did not know how usually kind Sarah Stack was of the company, to welcome her with Jonathan, and play propriety. Sarah was a true friend, one for adversity, and though young herself, and not ill-looking, did not envy Grace her handsome lover; on the contrary, she did all to make them happy, and had gone the friendly length of insisting to find Grace and her family in tea and sugar, while all this lasted. I like that much in Sarah Stack.

However, the remainder of the virtuous world were not so considerate, nor so charitable. Many neighbours shunned the poor girl, as if contaminated by the crimes which Roger had undoubtedly committed: the more elderly unmarried sisterhood, as we have chronicled already, were overjoyed at the precious opportunity:—“Here was the pert vixen, whom all the young fellows so shamelessly followed, turned out, after all, a murderer’s daughter;—they wished her joy of her eyes, and lips, and curls, and pretty speeches: no good ever came of such naughty ways, that the men liked so.”

Nay, even the tipsy crew at Bacchus's affected to treat her name with scorn:—"The girl had made much noise about being called a trull, as if many a better than she wasn't one; and, after all, what was the prudish wench? a sort of she-butcher; they had no patience with her proud looks."

Page 86

As to farmer Floyd, he made a great stir about his boy being about to marry a felon's daughter; and the affectionate mother, with many elaborate protestations, had "vowed to Master Jonathan, that she would rather lay him out with her own hands, and a penny on each eye, than see a Floyd disgrace himself in that 'ere manner."

And uncles, aunts, and cousins, most disinterestedly exhorted that the obstinate youth be disinherited—"Ay, Mr. Floyd, I wish your son was a high-minded man like his father; but there's a difference, Mr. Floyd; I wish he had your true blue yeoman's honour, and the spirit that becomes his father's son: if the lad was mine, I'd cut him off with a shilling, to buy a halter for his drab of a wife. Dang it, Mrs. Floyd, it'll never do to see so queer a Mrs. Jonathan Junior, a standing in your tidy shoes beside this kitchen dresser."

These estimable counsels were, I grieve to say, of too flattering a nature to displease, and of too lucrative a quality not to be continually repeated; until, really, Jonathan was threatened with beggary and the paternal malediction, if he would persist in his disreputable attachment.

Nevertheless, Jonathan clung to the right like a hero.

"Granting poor Acton is the wretch you think—but I do not believe one word of it—does his crime make his daughter wicked too? No; she is an angel, a pure and blessed creature, far too good for such a one as I. And happy is the man that has gained her love; he should not give her up were she thrice a felon's daughter. My father and mother," Jonathan went on to say, "never found a fault in her till now. Who was more welcome on the hill than pretty Grace? who would oftenest come to nurse some sickly lamb, but gentle Grace? who was wont, from her childhood up, to run home with me so constantly, when school was over, and pleased my kinsfolk so entirely with her nice manners and kind ways? Hadn't he fought for her more than once, and though he came home with bruises on his face, his mother praised him for it?" Then, with a natural divergence from the strict subject-matter of objection, vicarious felony, Jonathan went on to argue about other temporal disadvantages. "Hadn't he heard his father say, that, if she had but money, she was fit to be a countess? and was money, then, the only thing, whereof the having, or the not having, could make her good or bad?—money, the only wealth for soul, and mind, and body? Are affections nothing, are truth and honour nothing, religion nothing, good sense nothing, health nothing, beauty nothing—unless money gild them all? Nonsense!" said Jonathan, indignantly, warmed by his amatory eloquence; "come weal, come wo, Grace and I go down to the grave together; for better, if she can be better—for worse, if she could sin—Grace Acton is my wealth, my treasure, and possession; and let man do his worst, God himself will bless us!"

Page 87

So, all this knit their loves: she knew, and he felt, that he was going in the road of nobleness and honour; and the fiery ordeal which he had to struggle through, raised that hearty earthly lover more nearly to a level with his heavenly-minded mistress. Through misfortune and mistrust, and evil rumours all around, in spite of opposition from false friends, and the scorn of slanderous foes, he stood by her more constantly, perchance more faithfully, than if the course of true-love had been smoother: he was her escort morning and evening to and from the prison; his strong arm was the dread of babbling fools that spoke a word of disrespect against the Actons; and his brave tongue was now making itself heard, in open vindication of the innocent.

CHAPTER XL.

SUSPICIONS.

YES—Jonathan Floyd was beginning to speak out boldly certain strange suspicions he had entertained of Jennings. It was a courageous, a rash, a dangerous thing to do: he did not know but what it might have jeopardized his life, say nothing of his livelihood: but Floyd did it.

Ever since that inquest, contrived to be so quickly and so quietly got over, he had noticed Simon's hurried starts, his horrid looks, his altered mien in all he did and said, his new nervous ways at nightfall—John Page to sleep in Mr. Jennings's chamber, and a rush-light perpetually—his shudder whenever he had occasion to call at the housekeeper's room, and his evident shrinking from the frequent phrase “Mrs. Quarles's murder.”

Then again, Jonathan would often lie awake at nights, thinking over divers matters connected with his own evidence before the coroner, which he began to see might be of great importance. Jennings said, he had gone out to still the dog by the front door—didn't he?—“How then, Mr. Jennings, did you contrive to push back the top bolt? The Hall chairs had not come then, and you are a little fellow, and you know that nobody in the house could reach, without a lift, that bolt but me. Besides, before Sir John came down, the hinges of that door creaked, like a litter o' kittens screaming, and the lock went so hard for want of use and oil, that I'll be sworn your gouty chalkstone fingers could never have turned it: now, I lay half awake for two hours, and heard no creak, no key turned; but I tell you what I did hear though, and I wish now I had said it at that scanty, hurried inquest; I heard what I now believe were distant screams (but I was so sleepy), and a kind of muffled scuffling ever so long: but I fancied it might be a horse in the stable kicking among the straw in a hunter's loose box. I can guess what it was now—cannot you, Mr. Simon?—I say, butler, you must have gone out to quiet Don—who by the way can't abear the sight of you—through Mrs. Quarles's room: and, for all your threats, I'm not afeard to tell you what I think. First answer me this, Mr. Simon Jennings:—where were you all that night, when we were looking for you?—Oh! you

choose to forget, do you? I can help your memory, Mr. Butler; what do you think of the shower-bath in Mother Quarles's room?"

Page 88

As Jonathan, one day at dinner in the servants' hall, took occasion to direct these queries to the presiding Simon, the man gave such a horrid start, and exclaimed, "Away, I say!" so strangely, that Jonathan could doubt no longer—nor, in fact, any other of the household: Jennings gave them all round a vindictive scowl, left the table, hastened to his own room, and was seen no more that day.

Speculation now seemed at an end, it had ripened into probability;—but what evidence was there to support so grave a charge against this rigid man? Suspicions are not half enough to go upon—especially since Roger Acton seemed to have had the money. Therefore, though the folks at Hurstley, Sir John, his guests, and all the house, could not but think that Mr. Jennings acted very oddly—still, he had always been a strange creature, an unpopular bailiff; nobody understood him. So, Floyd, to his own no small danger, stood alone in accusing the man openly.

CHAPTER XLI.

GRACE'S ALTERNATIVE.

VERY shortly after that remarkable speech in the servants' hall, Jonathan found another reason for believing that Mr. Simon Jennings was equal to any imaginable amount of human wickedness. That reason will shortly now appear; but we must first of all dig at its roots somewhat deeper than Jonathan's mental husbandry could manage.

If any trait of character were wanting to complete the desperate infamy of Jennings—(really I sometimes hope that his grandfather's madness had a kind of reawakening in this accursed man)—it was furnished by a new and shrewd scheme for feeding to the full his lust of gold. The bailiff had more than once, as we have hinted, found means to increase his evil hoard, by having secretly gained power over female innocence and honest reputation: similarly he now devised a deep-laid plot, nothing short of diabolical. His plot was this: and I choose to hurry over such foul treason. Let a touch or two hint its outlines: those who will, may paint up the picture for themselves. Simon looked at Sir John—young, gay, wealthy; he coveted his purse, and fancied that the surest bait to catch that fish was fair Grace Acton: if he could entrap her for his master (to whom he gave full credit for delighting in the plan), he counted surely on magnificent rewards. How then to entrap her? Thus:—he, representing himself as prosecutor of Roger, the accused, held for him, he averred, the keys of life and death: he would set this idea (whether true or not little mattered, if it served his purpose) before an affectionate daughter, who should have it in her power to save her parent, if, and only if, she would yield herself to Jennings: and he well knew that, granting she gave herself secretly to him first, on such a bribe as her father's liberation, he would have no difficulty whatever in selling her second-hand beauty on his own terms to his master. It was a foul

Page 89

scheme, and shall not be enlarged upon: but (as will appear) thus slightly to allude to it was needful to our tale, as well as to the development of character in Mammon's pattern-slave, and to the fullness of his due retribution in this world. I may add, that if any thing could make the plan more heinous—if any shade than blackest can be blacker—this extra turpitude is seen in the true consideration, that the promise to Grace of her father's safety would be entirely futile—as Jennings knew full well; the crown was prosecutor, not he: and circumstantial evidence alone would be sufficient to condemn. Again, it really is nothing but bare justice to remark, with reference to Sir John, that the deep-dyed villain reckoned quite without his host; for however truly the baronet had oft-times been much less a self-denying Scipio than a wanton Alcibiades, still the fine young fellow would have flung Simon piecemeal to his hounds, if ever he had breathed so atrocious a temptation: the maid was pledged, and Vincent knew it.

Now, it so happened that one evening at dusk, when Grace as usual was obliged to leave the prison, there was no Jonathan in waiting to accompany her all the dreary long way home: this was strange, as his good-hearted master, privately informed of his noble attachment, never refused the man permission, but winked, for the time, at his frequent evening absence. Nevertheless, on this occasion, as would happen now and then, Floyd could not escape from the dining-room; probably because—Mr. Jennings had secretly gone forth to escort the girl himself. Accordingly, instead of loved Jonathan, sidled up to her the loathsome Simon.

Let me not soil these pages by recording, in however guarded phrase, the grossness of this wretch's propositions; it was a long way to Hurstley, and the reptile never ceased tormenting her every step of it, till the village was in sight: twice she ran, and he ran too, keeping up with her, and pouring into her ear a father's cruel fate and his own detestable alternative. She never once spoke to him, but kept on praying in her own pure mind for a just acquittal; not for one moment would she entertain the wicked thought of "doing evil that good might come;" and so, with flushed cheek, tingling ears, the mien of an insulted empress, and the dauntless resolution of a heroine, she hastened on to Hurstley.

Look here! by great good fortune comes Jonathan Floyd to meet her.

"Save me, Jonathan, save me!" and she fainted in his arms.

Now, truth to say, though Sir John knew it, Simon did not, that Grace was Jonathan's beloved and betrothed; and the cause lay simply in this, that Jonathan had frankly told his master of it, when he found the dreadful turn things had taken with poor Roger; but as to Simon, no mortal in the neighbourhood ever communicated with him, further than as urged by fell necessity. Of course, the lovers' meetings were as private as all such matters generally are; and Sarah's aid managed them admirably. Therefore it now

came to pass that Simon and Jonathan looked on each other in mutual astonishment, and needs must wait until Grace Acton could explain the “save me.” Not but that Jennings seemed much as if he wished to run away; but he did not know how to manage it.

Page 90

"Dear Jonathan," she whispered feebly, "save me from Simon Jennings."

In an instant, Jonathan's grasp was tightly involved in the bailiff's stiff white neckcloth. And Grace, with much maidenly reserve, told her lover all she dared to utter of that base bartering for her father's life.

"Come straight along with me, you villain, straight to the master!" And the sturdy Jonathan, administering all the remainder of the way (a quarter of a mile of avenue made part of it) innumerable kickings and cuffings, hauled the half-mummied bailiff into the servants' hall.

"Now then, straight before the master! John Page, be so good as to knock at the dining-room door, and ask master very respectfully if his honour will be good enough to suffer me to speak to him."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE DISMISSAL.

IT was after dinner. Sir John and his friends had somehow been less jovial than usual; they were absolutely dull enough to be talking politics. So, when the boy of many buttons tapped at the door, and meekly brought in Jonathan's message, recounting also how he had got Mr. Jennings in tow for some inexplicable crime, the strangeness of the affair was a very welcome incident: both host and guests hailed it an adventure.

"By all means, let Jonathan come in."

The trio were just outside; and when the blue and silver footman, hauling in by his unrelinquished throat that scared bailiff, and followed by the blushing village beauty, stood within the room, Sir John and his half-dozen friends greeted the *tableau* with united acclamations.

"I say, Pypp, that's a devilish fine creature," metaphorically remarked the Honorable Lionel Poynter.

"Yaas." Lord George was a long, sallow, slim young man, with a goatish beard, like the Duc d'Aumale's; he affected extreme fashion and infinite *sangfroid*.

"Well, Jonathan, what is it?" asked the baronet.

"Why, in one word, my honoured master, this scoundrel here has been wickedly insulting my own poor dear Grace, by promising to save her father from the gallows if—
if—"

"If what, man? speak out," said Mr. Poynter.

"You don't mean to say, Jennings, that you are brute enough to be seducing that poor man Roger's daughter, just as he's going to be tried for his life?" asked Sir John.

Simon uttered nothing in reply; but Grace burst into tears.

"A fair idea that, 'pon my honour," drawled the chivalrous Pypp, proceeding to direct his delicate attentions towards the weeping damsel.

"Simon Jennings," said Sir John, after pausing in vain for his reply, "I have long wished to get rid of you, sir. Silence! I know you, and have been finding out your rascally proceedings these ten days past. I have learnt much, more than you may fancy: and now this crowning villany [what if he had known of the ulterior designs?] gives me fair occasion to say once and for ever, begone!"

Page 91

Jennings drew himself up with an air of insufferable impudence, and quietly answered, "John Vincent, I am proud to leave your service. I trust I can afford to live without your help."

There was a general outcry at this speech, and Jonathan collared him again; but the baronet calmly set all straight by saying,

"Perhaps, sir, you may not be aware that your systematic thievings and extortions have amply justified me in detaining your iron chest and other valuables, until I find out how you may have come by them."

This was the *coup de grace* to Jennings, who looked scared and terrified:—what! all gone—all, his own beloved hoard, and that dear-bought crock of gold? Then Sir John added, after one minute of dignified and indignant silence,

"Begone!—Jonathan put him out; and if you will kick him out of the hall-door on your private account, I'll forgive you for it."

With that, the liveried Antinous raised the little monster by the small of the back, drew him struggling from the presence, and lifting him up like a football, inflicted one enormous kick that sent him spinning down the whole flight of fifteen marble stairs. This exploit accomplished to the satisfaction of all parties, Jonathan naturally enough returned to look for Grace; and his master, with a couple of friends who had run to the door to witness the catastrophe, returned immediately before him.

"Lord George Pypp, you will oblige me by leaving the young woman alone;" was Sir John's first angry reproof when he perceived the rustic beauty radiant with indignation at some mean offence.

"The worthy baronet wa-ants her for himself," drawled Pypp.

"Say that again, my lord, and you shall follow Jennings."

Whilst the noble youth was slowly elaborating a proper answer, Jonathan's voice was heard once more: he had long looked very white, kept both hands clenched, and seemed as if, saving his master's presence, he could, and would have vanquished the whole room of them.

"Master, have I your honour's permission to speak?"

"No, Jonathan, I'll speak for you; if, that is to say, Lord George will—"

"Paardon me, Sir John Devereux Vincent, your feyllow—and his master, are not fit company for Lord George Pypp;"—and he leisurely proceeded to withdraw.



“Stop a minute, Pypp, I’ve just one remark to make,” hurriedly exclaimed Mr. Lionel Poynter, “if Sir John will suffer me; Vincent, my good friend, we are wrong—Pypp’s wrong, and so am I. First then, let me beg pardon of a very pretty girl, for making her look prettier by blushes; next, as the maid really is engaged to you, my fine fellow, it is not beneath a gentleman to say, I hope that you’ll forgive me for too warmly admiring your taste; as for George’s imputation, Vincent—”

“I beyg to observe,” enunciated the noble scion, “I’m awf, Poynter.”

He gradually drew himself away, and the baronet never saw him more.

Page 92

“For shame, Pypp!” shouted after him the warm-hearted Siliphant; “I tell you what it is, Vincent, you must let me give a toast:—’Grace and her lover!’ here, my man, your master allows you to take a glass of wine with us; help your beauty too.”

The toast was drank with high applause: and before Jonathan humbly led away his pleased and blushing Grace, he took an opportunity of saying,

“If I may be bold enough to speak, kind gentlemen, I wish to thank you: I oughtn’t to be long, for I am nothing but your servant; let it be enough to say my heart is full. And I’m in hopes it wouldn’t be very wrong in me, kind gentlemen, to propose;—’My noble master—honour and happiness to him!’”

“Bravo! Jonathan, bravo-o-o-o!” there was a clatter of glasses;—and the humble pair of lovers retreated under cover of the toast.

CHAPTER XLIII.

SIMON ALONE.

JENNINGS gathered himself up, from that Jew-of-Malta tumble down the steps, less damaged by the fall than could have been imagined possible; the fact being that his cat-like nature had stood him in good stead—he had lighted on his feet; and nothing but a mighty dorsal bruise bore witness to the prowess of a Jonathan.

But, if his body was comparatively sound, the inner man was bruised all over: he crept back, and retreated to his room, in as broken and despondent a frame of mind, as any could have wished to bless him wherewithal. However, he still had one thing left to live for: his hoard—that precious hoard within his iron box, and then—the crock of gold. He took Sir John’s threat about detaining, and so forth, as merely future, and calculated on rendering it nugatory, by decamping forthwith, chattels and all; but he little expected to find that the idea had already been acted upon!

On that identical afternoon, when Simon had gone forth to insult Grace Acton with his villanous proposals, Sir John, on returning from a ride, had commanded his own seal to be placed on all Mr. Jennings’s effects, and the boxes to be forthwith removed to a place of safety: induced thereto by innumerable proofs from every quarter that the bailiff had been cheating him on a most liberal scale, and plundering his tenants systematically. Therefore, when Jennings hastened to his chamber to console himself for all things by looking at his gold, and counting out a bag or two—it was gone, gone, irrevocably gone! safely stored away for rigid scrutiny in the grated muniment-room of Hurstley. Oh, what a howl the caitiff gave, when he saw that his treasure had been taken! he was a wild bull in a net; a crocodile caught upon the hooks; a hyena at bay. What could he do? which way should he turn? how help himself, or get his gold again?

Unluckily—Oh, confusion, confusion!—his account-books were along with all his hoard, those tell-tale legers, wherein he had duly noted down, for his own private

Page 93

and triumphant glance, the curious difference between his lawful and unlawful gains; there, was every overcharge recorded, every matter of extortion systematically ranged, that he might take all the tenants in their turn; there, were filed the receipts of many honest men, whom the guardians and Sir John had long believed to be greatly in arrear; there, was recorded at length the catalogue of dues from tradesmen; there, the list of bribes for the custom of the Hall. It would amply authorize Sir John in appropriating the whole store; and Jennings thought of this with terror. Every thing was now obviously lost, lost! Oh, sickening little word, all lost! all he had ever lived for—all which had made him live the life he did—all which made him fear to die. “Fear to die—ha! who said that? I will not fear to die; yes, there is one escape left, I will hazard the blind leap; this misery shall have an end—this sleepless, haunted, cheated, hated wretch shall live no longer—ha! ha! ha! ha! I’ll do it! I’ll do it!”

Then did that wretched man strive in vain to kill himself, for his hour was not yet come. His first idea was laudanum—that only mean of any thing like rest to him for many weeks; and pouring out all he had, a little phial, nearly half a wine-glass full, he quickly drank it off: no use—no use; the agitation of his mind was too intense, and the habit of a continually increasing dose had made him proof against the poison; it would not even lull him, but seemed to stretch and rack his nerves, exciting him to deeds of bloody daring. Should he rush out, like a Malay running a muck, with a carving-knife in each hand, and kill right and left:—vengeance! vengeance! on Jonathan Floyd, and John Vincent? No, no; for some of them at last would overcome him, think him mad, and, O terror!—his doom for life, without the means of death, would be solitary confinement. “Stay! with this knife in my hand—means of death—yes, it shall be so.” And he hurriedly drew the knife across his throat; no use, nothing done; his cowardly skin shrank away from cutting—he dared not cut again; a little bloody scratch was all.

But the heart, the heart—that should be easier! And the miscreant, not quite a Cato, gave a feeble stab, that made a little puncture. Not yet, Simon Jennings; no, not yet; you shall not cheat the gallows. “Ha! hanging, hanging! why had I not thought of that before?”

He mounted on a chair with a gimlet in his hand, and screwed it tightly into the wainscoting as high as he could reach; then he took a cord from the sacking of his bed, secured it to the gimlet, made a noose, put his head in, kicked the chair away—and swung by his wounded neck; in vain, all in vain; as he struggled in the agonies of self-protecting nature, the handle of the gimlet came away, and he fell heavily to the ground.

“Bless us!” said Sarah to one of the house-maids, as they were arranging their curl-papers to go to bed: “what can that noise be in Mr. Jennings’s room? his tall chest of drawers has fallen, I shouldn’t wonder: it was always unsafe to my mind. Listen, Jenny, will you?”

Page 94

Jenny crept out, and, as laudable females sometimes do, listened at Simon's key-hole.

"Lack-a-daisy, Sall, such a groaning and moaning; p'raps he's a-dying: put on your cap again, and tell Jonathan to go and see."

Sarah did as she was bid, and Jonathan did as he was bid; and there was Mr. Jennings on the floor, blue in the face, with a halter round his neck.

The house was soon informed of the interesting event, and the bailiff was nursed as tenderly as if he had been a sucking babe; fomentations, applications, hot potations: but he soon came to again, without any hope or wish to repeat the dread attempt: he was kept in bed, closely watched, and Stephen Cramp, together with his rival, Eager, remained continually in alternate attendance: until a day or two recovered him as strong as ever. I told you, Simon Jennings, that your time was not yet come.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE TRIAL.

THE trial now came on, and Roger Acton stood arraigned of robbery and murder. I must hasten over lengthy legal technicalities, which would only serve to swell this volume, without adding one iota to its interest or usefulness. Nothing could be easier, nothing more worth while, as a matter of mere book-making, than to tear a few pages out of some musty record of Criminal Court Practice or other Newgate Calendar-piece of authorship, and wade wearily through the length and breadth of indictments, speeches, examinations, and all the other learned clatter of six hours in the judgment-halls of law. If the reader wishes for all this, let him pore over those unhealthy-looking books, whose exterior is dove-coloured as the kirtle of innocence, but their inwards black as the conscience of guilt; whitened sepulchres, all spotless without; but within them are enshrined the quibbling knavery, the distorted ingenuity, the mystifying learnedness, the warped and warping views of truth, the lying, slandering, bad-excusing, good-condemning principles and practices of those who cater for their custom at the guiltiest felon's cell, and would glory in defending Lucifer himself.

In the case of sheer innocence, indeed, as Roger's was—or in one of much doubt and secrecy, where the client denies all guilt, and the counsel sees reason to believe him—let the advocate manfully battle out his cause: but where crime has poured out his confessions in a counsellor's ear—is not this man bought by gold to be a partaker and abettor in his sins, when he strives with all his might to clear the guilty, and not seldom throws the hideous charge on innocence? If the advocate has no wish to entrap his own conscience, nor to damage the tissue of his honour, let him reject the client criminal who confesses, and only plead for those from whom he has had no assurance of their guilt; or, better far, whose innocence he heartily believes in.

Page 95

Such an advocate was Mr. Grantly, a barrister of talents and experience, who, from motives of the purest benevolence, did all that in him lay for Roger Acton. In one thing, however, and that of no small import, the kindly cautious man of law had contrived to do more harm than good: for, after having secretly made every effort, but in vain, to find Ben Burke as a witness—and after having heard that the aforesaid Ben was a notorious poacher, and only intimate at Hurstley with Acton and his family—he strongly recommended Roger to say nothing about the man or his adventure, as the acknowledgment of such an intimacy would only damage his cause: all that need appear was, that he found the crock in his garden, never mind how he “thought” it got there: poachers are not much in the habit of flinging away pots of gold, and no jury would believe but that the ill-reputed personage in question was an accomplice in the murder, and had shared the spoil with his friend Roger Acton. All this was very shrewd; and well meant; but was not so wise, for all that, as simple truth would have been: nevertheless, Roger acquiesced in it, for a better reason than Mr. Grantly’s—namely, this: his feelings toward poor Ben had undergone an amiable revulsion, and, well aware how the whole neighbourhood were prejudiced against him for his freebooting propensities, he feared to get his good rough friend into trouble if he mentioned his nocturnal fishing at Pike island; especially when he considered that little red Savings’ Bank, which, though innocent as to the getting, was questionable as to the rights of spending, and that, really, if he involved the professed poacher in this mysterious affair, he might put his liberty or life into very serious jeopardy. On this account, then, which Grace could not entirely find fault with (though she liked nothing that savoured of concealment), Roger Acton agreed to abide by Mr. Grantly’s advice; and thus he never alluded to his connexion with the poacher.

Enlightened as we are, and intimate with all the hidden secrets of the story, we may be astonished to hear that, notwithstanding all Mr. Grantly’s ingenuity, and all the siftings of cross-questioners, the case was clear as light against poor Acton. No *alibi*, he lived upon the spot. No witnesses to character; for Roger’s late excesses had wiped away all former good report: kind Mr. Evans himself, with tears in his eyes, acknowledged sadly that Acton had once been a regular church-goer, a frequent communicant: but had fallen off of late, poor fellow! And then, in spite of protestations to the contrary, behold! the *corpus delicti*—that unlucky crock of gold, actually in the man’s possession, and the fragment of shawl—was not that sufficient?

Page 96

Jonathan Floyd in open court had been base enough to accuse Mr. Jennings of the murder. Mr. Jennings indeed! a strict man of high character, lately dismissed, after twenty years' service, in the most arbitrary manner by young Sir John, who had taken a great liking to the Actons. People could guess why, when they looked on Grace: and Grace, too, was sufficient reason to account for Jonathan's wicked suspicions; of course, it was the lover's interest to throw the charge on other people. As to Mr. Jennings himself, just recovered from a fit of illness, it was astonishing how liberally and indulgently he prayed the court to show the prisoner mercy: his white and placid face looked quite benevolently at him—and this respectable person was a murderer, eh, Mr. Jonathan?

So, when the judge summed up, and clearly could neither find nor make a loop-hole for the prisoner, the matter seemed accomplished; all knew what the verdict must be—poor Roger Acton had not the shadow of a chance.

CHAPTER XLV.

ROGER'S DEFENCE.

THEN, while the jury were consulting—they would not leave the box, it seemed so clear—Roger broke the death-like silence; and he said:

"Judge, I crave your worship's leave to speak: and hearken to me, countrymen. Many evil things have I done in my time, both against God and my neighbour: I am ashamed, as well I may be, when I think on 'em: I have sworn, and drunk, and lied; I have murmured loudly—coveted wickedly—ay, and once I stole. It was a little theft, I lost it on the spot, and never stole again: pray God, I never may. Nevertheless, countrymen, and sinful though I be in the sight of Him who made us, according to man's judgment and man's innocence, I had lived among you all blameless, until I found that crock of gold. I did find it, countrymen, as God is my witness, and, therefore, though a sinner, I appeal to Him: He knoweth that I found it in the sedge that skirts my garden, at the end of my own celery trench. I did wickedly and foolishly to hide my find, worse to deny it, and worst of all to spend it in the low lewd way I did. But of robbery I am guiltless as you are. And as to this black charge of murder, till Simon Jennings spoke the word, I never knew it had been done. Folk of Hurstley, friends and neighbours, you all know Roger Acton—the old-time honest Roger of these forty years, before the devil made him mad by giving him much gold—did he ever maliciously do harm to man or woman, to child or poor dumb brute?—No, countrymen, I am no murderer. That the seemings are against me, I wot well; they may excuse your judgment in condemning me to death—and I and the good gentleman there who took my part (Heaven bless you, sir!) cannot go against the facts: but they speak falsely, and I truly; Roger Acton is an innocent man: may God defend the right!"

“Amen!” earnestly whispered a tremulous female voice, “and God will save you, father.”

Page 97

The court was still as death, except for sobbing; the jury were doubting and confounded; in vain Mr. Jennings, looking at the foreman, shook his head and stroked his chin in an incredulous and knowing manner; clearly they must retire, not at all agreed; and the judge himself, that masqued man in flowing wig and ermine, but still warmed by human sympathies, struck a tear from his wrinkled cheek; and all seemed to be involuntarily waiting (for the jury, though unable to decide, had not yet left their box), to see whether any sudden miracle would happen to save a man whom evidence made so guilty, and yet he bore upon his open brow the genuine signature of Innocence.

“Silence, there, silence! you can’t get in; there’s no room for’ards!” But a couple of javelin-men at the door were knocked down right and left, and through the dense and suffocating crowd, a black-whiskered fellow, elbowing his way against their faces, spite of all obstruction, struggled to the front behind the bar. Then, breathless with gigantic exertion (it was like a mammoth treading down the cedars), he roared out,

“Judge, swear me, I’m a witness; huzza! it’s not too late.”

And the irreverent gentleman tossed a fur cap right up to the skylight.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE WITNESS.

MR. GRANTLY brightened up at once, Grace looked happily to Heaven, and Roger Acton shouted out,

“Thank God! thank God!—there’s Ben Burke!”

Yes, he had heard miles away of his friend’s danger about an old shawl and a honey-pot full of gold, and he had made all speed, with Tom in his train, to come and bear witness to the innocence of Roger. The sensation in court, as may be well conceived, was thrilling; but a vociferous crier, and the deep anxiety to hear this sturdy witness, soon reduced all again to silence.

Then did they swear Benjamin Burke, who, to the scandal of his cause, would insist upon stating his profession to be “poacher;” and at first, poor simple fellow, seemed to have a notion that a sworn witness meant one who swore continually; but he was soon convinced otherwise, and his whole demeanour gradually became as polite and deferent as his coarse nature would allow. And Ben told his adventure on Pike island, as we have heard him tell it, pretty much in the same words, for the judge and Mr. Grantly let him take his own courses; and then he added (with a characteristic expletive, which we may as well omit, seeing it occasioned a cry of “order” in the court), “There, if that there white-livered little villain warn’t the chap that brought the crocks, my name an’t Ben Burke.”

“Good Heavens! Mr. Jennings, what’s the matter?” said a briefless one, starting up: this was Mr. Sharp, a personage on former occasions distinguished highly as a thieves’ advocate, but now, unfortunately, out of work. “Loosen his cravat, some one there; the gentleman is in fits.”

Page 98

"Oh, Aunt—Aunt Quarles, don't throttle me; I'll tell all—all; let go, let go!" and the wretched man slowly recovered, as Ben Burke said,

"Ay, my lord, ask him yourself, the little wretch can tell you all about it."

"I submit, my lurd," interposed the briefless one, "that this respectable gentleman is taken ill, and that his presence may now be dispensed with, as a witness in the cause."

"No, sir, no;" deliberately answered Jennings; "I must stay: the time I find is come; I have not slept for weeks; I am exhausted utterly; I have lost my gold; I am haunted by her ghost; I can go no where but that face follows me—I can do nothing but her fingers clutch my throat. It is time to end this misery. In hope to lay her spirit, I would have offered up a victim: but—but she will not have him. Mine was the hand that—"

"Pardon me," upstarted Mr. Sharp, "this poor gentleman is a mono-maniac; pray, my lurd, let him be removed while the trial is proceeding."

"You horse-hair hypocrite, you!" roared Ben, "would you hang the innocent, and save the guilty?"

Would he? would Mr. Philip Sharp? Ay, that he would; and glad of such a famous opportunity. What! would not Newgate rejoice, and Horsemonger be glad? Would not his bag be filled with briefs from the community of burglars, and his purse be rich in gold subscribed by the brotherhood of thieves? Great at once would be his name among the purlieus of iniquity: and every rogue in London would retain but Philip Sharp. Would he? ask him again.

But Jennings quietly proceeded like a speaking statue.

"I am not mad, most noble—" [the Bible-read villain was from habit quoting Paul]—"my lord, I mean. My hand did the deed: I throttled her" (here he gave a scared look over his shoulder): "yes—I did it once and again: I took the crock of gold. You may hang me now, Aunt Quarles."

"My lurd, my lurd, this is a most irregular proceeding," urged Mr. Sharp; "on the part of the prisoner—I, I crave pardon—on behalf of this most respectable and deluded gentleman, Mr. Simon Jennings, I contend that no one may criminate himself in this way, without the shadow of evidence to support such suicidal testimony. Really, my lurd —"

"Oh, sir, but my father may go free?" earnestly asked Grace. But Ben Burke's voice—I had almost written voice—overwhelmed them all:

"Let me speak, judge, an't it please your honour, and take you notice, Master Horsehair. You wan't ewidence, do you, beyond the man's confession: here, I'll give it

you. Look at this here wice:" and he stretched forth his well-known huge and horny hand:

"When I caught that dridful little reptil by the arm, he wriggled like a sniggled eel, so I was forced you see, to grasp him something tighter, and could feel his little arm-bones crack like any chicken's: now then, if his left elbow an't black and blue, though it's a month a-gone and more, I'll eat it. Strip him and see."

Page 99

No need to struggle with the man, or tear his coat off. Jennings appeared only too glad to find that there was other evidence than his own foul tongue, and that he might be hung at last without sacking-rope or gimlet; so, he quietly bared his arm, and the elbow looked all manner of colours—a mass of old bruises.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MR. SHARP'S ADVOCACY.

THE whole court trembled with excitement: it was deep, still silence; and the judge said,

"Prisoner at the bar, there is now no evidence against you: gentlemen of the jury, of course you will acquit him."

The foreman: "All agreed, my lord, not guilty."

"Roger Acton," said the judge, "to God alone you owe this marvellous, almost miraculous, interposition: you have had many wrongs innocently to endure, and I trust that the right feelings of society will requite you for them in this world, as, if you serve Him, God will in the next. You are honourably acquitted, and may leave this bar."

In vain the crier shouted, in vain the javelin-men helped the crier, the court was in a tumult of joy; Grace sprang to her father's neck, and Sir John Vincent, who had been in attendance sitting near the judge all the trial through, came down to him, and shook his hand warmly.

Roger's eyes ran over, and he could only utter,

"Thank God! thank God! He does better for me than I deserved." But the court was hushed at last: the jury resworn; certain legal forms and technicalities speedily attended to, as counts of indictment, and so forth: and the judge then quietly said,

"Simon Jennings, stand at that bar."

He stood there like an image.

"My lurd, I claim to be prisoner's counsel."

"Mr. Sharp—the prisoner shall have proper assistance by all means; but I do not see how it will help your case, if you cannot get your client to plead not guilty."

While Mr. Philip Sharp converses earnestly with the criminal in confidential whispers, I will entertain the sagacious reader with a few admirable lines I have just cut out of a newspaper: they are headed

“SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH AND EXCLUSION OF EVIDENCE.

“Lawyers abhor any short cut to the truth. The pursuit is the thing for their pleasure and profit, and all their rules are framed for making the most of it.

“Crime is to them precisely what the fox is to the sportsman: and the object is not to pounce on it, and capture it at once, but to have a good run for it, and to exhibit skill and address in the chase. Whether the culprit or the fox escape or not, is a matter of indifference, the run being the main thing.

“The punishment of crime is as foreign to the object of lawyers, as the extirpation of the fox is to that of sportsmen. The sportsman, because he hunts the fox, sees in the summary destruction of the fox by the hand of a clown, an offence foul, strange, and unnatural, little short of murder. The lawyer treats crime in the same way: his business is the chase of it; but, that it may exist for the chase, he lays down rules protecting it against surprises and capture by any methods but those of the forensic field.

Page 100

“One good turn deserves another, and as the lawyer owes his business to crime, he naturally makes it his business to favour and spare it as much as possible. To seize and destroy it wherever it can be got at, seems to him as barbarous as shooting a bird sitting, or a hare in her form, does to the sportsman. The phrase, to give *law*, for the allowance of a start, or any chance of escape, expresses the methods of lawyers in the pursuit of crime, and has doubtless been derived from their practice.

“Confession is the thing most hateful to law, for this stops its sport at the outset. It is the surrender of the fox to the hounds. ‘We don’t want your stinking body,’ says the lawyer; ‘we want the run after the scent. Away with you, be off; retract your admission, take the benefit of telling a lie, give us employment, and let us take our chance of hunting out, in our roundabout ways, the truth, which we will not take when it lies before us.’”

* * * * *

As I perceive that Mr. Sharp has not yet made much impression upon the desponding prisoner, suffer me to recommend to your notice another sensible leader: the abuse which it would combat calls loudly for amendment. There is plenty of time to spare, for some preliminaries of trial have yet to be arranged, and the judge has just stepped out to get a sandwich, and every body stands at ease; moreover, gentle reader, the paragraphs following are well worthy of your attention. Let us name them,

“MORBID SYMPATHIES.

“We have often thought that the tenderness shown by our law to presumed criminals is as injurious as it is inconsistent and excessive. A miserable beggar, a petty rioter, the wretch who steals a loaf to satisfy the gnawings of his hunger, is roughly seized, closely examined, and severely punished; meanwhile, the plain common sense of our mobs, if not of our magistracy, has pitied the offender, and perhaps acquitted him. But let some apparent murderer be caught, almost in the flagrant deed of his atrocity; let him, to the best of all human belief, have killed, disembowelled, and dismembered; let him have united the coolness of consummate craft to the boldest daring of iniquity, and straightway (though the generous crowd may hoot and hunt the wretch with yelling execration) he finds in law and lawyers, refuge, defenders, and apologists. Tenderly and considerately is he cautioned on no account to criminate himself: he is exhorted, even by judges, to withdraw the honest and truthful plea of ‘guilty,’ now the only amends which such a one can make to the outraged laws of God and man: he is defended, even to the desperate length of malignant accusation of the innocent, by learned men, whose aim it is to pervert justice and screen the guilty! he is lodged and tended with more circumstances of outward comfort and consideration than he probably has ever experienced in all his life before; and if, notwithstanding the ingenuity of his advocates, and the merciful glosses of his judge, a simple-minded British jury capitally convict him, and he is handed over to the executioner, he still finds pious gentlemen ready to weep

over him in his cell, and titled dames to send him white camellias, to wear upon his heart when he is hanging.[A]

Page 101

“Now what is the necessary consequence of this, but a mighty, a fearfully influential premium on crime? And what is its radical cause, but the absurd indulgence wherewith our law greets the favoured, *because* the atrocious criminal? Upon what principle of propriety, or of natural justice, should a seeming murderer not be—we will not say sternly, but even kindly—catechised, and for his very soul’s sake counselled to confess his guilt? Why should the *morale* of evidence be so thoroughly lost sight of, and a malefactor, who is ready to acknowledge crime, or unable, when questioned, to conceal it, on no account be listened to, lest he may do his precious life irreparable harm? It is not agonized repentance, or incidental disclosure, that makes the culprit his own executioner, but his crime that has preceded; it is not the weak, avowing tongue, but the bold and bloody hand.

“We are unwilling to allude specifically to the name of any recent malefactor in connexion with these plain remarks; for, in the absence alike of hindered voluntary confession and of incomplete legal evidence, we would not prejudge, that is, prejudice a case. But we do desire to exclaim against any further exhibition of that morbid tenderness wherewith all persons are sure to be treated, if only they are accused of enormities more than usually disgusting; and we specially protest against that foolish, however ancient, rule in our criminal law, which discourages and rejects the slenderest approach to a confession, while it has sacrificed many an innocent victim to the uncertainty of evidence, supported by nothing more safe than outward circumstantial.”

At length, and after much gesticulation and protestation, Mr. Sharp has succeeded; he had apparently inoculated the miserable man with hopes; for the miscreant now said firmly, “I plead not guilty.”

* * * * *

The briefless one looked happy—nay, triumphant: Jennings was a wealthy man, all knew; and, any how, he should bag a bouncing fee. How far such money was likely to do him any good, he never stopped to ask. “Money is money,” said Philip Sharp and the Emperor Vespasian.

We need not trouble ourselves to print Mr. Sharp’s very flashy, flippant speech. Suffice it to say, that, not content with asserting vehemently on his conscience as a Christian, on his honour as a man, that Simon Jennings was an innocent, maligned, persecuted individual; labouring, perhaps, under mono-mania, but pure and gentle as the babe new-born—not satisfied with traducing honest Ben Burke as a most suspicious witness, probably a murderer—ay, *the* murderer himself, a mere riotous ruffian [Ben here chucked his cap at him, and thereby countenanced the charge], a mere scoundrel, not to say scamp, whom no one should believe upon his oath; he again, with all the semblance of sincerity, accused, however vainly, Roger Acton: and lastly, to the disgust and astonishment of the whole court, added, with all acted appearances of fervent zeal

for justice, "And I charge his pious daughter, too, that far too pretty piece of goods, Grace Acton, with being accessory to this atrocious crime after the fact!"

Page 102

There was a storm of shames and hisses; but the judge allayed it, quietly saying,

“Mr. Sharp, be so good as to confine your attention to your client; he appears to be quite worthy of you.”

Then Mr. Sharp, like the firm just man immortalized by Flaccus, stood stout against the visage of the judge, sneered at the wrath of citizens commanding things unjust, turned to Ben Burke minaciously, calling him “*Dux inquieti turbidus Adriæ*” [as Burke had heard this quotation, he thought it was about the “ducks” he had been decoying], and altogether seemed not about to be put down, though the huge globe crack about his ears. After this, he calmly worded on, seeming to regard the judge’s stinging observation with the same sort of indifference as the lion would a dew-drop on his mane; and having poured out all manner of voluminous bombast, he gradually ran down, and came to a conclusion; then, jumping up refreshed, like the bounding of a tennis-ball, he proceeded to call witnesses; and, judging from what happened at the inquest, as well as because he wished to overwhelm a suspected and suspecting witness, he pounced, somewhat infelicitously, on Jonathan Floyd.

“So, my fine young fellow, you are a footman, eh, at Hurstley?”

“Yes, sir, an’ it please you—or rather, an’ it please my master.”

“You remember what happened on the night of the late Mrs. Quarles’s decease?”

“Oh, many things happened; Mr. Jennings was lost, he wasn’t to be found, he was hid somewhere, nobody saw him till next morning.”

“Stop, sirrah! not quite so quick, if you please; you are on your oath, be careful what you say. I have it in evidence, sirrah, before the coroner;” and he looked triumphantly about him at this clench to all Jonathan’s testimony; “that you saw him yourself that night speaking to the dog; what do you mean by swearing that nobody saw him till next morning?”

“Well, mister, I mean this; whether or no poor old Mrs. Quarles saw her affectionate nephew that night before the clock struck twelve, there’s none alive to tell; but no one else did—for Sarah and I sat up for him till past midnight. He was hidden away somewhere, snug enough; and as I verily believe, in the poor old ’ooman’s own—”

“Silence, silence! sir, I say; we want none of your impertinent guesses here, if you please: to the point, sirrah, to the point; you swore before the coroner, that you had seen Mr. Jennings, in his courage and his kindness, quieting the dog that very night, and now—”

“Oh,” interrupted Jonathan in his turn, “for the matter of that, when I saw him with the dog, it was hard upon five in the morning. And here, gentlemen,” added Floyd, with a



promiscuous and comprehensive bow all round, "if I may speak my mind about the business—"

"Go down, sir!" said Mr. Sharp, who began to be afraid of truths.

"Pardon me, this may be of importance," remarked Roger Acton's friend; "say what you have to say, young man."

Page 103

"Well, then, gentlemen and my lord, I mean to say thus much. Jennings there, the prisoner (and I'm glad to see him standing at the bar), swore at the inquest that he went to quiet Don, going round through the front door; now, none could get through that door without my hearing of him; and certainly a little puny Simon like him could never do so without I came to help him; for the lock was stiff with rust, and the bolt out of his reach."

"Stop, young man; my respected client, Mr. Jennings, got upon a chair."

"Indeed, sir? then he must ha' created the chair for that special purpose: there wasn't one in the hall then; no, nor for two days after, when they came down bran-new from Dowbiggins in London, with the rest o' the added furnitur' just before my honoured master."

This was conclusive, certainly; and Floyd proceeded.

"Now, gentlemen and my lord, if Jennings did not go that way, nor the kitchen-way neither—for he always was too proud for scullery-door and kitchen—and if he did not give himself the trouble to unfasten the dining-room or study windows, or to unscrew the iron bars of his own pantry, none of which is likely, gentlemen—there was but one other way out, and that way was through Bridget Quarles's own room. Now—"

"Ah—that room, that bed, that corpse, that crock!—It is no use, no use," the wretched miscreant added slowly, after his first hurried exclamations; "I did the deed, I did it! guilty, guilty." And, notwithstanding all Mr. Sharp's benevolent interferences, and appeals to judge and jury on the score of mono-mania, and shruggings-up of shoulders at his client's folly, and virtuous indignation at the evident leaning of the court—the murderer detailed what he had done. He spoke quietly and firmly, in his usually stern and tyrannical style, as if severe upon himself, for being what?—a man of blood, a thief, a perjured false accuser? No, no; lower in the scale of Mammon's judgment, worse in the estimate of him whose god is gold; he was now a pauper, a mere moneyless forked animal; a beggared, emptied, worthless, penniless creature: therefore was he stern against his ill-starred soul, and took vengeance on himself for being poor.

It was a consistent feeling, and common with the mercantile of this world; to whom the accidents of fortune are every thing, and the qualities of mind nothing; whose affections ebb and flow towards friends, relations—yea, their own flesh and blood, with the varying tide of wealth: whom a luckless speculation in cotton makes an enemy, and gambling gains in corn restore a friend; men who fall down mentally before the golden calf, and offer up their souls to Nebuchadnezzar's idol: men who never saw harm nor shame in the craftiest usurer or meanest pimp, provided he has thousands in the three per cents.; and whose indulgent notions of iniquity reach their climax in the phrase—the man is poor.

Page 104

So then, with unhallowed self-revenge, Simon rigidly detailed his crimes: he led the whole court step by step, as I have led the reader, through the length and breadth of that terrible night: of the facts he concealed nothing, and the crowded hall of judgment shuddered as one man, when he came to his awful disclosure, hitherto unsuspected, unimagined, of that second strangulation: as to feelings, he might as well have been a galvanized mummy, an automaton lay-figure enunciating all with bellows and clapper, for any sense he seemed to have of shame, or fear, or pity; he admitted his lie about the door, complimented Burke on the accuracy of his evidence, and declared Roger Acton not merely innocent, but ignorant of the murder.

This done, without any start or trepidation in his manner as formerly, he turned his head over his left shoulder, and said, in a deep whisper, heard all over the court, "And now, Aunt Quarles, I am coming; look out, woman, I will have my revenge for all your hauntings: again shall we wrestle, again shall we battle, again shall I throttle you, again, again!"

O, most fearful thought! who knoweth but it may be true? that spirits of wickedness and enmity may execute each other's punishment, as those of righteousness and love minister each other's happiness! that—damned among the damned—the spirit of a Nero may still delight in torturing, and that those who in this world were mutual workers of iniquity, may find themselves in the next, sworn retributors of wrath? No idle threat was that of the demoniac Simon, and possibly with no vain fears did the ghost of the murdered speed away.

When the sensation of horror, which for a minute delayed the court-business, and has given us occasion to think that fearful thought, when this had gradually subsided, the foreman of the jury, turning to the judge, said,

"My lord, we will not trouble your lordship to sum up; we are all agreed—Guilty."

One word about Mr. Sharp: he was entirely chagrined; his fortunes were at stake; he questioned whether any one in Newgate would think of him again. To make matters worse, when he whispered for a fee to Mr. Jennings (for he did whisper, however contrary to professional etiquette), that worthy gentleman replied by a significant sneer, to the effect that he had not a penny to give him, and would not if he had: whereupon Mr. Sharp began to coincide with the rest of the world in regarding so impoverished a murderer as an atrocious criminal; then, turning from his client with contempt, he went to the length of congratulating Roger on his escape, and actually offered his hand to Ben Burke. The poacher's reply was characteristic: "As you means it kindly, Master Horsehair, I won't take it for an insult: howsomdever, either your hand or mine, I won't say which, is too dirty for shaking. Let me do you a good turn, Master: there's a blue-bottle on your wig; I think as it's Beelzebub a-whispering in your ear: allow me to drive him away." And the poacher dealt him such a cuff that this barrister reeled again; and

instantly afterwards took advantage of the cloud of hair-powder to leave the court unseen.

Page 105

CHAPTER XLVIII.

SENTENCE AND DEATH.

SILENCE, silence! shouted the indignant crier, and the episodical cause of Burke, v. Sharp, was speedily hushed.

The eyes of all now centred on the miserable criminal; for the time, every thing else seemed forgotten. Roger, Grace, and Ben, grouped together in the midst of many friends, who had crowded round them to congratulate, leaned forward like the rest of that dense hall, as simply thrall'd spectators. Mr. Grantly lifted up a pair of very moistened eyes behind his spectacles, and looked earnestly on, with his wig, from agitation, wriggled tails in front. The judge (it was good old Baron Parker) put on the black cap to pronounce sentence. There was a pause.

But we have forgotten Simon Jennings—what was he about? did that “cynosure of neighbouring eyes” appear alarmed at his position, anxious at his fate, or even attentive to what was going on? No: he not only appeared, but was, the most unconcerned individual in the whole court: he even tried to elude utter vacancy of thought by amusing himself with external things about him: and, on Wordsworth’s principle of inducing sleep by counting

“A flock of sheep, that leisurely pass by,
One after one,”

he was trying to reckon, for pleasant peace of mind’s sake, how many folks were looking at him. Only see—he is turning his white stareful face in every direction, and his lips are going a thousand and forty-one, a thousand and forty-two, a thousand and forty-three; he will not hurry it over, by leaving out the “thousand:” alas! this holiday of idiotic occupation is all the respite now his soul can know.

And the judge broke that awful silence, saying,

“Prisoner at the bar, you are convicted on your own confession, as well as upon other evidence, of crimes too horrible to speak of. The deliberate repetition of that fearful murder, classes you among the worst of wretches whom it has been my duty to condemn: and when to this is added your perjured accusation of an innocent man, whom nothing but a miracle has rescued, your guilt becomes appalling—too hideous for human contemplation. Miserable man, prepare for death, and after that the judgment; yet, even for you, if you repent, there may be pardon; it is my privilege to tell even you, that life and hope are never to be separated, so long as God is merciful, or man may be contrite. The Sacrifice of Him who died for us all, for you, poor fellow-creature [here the good judge wept for a minute like a child]—for you, no less than for me, is available even to the chief of sinners. It is my duty and my comfort to direct your blood-stained,

but immortal soul, eagerly to fly to that only refuge from eternal misery. As to this world, your career of wickedness is at an end: covetousness has conceived and generated murder; and murder has even over-stept its common bounds, to repeat the terrible crime, and then to throw its guilt upon the innocent. Entertain no hope whatever of a respite; mercy in your case would be sin.



Page 106

"The sentence of the court is, that you, Simon Jennings, be taken from that bar to the county jail, and thence on this day fortnight to be conveyed to the place of execution within the prison, and there by the hands of the common hangman be hanged by the neck—"

At the word "neck," in the slow and solemn enunciation of the judge, issued a terrific scream from the mouth of Simon Jennings: was he mad after all—mad indeed? or was he being strangled by some unseen executioner? Look at him, convulsively doing battle with an invisible foe! his eyes start; his face gets bluer and bluer; his hands, fixed like griffin's talons, clutch at vacancy—he wrestles—struggles—falls.

All was now confusion: even the grave judge, who had necessarily stopped at that frightful interruption, leaned eagerly over his desk, while barristers and serjeants learned in the law crowded round the prisoner: "He is dying! air, there—air! a glass of water, some one!"

About a thimbleful of water, after fifty spillings, arrived safely in a tumbler; but as for air, no one in that court had breathed any thing but nitrogen for four hours.

He was dying: and three several doctors, hoisted over the heads of an admiring multitude, rushed to his relief with thirsty lancets: apoplexy—oh, of course, apoplexy: and they nodded to each other confidentially.

Yes, he was dying: they might not move him now: he must die in his sins, at that dread season, upon that dread spot. Perjury, robbery, and murder—all had fastened on his soul, and were feeding there like harpies at a Strophadian feast, or vultures ravening on the liver of Prometheus. Guilt, vengeance, death had got hold of him, and rent him, as wild horses tearing him asunder different ways; he lay there gurgling, strangling, gasping, panting: none could help him, none could give him ease; he was going on the dark, dull path in the bottom of that awful valley, where Death's cold shadow overclouds it like a canopy; he was sinking in that deep black water, that must some day drown us all—pray Heaven, with hope to cheer us then, and comfort in the fierce extremity! His eye filmed, his lower jaw relaxed, his head dropped back—he was dying—dying—dying

On a sudden, he rallied! his blood had rushed back again from head to heart, and all the doctors were deceived—again he battled, and fought, and wrestled, and flung them from him; again he howled, and his eyes glared lightning—mad? Yes, mad—stark mad! quick—quick—we cannot hold him: save yourselves there!

But he only broke away from them to stand up free—then he gave one scream, leaped high into the air, and fell down dead in the dock, with a crimson stream of blood issuing from his mouth.

CHAPTER XLIX.

RIGHTEOUS MAMMON.

Page 107

THUS the crock of gold had gained another victim. Is the curse of its accumulation still unsatisfied? Must more misery be born of that unhallowed store? Shall the poor man's wrongs, and his little ones' cry for bread, and the widows' vain appeal for indulgence in necessity, and the debtor's useless hope for time—more time—and the master's misused bounty, and the murmuring dependants' ever-extorted dues—must the frauds, falsehoods, meannesses, and hardnesses of half a century long, concentrate in that small crock—must these plead still for bloody judgments from on high against all who touch that gold?

No! the miasma is dispelled: the curse is gone: the crimes are expiated. The devil in that jar is dispossessed, and with Simon's last gasp has returned unto his own place. The murderer is dead, and has thereby laid the ghost of his mate in sin, the murdered victim; while that victim has long ago paid by blood for her many years of mean domestic pilfering.

And now I see a better angel hovering round the crock: it is purified, sanctified, accepted. It is become a talent from the Lord, instead of a temptation from the devil; and the same coin, which once has been but dull, unrighteous mammon, through justice, thankfulness, and piety, shineth as the shekel of the temple. Gratefully, as from God, the rightful owner now may take the gift.

For, gold is a creature of God, representing many excellencies: the sweat of honest Industry distils to gold; the hot-spring of Genius congeals to gold; the blessing upon Faithfulness is often showered in gold; and Charities not seldom are guerdoned back with gold. Let no man affect to despise what Providence hath set so high in power. None do so but the man who has it not, and who knows that he covets it in vain. Sour grapes—sour grapes—for he may not touch the vintage. This is not the verdict of the wise; the temptation he may fear, the cares he may confess, the misuse he may condemn: yet will he acknowledge that, received at God's hand, and spent in his service, there is scarce a creature in this nether world of higher name than Money.

Beauty fadeth; Health dieth; Talents—yea, and Graces—go to bloom in other spheres—but when Benevolence would bless, and bless for ages, his blessing is vain, but for money—when Wisdom would teach, and teach for ages, the teacher must be fed, and the school built, and the scholar helped upon his way by money—righteous money. There is a righteous money as there is unrighteous mammon; but both have their ministrations here limited to earth and time; the one, a fruit of heaven—the other, a fungus from below: yet the fruit will bring no blessing, if the Grower be forgotten; neither shall the fungus yield a poison, if warmed awhile beneath the better sun. Like all other gifts, given to us sweet, but spoilt in the using, gold may turn to good or ill: Health may kick, like fat Jeshurun in his wantonness; Power may change from beneficence

Page 108

to tyranny; Learning may grow critical in mores until it overlooks the sunbeam; Love may be degraded to an instinct; Zaccheus may turn Pharisee; Religion may cant into the hypocrite, or dogmatize to theologic hate. Even so it is with money: its power of doing good has no other equivalent in this world than its power of doing evil: it is like fire—used for hospitable warmth, or wide-wasting ravages; like air—the gentle zephyr, or the destroying hurricane. Nevertheless, all is for this world—this world only; a matter extraneous to the spirit, always foreign, often-times adversary: let a man beware of lading himself with that thick clay.

I see a cygnet on the broad Pactolus, stemming the waters with its downy breast; and anon, it would rise upon the wing, and soar to other skies; so, taking down that snow-white sail, it seeks for a moment to rest its foot on shore, and thence take flight: alas, poor bird! thou art sinking in those golden sands, the heavy morsels clog thy flapping wing—in vain—in vain thou triest to rise—Pactolus chains thee down.

Even such is wealth unto the wisest; wealth at its purest source, exponent of labour and of mind. But, to the frequent fool, heaped with foulest dross—for the cygnet of Pactolus and those golden sands, read—the hippopotamus wallowing in the Niger, and smothered in a bay of mud.

CHAPTER L.

THE CROCK A BLESSING.

THERE was no will found: it is likely Mrs. Quarles had never made one; she feared death too much, and all that put her in mind of it. So the next of kin, the only one to have the crock of gold, was Susan Scott, a good, honest, hard-working woman, whom Jennings, by many arts, had kept away from Hurstley: her husband, a poor thatcher, sadly out of work except in ricking time, and crippled in both legs by having fallen from a hay-stack: and as to the family, it was already as long a flight of steps as would reach to an ordinary first floor, with a prospect (so the gossips said) of more in the distance. Susan was a Wesleyan Methodist—many may think, more the pity: but she neither disliked church, nor called it steeple-house: only, forasmuch as Hagglesfield was blessed with a sporting parson, the chief reminders of whose presence in the parish were strifes perpetual about dues and tithes, it is little blame or wonder, if the starving sheep went anywhither else for pasturage and water. So, then, Susan was a good mother, a kind neighbour, a religious, humble-minded Christian: is it not a comfort now to know that the gold was poured into her lap, and that she hallowed her good luck by prayers and praises?



I judge it worth while stepping over to Hagglesfield for a couple of minutes, to find out how she used that gold, and made the crock a blessing. Susan first thought of her debts: so, to every village shop around, I fear they were not a few, which had kindly given her credit, some for weeks, some for months, and more than one for a year, the happy house-wife went to pay in full; and not this only, but with many thanks, to press a little present upon each, for well-timed help in her adversity.

Page 109

The next thought was near akin to it: to take out of pawn divers valued articles, two or three of which had been her mother's; for Reuben's lameness, poor man, kept him much out of work, and the childer came so quick, and ate so fast, and wore out such a sight of shoes, that, but for an occasional appeal to Mrs. Quarles—it was her one fair feature this—they must long ago have been upon the parish: now, however, all the ancestral articles were redeemed, and honour no doubt with them.

Thirdly, Susan went to her minister in best bib and tucker, and humbly begged leave to give a guinea to the school; and she hoped his reverence wouldn't be above accepting a turkey and chine, as a small token of her gratitude to him for many consolations: it pleased me much to hear that the good man had insisted upon Susan and her husband coming to eat it with him the next day at noon.

Fourthly, Susan prudently set to work, and rigged out the whole family in tidy clothes, with a touch of mourning upon each for poor Aunt Bridget, and unhappy brother Simon; while the fifthly, sixthly, and to conclude, were concerned in a world of notable and useful schemes, with a strong resolution to save as much as possible for schooling and getting out the children.

It was wonderful to see how much good was in that gold, how large a fund of blessing was hidden in that crock: Reuben Scott gained health, the family were fed, clad, taught; Susan grew in happiness at least as truly as in girth; and Hagglesfield beheld the goodness of that store, whose curse had startled all Hurstley-cum-Piggesworth.

But also at Hurstley now are found its consequential blessings.

We must take another peep at Roger and sweet Grace; they, and Ben too, and Jonathan, and Jonathan's master, may all have cause to thank an overruling Providence, for blessing on the score of Bridget's crock. Only before I come to that, I wish to be dull a little hereabouts, and moralize: the reader may skip it, if he will—but I do not recommend him so to do.

For, evermore in the government of God, good groweth out of evil: and, whether man note the fact or not, Providence, with secret care, doth vindicate itself. There is justice done continually, even on this stage of trial, though many pine and murmur: substantial retribution, even in this poor dislocated world of wrong, not seldom overtakes the sinner, not seldom encourages the saint. Encourages? yea, and punishes: blessing him with kind severity; teaching him to know himself a mere bad root, if he be not grafted on his God; proving that the laws which govern life are just, and wise, and kind; showing him that a man's own heart's desire, if fulfilled, would probably tend to nothing short of sin, sorrow, and calamity; that many seeming goods are withheld, because they are evils in disguise; and many seeming ills allowed, because they are masqueraded blessings; and demonstrating, as in this strange tale, that the unrighteous Mammon is a cruel

master, a foul tempter, a pestilent destroyer of all peace, and a teeming source of both world's misery.

Page 110

Listen to the sayings of the Wisest King of men:

“As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more: but the righteous is an everlasting foundation.”

“The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked cometh in his stead.”

“He that trusteth in his riches shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a branch.”

“Better is a little with righteousness, than great revenues without right.”

“The wicked shall be a ransom for the righteous, and the transgressor for the upright.”

“A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children’s children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just.”

CHAPTER LI.

POPULARITY.

THE storm is lulled: the billows of temptation have ebbed away from shore, and the clouds of adversity have flown to other skies.

“The winter is past; the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear upon the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land: the fig-tree putteth forth his green figs, and the blossoms of the vine smell sweetly. Arise, and come away.”

Yesterday’s trial, and its unlooked-for issue, have raised Roger Acton to the rank of hero. The town’s excitement is intense: and the little inn, where he and Grace had spent the night in gratitude and prayerful praise, is besieged by carriages full of lords and gentlemen, eager to see and speak with Roger.

Humbly and reverently, yet preserving an air of quiet self-possession, the labourer received their courteous kindnesses; and acquitted himself of what may well be called the honours of that levee, with a dignity native to the true-born Briton, from the time of Caractacus at Rome to our own.

But if Roger was a demi-god, Grace was at the least a goddess; she charmed all hearts with her modest beauty. Back with the shades of night, and the prison-funeral of Jennings, fled envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness; the elderly sisterhood of Hurstley, not to be out of a fashion set by titled dames, hastened to acknowledge her perfections; Calumny was shamed, and hid his face; the uncles, aunts, and cousins of the hill-top yonder, were glad to hold their tongues, and bite their nails in peace: Farmer

Floyd and his Mrs. positively came with peace-offerings—some sausage-meat, elder-wine, jam, and other dainties, which were to them the choicest sweets of life: and as for Jonathan, he never felt so proud of Grace in all his life before; the handsome fellow stood at least a couple of inches taller.

Honest Ben Burke, too, that most important witness—whose coming was as Blucher's at Waterloo, and secured the well-earned conquest of the day—though it must be confessed that his appearance was something of the satyr, still had he been Phoebus Apollo in person, he would scarcely have excited sincerer admiration. More than one fair creature sketched his unkempt head, and loudly wished that its owner was a bandit; more than one bright eye discovered beauty in his open countenance—though a little soap and water might have made it more distinguishable. Well—well—honest Ben—they looked, and wisely looked, at the frank and friendly mind hidden under that rough carcase, and little wonder that they loved it.

Page 111

Now, to all this stream of hearty English sympathy, the kind and proper feeling of young Sir John resolved to give a right direction. His fashionable friends were gone, except Silliphant and Poynter, both good fellows in the main, and all the better for the absence (among others) of that padded old debauchee, Sir Richard Hunt, knight of the order of St. Sapphira—that frivolous inanity, Lord George Pypp—and that professed gentleman of gallantry, Mr. Harry Mynton. The follies and the vices had decamped—had scummed off, so to speak—leaving the more rectified spirits behind them, to recover at leisure, as best they might, from all that ferment of dissipation. So, then, there was now neither ridicule, nor interest, to stand in the way of a young and wealthy heir's well-timed schemes of generosity.

Well-timed they were, and Sir John knew it, though calculation seldom had a footing in his warm and heedless heart; but he could not shut his eyes to the fact, that the state of feeling among his hereditary labourers was any thing but pleasant. In truth, owing to the desperate malpractices of Quarles and Jennings, perhaps no property in the kingdom had got so ill a name as Hurstley: discontent reigned paramount; incendiary fires had more than once occurred; threatening notices, very ill-spelt, and signed by one *soi-disant* Captain Blood, had been dropped, in dead of winter, at the door-sills of the principal farmers; and all the other fruits of long-continued penury, extortion, and misgovernment, were hanging ripe upon the bough—a foul and fatal harvest.

Therefore, did the kind young landlord, who had come to live among his own peasantry, resolve, not more nobly than wisely, to seize an opportunity so good as this, for restoring, by a stroke of generous policy, peace and content on his domain. No doubt, the baronet rejoiced, as well he might, at the honourable acquittal of innocence, and the mysteries of murder now cleared up; he made small secret of his satisfaction at the doom of Jennings; and, as for Bridget Quarles, by all he could learn of her from tenants' wives, and other female dependants, he had no mind to wish her back again, or to think her fate ill-timed: nevertheless, he was even more glad of an occasion to vindicate his own good feelings; and prove to the world that bailiff Simon Jennings was a very opposite character to landlord Sir John Devereux Vincent.

To carry out his plan, he determined to redress all wrongs within one day, and to commence by bringing "honest Roger" in triumph home again to Hurstley; following the suggestion of Baron Parker, to make some social compensation for his wrongs. With this view, Sir John took counsel of the county-town authorities, and it was agreed unanimously, excepting only one dissenting vote—a rich and radical Quaker, one Isaac Sneak, grocer, and of the body corporate, who refused to lose one day's service of his shopmen, and thereby (I rejoice to add) succeeded in

Page 112

getting rid of fifteen good annual customers—it was agreed, then, and arranged that the morrow should be a public holiday. All Sir John's own tenantry, as well as Squire Ryle's, and some of other neighbouring magnates, were to have a day's wages without work, on the easy conditions of attending the procession in their smartest trim, and of banqueting at Hurstley afterwards. So, then, the town-band was ordered to be in attendance next morning by eleven at the Swan, a lot of old election colours were shaken from their dust and cobwebs, the bell-ringers engaged, vasty preparations of ale and beef made at Hurstley Hall—an ox to be roasted whole upon the terrace, and a plum-pudding already in the cauldron of two good yards in circumference—and all that every body hoped for that night, was a fine May-day to-morrow.

CHAPTER LII.

ROGER AT THE SWAN.

MEANWHILE, eventide came on: the crowd of kindly gentle-folks had gone their several ways; and Roger Acton found himself (through Sir John's largess) at free quarters in the parlour of the Swan, with Grace by his side, and many of his mates in toil and station round him.

"Grace," said her father on a sudden, "Grace—my dear child—come hither." She stood in all her loveliness before him. Then he took her hand, looked up at her affectionately, and leaned back in the old oak chair.

"Hear me, mates and neighbours; to my own girl, Grace, under God, I owe my poor soul's welfare. I have nothing, would I had, to give her in return:" and the old man (he looked ten years older for his six weeks, luck, and care, and trouble)—the old man could not get on at all with what he had to say—something stuck in his throat—but he recovered, and added cheerily, with an abrupt and rustic archness, "I don't know, mates, whether after all I can't give the good girl something: I can give her—away! Come hither, Jonathan Floyd; you are a noble fellow, that stood by us in adversity, and are almost worthy of my angel Grace." And he joined their hands.

"Give us thy blessing too, dear father!"

They kneeled at his feet on the sanded floor, in the midst of their kinsfolk and acquaintance, and he, stretching forth his hands like a patriarch, looked piously up to heaven, and blessed them there.

“Grace,” he added, “and Jonathan my son, I need not part with you—I could not. I have heard great tidings. To-morrow you shall know how kind and good Sir John is: God bless him! and send poor England’s children of the soil many masters like him.

Page 113

“And now, mates, one last word from Roger Acton; a short word, and a simple, that you may not forget it. My sin was love of money: my punishment, its possession. Mates, remember Him who sent you to be labourers, and love the lot He gives you. Be thankful if His blessing on your industry keeps you in regular work and fair wages: ask no more from God of this world’s good. Believe things kindly of the gentle-folks, for many sins are heaped upon their heads, whereof their hearts are innocent. Never listen to the counsels of a servant, who takes away his master’s character: for of such are the poor man’s worst oppressors. Be satisfied with all your lowliness on earth, and keep your just ambitions for another world. Flee strong liquors and ill company. Nurse no heated hopes, no will-o’-the-wisp bright wishes: rather let your warmest hopes be temperately these—health, work, wages: and as for wishing, mates, wish any thing you will—sooner than to find a crock of gold.”

CHAPTER LIII.

ROGER’S TRIUMPH.

THE steeples rang out merrily, full chime; High street was gay with streamers; the town-band busily assembling; a host of happy urchins from emancipated schools, were shouting in all manner of keys all manner of gleeful noises: every body seemed a-stir.

A proud man that day was Roger Acton; not of his deserts—they were worse than none, he knew it; not of the procession—no silly child was he, to be caught with toy and tinsel; God wot, he was meek enough in self—and as for other pride, he knew from old electioneerings, what a humbling thing is triumph.

But when he saw from the windows of the Swan, those crowds of new-made friends trooping up in holiday suits with flags, and wands, and corporation badges—when the band for a commencement struck up the heart-stirring hymn ‘God save the Queen,’—when the horsemen, and carriages, and gigs, and carts assembled—when the baronet’s own barouche and four, dashing up to the door, had come from Hurstley Hall for *him*—when Sir John, the happiest of the happy, alighting with his two friends, had displaced them for Roger and Grace, while the kind gentlemen took horse, and headed the procession—when Ben Burke (as clean as soap could get him, and bedecked in new attire) was ordered to sit beside Jonathan in the rumble-tumble—when the cheering, and the merry-going bells, and the quick-march ‘British Grenadiers,’ rapidly succeeding the national anthem—when all these tokens of a generous sympathy smote upon his ears, his eyes, his heart, Roger Acton wept aloud—he wept for very pride and joy: proud and glad was he that day of his country, of his countrymen, of his generous landlord, of his gentle Grace, of his vindicated innocence, and of God, “who had done so great things for him.”

So, the happy cavalcade moved on, horse and foot, and carts and carriages, through the noisy town, along the thronged high road, down the quiet lanes that lead to Hurstley; welcomed at every cottage-door with boisterous huzzas, and adding to its ranks at every corner. And so they reached the village, where the band struck up,

Page 114

“See the conquering hero comes,
Sound the trumpets, beat the drums!”

Is not this returning like a nabob, Roger? Hath not God blest thee through the crock of gold at last, in spite of sin?

There, at the entrance by the mile-stone, stood Mary and the babes, with a knot of friends around her, bright with happiness; on the top of it was perched son Tom, waving the blue and silver flag of Hurstley, and acting as fugleman to a crowd of uproarious cheerers; and beside it, on the bank, sat Sarah Stack, overcome with joy, and sobbing like a gladsome Niobe.

And the village bells went merrily; every cottage was gay with spring garlands, and each familiar face lit up with looks of kindness; Hark! hark!—“Welcome, honest Roger, welcome home again!” they shout: and the patereroes on the lawn thunder a salute; “welcome, honest neighbour;”—and up went, at bright noon, Tom Stableboy’s dozen of rockets wrapped around with streamers of glazed calico—“welcome, welcome!”

Good Mr. Evans stood at the door of fine old Hurstley, in wig, and band, and cassock, to receive back his wandering sheep that had been lost: and the school-children, ranged upon the steps, thrillingly sang out the beautiful chant, “I will arise, and go to my Father, and will say unto Him, ‘Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son!’”

Every head was uncovered, and every cheek ran down with tears.

CHAPTER LIV.

SIR JOHN’S PARTING SPEECH.

THEN Sir John, standing up in the barouche at his own hall-door, addressed the assembled multitude:

“Friends, we are gathered here to-day, in the cause of common justice and brotherly kindness. There are many of you whom I see around me, my tenants, neighbours, or dependants, who have met with wrongs and extortions heretofore, but you all shall be righted in your turn; trust me, men, the old hard times are gone, your landlord lives among you, and his first care shall be to redress your many grievances, paying back the gains of your oppressor.”

“God bless you, sir, God bless you!” was the echo from many a gladdened heart.

“But before I hear your several claims in turn, which shall be done to-morrow, our chief duty this day is to recompense an honest man for all that he has innocently suffered. It

is five-and-thirty years, as I find by my books, on this very first of May, since Roger Acton first began to work at Hurstley; till within this now past evil month, he has always been the honest steady fellow that you knew him from his youth: what say you, men, to having as a bailiff one of yourselves; a kind and humble man, a good man, the best hand in the parish in all the works of your vocation—a steady mind, an honest heart—what say ye all to Roger Acton?”

There was a whirlwind of tumultuous applause.

Page 115

“Moreover, men, though you all, each according to his measure and my means, shall meet with liberal justice for your lesser ills, yet we must all remember that Bailiff Acton here had nearly died a felon’s death, through that bad man Jennings and the unlucky crock of gold; in addition, extortion has gone greater lengths with him, than with any other on the property; I find that for the last twenty years, Roger Acton has regularly paid to that monster of oppression who is now dead, a double rent—four guineas instead of forty shillings. I desire, as a good master, to make amends for the crimes of my wicked servant; therefore in this bag, Bailiff Acton, is returned to you all the rent you ever paid;” [Roger could not speak for tears;]—“and your cottage repaired and fitted, with an acre round it, is yours and your children’s, rent-free for ever.”

“Huzzah, huzzah!” roared Ben from the dickey, in a gush of disinterested joy; and then, like an experienced toast-master, he marshalled in due hip, hip, hip order, the shouts of acclamation that rent the air. In an interval of silence, Sir John added,

“As for you, good-hearted fellow, if you will only mend your speech, I’ll make you one of my keepers; you shall call yourself licensed poacher, if you choose.”

“Blessings on your honour! you’ve made an honest man o’ me.”

“And now, Jonathan Floyd, I have one word to say to you, sir. I hear you are to marry our Roger’s pretty Grace.” Jonathan appeared like a sheep in livery.

“You must quit my service.” Jonathan was quite alarmed. “Do you suppose, Master Jonathan, that I can house at Hurstley, before a Lady Vincent comes amongst us to keep the gossips quiet, such a charming little wife as that, and all her ruddy children?”

It was Grace’s turn to feel confused, so she “looked like a rose in June,” and blushed all over, as Charles Lamb’s *Astraea* did, down to the ankle.

“Yes, Jonathan, you and I must part, but we part good friends: you have been a noble lover: may you make the girl a good and happy husband! Jennings has been robbing me and those about me for years: it is impossible to separate specially my rights from his extortions: but all, as I have said, shall be satisfied: meanwhile, his hoards are mine. I appropriate one half of them for other claimants; the remaining half I give to Grace Floyd as dower. Don’t be a fool, Jonathan, and blubber; look to your Grace there, she’s fainting—you can set up landlord for yourself, do you hear?—for I make yours honestly, as much as Roger found in his now lucky Crock of Gold.”

Poor Roger, quite unmanned, could only wave his hat, and—the curtain falls amid thunders of applause.

[Footnote A: It has been stated as a fact, that a certain Lady L—— S——, in her last interview with a young man, condemned to death for the brutal murder of his

sweetheart, presented him with a white camellia, as a token of eternal peace, which the gallant gentleman actually wore at the gallows in his button-hole.]