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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VAST ABYSS ***

George Manville Fenn

"The Vast Abyss"

Chapter One.

"I wish I wasn't such a fool!"

Tom Blount said this to himself as he balanced that self upon a high stool at a desk in his uncle's office in Gray's Inn. There was a big book lying open, one which he had to study, but it did not interest him; and though he tried very hard to keep his attention fixed upon its learned words, invaluable to one who would some day bloom into a family solicitor, that book would keep on forming pictures that were not illustrations of legal practice in the courts of law. For there one moment was the big black pond on Elleston Common, where the water lay so still and deep under the huge elms, and the fat tench and eels every now and then sent up bubbles of air, dislodged as they disturbed the bottom.

At another time it would be the cricket-field in summer, or the football on the common in winter, or the ringing ice on the winding river, with the skates flashing as they sent the white powder flying before the wind.

Or again, as he stumbled through the opinions of the judge in "Coopendale *versus* Drabb's Exors.," the old house and garden would stand out from the page like a miniature seen on the ground-glass of a camera; and Tom Blount sighed and his eyes grew dim as he thought of the old happy days in the pleasant home. For father and mother both had passed away to their rest; the house was occupied by another tenant; and he, Tom Blount, told himself that he ought to be very grateful to Uncle James for taking him into his office, to make a man of him by promising to have him articled if, during his year of probation, he proved himself worthy.

"I wouldn't mind its being so dull," he thought, "or my aunt not liking me, or Sam being so disagreeable, if I could get on—but I can't. Uncle's right, I suppose, in what he says. He ought to know. I'm only a fool; and it doesn't seem to matter how I try, I can't get on."

Just then a door opened, letting in a broad band of sunshine full of dancing motes, and at the same time Samuel Brandon, a lad of about the same age as Tom, but rather slighter of build, but all the same more manly of aspect. He was better dressed too, and wore a white flower in his button-hole, and a very glossy hat. One glove was off, displaying a signet-ring, and he brought with him into the dingy office a strong odour of scent, whose source was probably the white pocket-handkerchief prominently displayed outside his breast-pocket.

"Hullo, bumpkin!" he cried. "How's Tidd getting on?"

"Very slowly," said Tom. "I wish you'd try and explain what this bit means."

"Likely! Think I'm going to find you in brains. Hurry on and peg away. Shovel it in, and think you are going to be Lord Chancellor some day. Guv'nor in his room?"

"No; he has gone on down to the Court. Going out?"

"Yes; up the river—Maidenhead. You heard at the breakfast, didn't you?"

Tom shook his head.

"I didn't hear," he said sadly.

"You never hear anything or see anything. I never met such a dull, chuckle-headed chap as you are. Why don't you wake up?"

"I don't know; I do try," said Tom sadly.

"You don't know!—you don't know anything. I don't wonder at the governor grumbling at you. You'll have to pull up your boots if you expect to be articled here, and so I tell you. There, I'm off. I've got to meet the mater at Paddington at

twelve. I say, got any money?"

"No," said Tom sadly.

"Tchah! you never have. There, pitch into Tidd. You've got your work cut out, young fellow. No letters for me?"

"No. Yes, there is—one."

"No!—yes! Well, you are a pretty sort of a fellow. Where is it?"

"I laid it in uncle's room."

"What! Didn't I tell you my letters were not to go into his room? Of all the—"

Tom sighed, though he did not hear the last words, for his cousin hurried into the room on their right, came back with a letter, hurried out, and the door swung to again.

"It's all through being such a fool, I suppose," muttered the boy. "Why am I not as clever and quick as Sam is? He's as sharp as uncle; but uncle doesn't seem a bit like poor mother was."

Just then Tom Blount made an effort to drive away all thoughts of the past by planting his elbows on the desk, doubling his fists, and resting his puckered-up brow upon them, as he plunged once more into the study of the legal work.

But the thoughts would come flitting by, full of sunshiny memories of the father who died a hero's death, fighting as a doctor the fell disease which devastated the country town; and of the mother who soon after followed her husband, after requesting her brother to do what he could to help and protect her son.

Then the thought of his mother's last prayer came to him as it often did—that he should try his best to prove himself worthy of his uncle's kindness by studying hard.

"And I do—I do—I do," he burst out aloud, passionately, "only it is so hard; and, as uncle says, I am such a fool."

"You call me, Blount?" said a voice, and a young old-looking man came in from the next office.

"I!—call? No, Pringle," said Tom, colouring up.

"You said something out loud, sir, and I thought you called."

"I—I—"

"Oh, I see, sir; you was speaking a bit out of your book. Not a bad way to get it into your head. You see you think it and hear it too."

"It's rather hard to me, I'm afraid," said Tom, with the puzzled look intensifying in his frank, pleasant face.

"Hard, sir!" said the man, smiling, and wiping the pen he held on the tail of his coat, though it did not require it, and then he kept on holding it up to his eye as if there were a hair or bit of grit between the nibs. "Yes, I should just think it is hard. Nutshells is nothing to it. Just like bits of granite stones as they mend the roads with. They won't fit nowhere till you wear 'em and roll 'em down. The law is a hard road and no mistake."

"And—and I don't think I'm very clever at it, Pringle."

"Clever! You'd be a rum one, sir, if you was. Nobody ever masters it all. They pretend to, but it would take a thousand men boiled down and double distilled to get one as could regularly tackle it. It's an impossibility, sir."

"What!" said Tom, with plenty of animation now. "Why, look at all the great lawyers!"

"So I do, sir, and the judges too, and what do I see? Don't they all think different ways about things, and upset one another? Don't you get thinking you're not clever because you don't get on fast. As I said before, you'd be a rum one if you did."

"But my cousin does," said Tom.

"Him? Ck!" cried the clerk, with a derisive laugh. "Why, it's my belief that you know more law already than Mr Sam does, and what I say to you is—Look out! the guv'nor!"

The warning came too late, for Mr James Brandon entered the outer office suddenly, and stopped short, to look sharply from one to the other—a keen-eyed, well-dressed man of five-and-forty; and as his brows contracted he said sharply—

"Then you've finished the deed, Pringle?" just as the clerk was in the act of passing through the door leading to the room where he should have been at work.

"The deed, sir?—no, not quite, sir. Shan't be long, sir."

"You shall be long—out of work, Mr Pringle, if you indulge in the bad habit of idling and gossiping as soon as my back's turned."

Pringle shot back to his desk, the door swung to, and Mr James Brandon turned to his nephew, with his face looking double of aspect—that is to say, the frown was still upon his brow, while a peculiarly tight-looking smile appeared upon his lips, which seemed to grow thinner and longer, and as if a parenthesis mark appeared at each end to shut off the

smile as something illegal.

“I am glad you are mastering your work so well, Tom,” he said softly.

“Mastering it, uncle!” said Tom, with an uneasy feeling of doubt raised by his relative’s look. “I—I’m afraid I am getting on very slowly.”

“But you can find time to idle and hinder my clerk.”

“He had only just come in, uncle, and—”

“That will do, sir,” said the lawyer, with the smile now gone. “I’ve told you more than once, sir, that you were a fool, and now I repeat it. You’ll never make a lawyer. Your thick, dense brain has only one thought in it, and that is how you can idle and shirk the duty that I for your mother’s sake have placed in your way. What do you expect, sir?—that I am going to let you loaf about my office, infecting those about you, and trying to teach your cousin your lazy ways? I don’t know what I could have been thinking about to take charge of such a great idle, careless fellow.”

“Not careless, uncle,” pleaded the lad. “I do try, but it is so hard.”

“Silence, sir! Try!—not you. I meant to do my duty by you, and in due time to impoverish myself by paying for your articles—nearly a hundred pounds, sir. But don’t expect it. I’m not going to waste my hard-earned savings upon a worthless, idle fellow. Lawyer! Pish! You’re about fit for a shoeblack, sir, or a carter. You’ll grow into as great an idiot as your father was before you. What my poor sister could have seen in him I don’t—”

Bang!

Chapter Two.

The loudly-closed door of the private office cut short Mr James Brandon’s speech, and he had passed out without looking round, or he would have seen that his nephew looked anything but a fool as he sat there with his fists clenched and his eyes flashing.

“How dare he call my dear dead father an idiot!” he said in a low fierce voice through his compressed teeth. “Oh, I can’t bear it—I won’t bear it. If I were not such a miserable coward I should go off and be a soldier, or a sailor, or anything so that I could be free, and not dependent on him. I’ll go. I must go. I cannot bear it,” he muttered; and then with a feeling of misery and despair rapidly increasing, he bent down over his book again, for a something within him seemed to whisper—“It would be far more cowardly to give up and go.”

Then came again the memory of his mother’s words, and he drew his breath through his teeth as if he were in bodily as well as mental pain; and forcing himself to read, he went on studying the dreary law-book till, in his efforts to understand the author, his allusions, quotations, footnotes, and references, he grew giddy, and at last the words grew blurred, and he had to read sentences over and over again to make sense of them, which slid out of his mind like so much quicksilver.

Lunch-time came, and Pringle crept through the place where he was seated, glanced at Mr Brandon’s door, stepped close up, and whispered—

“I’m going to get my dinner. Don’t look downhearted about a wigging, Mr Tom. It’s nothing when you’re used to it.”

“Ahem!” came from the inner office, and Pringle made a grimace like a pantomime clown, suggesting mock horror and fear, as he glided to the outer door, where he turned, looked back, and then disappeared; while, as soon as he was alone, Tom took out a paper of sandwiches, opened it, and began to eat, it being an understood thing that he should not leave the office all day.

But those sandwiches, good enough of their kind, tasted as if they were made of sawdust, and he had hard work to get them down, and then only by the help of a glass of water from the table-filter, standing at the side of the office—kept, Pringle said, to revive unfortunate clients whose affairs were going to the bad. Every now and then a cough was heard from the inner office, and Tom hurried over his meal in dread lest his uncle should appear before he had finished. Then, as soon as the last was eaten, and the paper thrust into the waste-basket, the boy attacked his book once more, and had hardly recommenced when the inner office door opened, and his uncle appeared, looking at him sharply—ready, Tom thought, to find fault with him for being so long over his midday meal.

But there was nothing to complain about.

“I’m going to have my lunch,” he said sharply, “and I may not come back, though all the same I may. Mind that man Pringle goes on with his work, and don’t let me have any fault to find about your reading. When you go home tell them to give you something to eat, for there will be no regular dinner to-day, as I shall be out. Take home any letters that may come, in case I don’t look in.”

“All right, uncle.”

“And don’t speak in that free-and-easy, offhand, unbusiness-like manner. Say ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘No, sir,’ if you are not too stupid to remember.”

He put on his hat and went out, leaving the boy feeling as if a fresh sting had been planted in his breast, and his brow wrinkled up more than ever, while his heart grew more heavy in his intense yearning for somebody who seemed to care for him, if ever so little.

Five minutes later Pringle came back, looking shining and refreshed. As he entered he gave Tom an inquiring look, and jerked his head sidewise toward the inner office.

Tom was not too stupid to understand the dumb language of that look and gesture.

"No," he replied. "He went out five minutes ago, and said that very likely he wouldn't be back."

"And that you were to take any letters home after office hours?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"How did I know!" said the clerk with a chuckle; "because I've been caught before. That means that he'll be sure to look in before very long to see whether we are busy. You'd better read hard, sir, and don't look up when he comes. Pst! 'ware hawk!"

He slipped into the little office, and his stool made a scraping noise, while, almost before Tom had settled down to his work, the handle of the outer door turned and his uncle bustled in.

"Here, did I leave my umbrella?" he said sharply.

"I did not see it, uncle—sir," replied Tom, jumping from his stool.

"Keep your place, sir, and go on with your work. Don't be so fond of seizing any excuse to get away from your books. Humph, yes," he muttered, as he reached into his room and took up the ivory-handled article from where it stood.

The next moment he was at the door of the clerk's office.

"By the way, Pringle, you had better go and have that deed stamped this afternoon if you get it done in time."

"Yes, sir," came back sharply, and the lawyer frowned, turned round, and went out once more.

The outer door had not closed a minute before the inner one opened, and Pringle's head appeared, but with its owner evidently on the alert, and ready to snatch it back again.

"Good-bye! Bless you!" he said aloud. "Pray take care of yourself, sir. You can bob back again if you like, but I shan't be out getting the deed stamped, because, as you jolly well know, it won't be done before this time to-morrow."

Pringle looked at Tom, smiled, and nodded.

"You won't tell him what I said, Mr Tom, I know. But I say, don't you leave your stool. You take my advice. Don't you give him a chance to row you again, because I can see how it hurts you."

Tom's lip quivered as he looked wistfully at the clerk.

"It's all right, sir. You just do what's c'rect, and you needn't mind anything. I ain't much account, but I do know that. I wouldn't stay another month, only there's reasons, you see, and places are easier to lose than find, 'specially when your last guv'nor makes a face with the corners of his lips down when any one asks for your character. Pst! look out. Here he is again."

For there was a step at the door, the handle rattled, and as Pringle disappeared, a quiet, grave-looking, middle-aged man stepped in.

"Do, Tom!" he said, as with an ejaculation of surprise the boy sprang from his stool and eagerly took the extended hand, but dropped it again directly, for there did not seem to be any warmth in the grasp. "Quite well, boy?"

"Yes, Uncle Richard," said Tom, rather sadly.

"That's right. Where's my brother?"

"He has gone out, sir, and said he might not return this afternoon."

"Felt I was coming perhaps," said the visitor. "Here, don't let me hinder you, my lad; he won't like you to waste time. Getting on with your law reading?"

The boy looked at him wistfully, and shook his head.

"Eh? No? But you must, my lad. You're no fool, you know, and you've got to be a clever lawyer before you've done."

Tom felt disposed to quote his other uncle's words as to his folly, but he choked down the inclination.

"There, I won't hinder you, my lad," continued the visitor. "I know what you busy London people are, and how we slow-going country folk get in your way. I only want to look at a Directory,—you have one I know."

"Yes, sir, in the other office. I'll fetch it."

The quiet, grey-haired, grave-looking visitor gave a nod as if of acquiescence, and Tom ran into the inner office, where he found that Pringle must have heard every word, for he was holding out the London Directory all ready.

"He must hear everything too when uncle goes on at me," thought Tom, as he took the Directory and returned Pringle's friendly nod.

"Tell him he ought to give you a tip."

Tom frowned, shook his head, and hurried back with the great red book.

"Hah, that's right, my boy," said the visitor. "There, I don't want to bother about taking off my gloves and putting on

my spectacles. Turn to the trades, and see if there are any lens-makers down.”

“Yes, sir, several,” said Tom, after a short search.

“Read ’em down, boy.”

Tom obeyed alphabetically till he came to D, and he had got as far as Dallmeyer when his visitor stopped him.

“That will do,” he said. “That’s the man I want. Address?”

Tom read this out, and the visitor said—

“Good; but write it down so that I don’t forget. It’s so easy to have things drop out of your memory.”

Tom obeyed, and the visitor took up the slip of paper, glanced at it, and nodded.

“That’s right. Nice clear hand, that one can read easily.”

“And Uncle James said my writing was execrable,” thought Tom.

“Good-bye for the present, boy. Tell your uncle I’ve been, and that I shall come on in time for dinner. Bye. Be a good boy, and stick to your reading.”

He nodded, shook hands rather coldly, and went out, leaving Tom looking wistfully after him with the big Directory in his hands.

“They neither of them like me,” he said to himself, feeling sadly depressed, when he started, and turned sharply round.

“On’y me, Mr Tom,” said the clerk. “I’ll take that. Directories always live in my office. I say, sir.”

“Yes, Pringle.”

“I used to wish I’d got a lot of rich old uncles, but I don’t now. Wouldn’t give tuppence a dozen for ’em. Ketched again!—All right, Mr Tom, sir; I’ll put it away.”

For the door opened once more, and their late visitor thrust in his head.

“Needn’t tell your uncle I shall come to-night.”

Pringle disappeared with the Directory, and Uncle Richard gazed after him in a grim way as he continued—

“Do you hear? Don’t tell him I shall come; and you needn’t mention that I said he wouldn’t want me, nor to his wife and boy neither. Bye.”

The door closed again, and the inner door opened, and Pringle’s head appeared once more.

“Nor we don’t neither, nor nobody else don’t. I say, Mr Tom, I thought it was the governor. Ever seen him before?”

“Only twice,” said Tom. “He has been abroad a great deal. He only came back to England just before dear mother—”

Tom stopped short, and Pringle nodded, looked very grave, and said softly—

“I know what you was going to say, Mr Tom.”

“And I saw him again,” continued the lad, trying to speak firmly, “when it was being settled that I was to come here to learn to be a lawyer. Uncle James wanted Uncle Richard to bring me up, but he wouldn’t, and said I should be better here.”

“Well, perhaps you are, Mr Tom, sir,” said Pringle thoughtfully. “I don’t know as I should care to live with him.”

“Nor I, Pringle, for—Here, I say, I don’t know why I tell you all this.”

Pringle grinned.

“More don’t I, sir. P’r’aps it’s because we both get into trouble together, and that makes people hang to one another. Steps again. Go it, sir.”

The clerk darted away, and Tom started leading once more; but the steps passed, and so did the long, dreary afternoon, with Tom struggling hard to master something before six o’clock came; and before the clock had done striking Pringle was ready to shut up and go.

“You’ll take the keys, sir,” he said. “Guv’nor won’t come back now. I’ve got well on with that deed, if he asks you when he comes home. Good-evening, sir.”

“Good-evening, Pringle,” said Tom; and ten minutes later he was on his way to his uncle’s house in Mornington Crescent, where he found dinner waiting for him, and though it was only cold, it was made pleasant by the handmaid’s smile.

Tom began a long evening all alone over another law-book, and at last, with his head aching, and a dull, weary sense of depression, he went up to the bedroom which he shared with his cousin, jumped into his own bed as soon as he could

to rest his aching head, and lay listening to a street band playing airs that sounded depressing and sorrowful in the extreme, and kept him awake till he felt as if he could never drop off, and cease hearing the rumble of omnibuses and carts.

Then all at once Mr Tidd came and sat upon his head, and made it ache ten times worse, or so it seemed—Mr Tidd being the author of one of the books his uncle had placed in his hands to read.

He tried to force him off, but he would not stir, only glared down at him laughing loud, and then mockingly, till the torture seemed too much to be borne; and in an agony of misery and despair he tried to escape from the pressure, and to assure his torturer that he would strive hard to master the book. But not a word could he utter, only lie there panting, till the eyes that glared looked close down into his, and a voice said—

"Now then, wake up, stupid. Don't be snoring like that."

Chapter Three.

Tom Blount started up in bed confused and staring. He was only half awake, and it was some time before he could realise that it was his cousin, who had come back from his trip boisterous and elated, and who had been playing him some trick as he lay there asleep.

"Well, what are you staring at, old torpid?" cried Sam, as he now began to divest himself slowly of his coat and vest.

"I—that is—have been asleep," stammered Tom.

"Asleep? Yes, and snoring loud enough to bring the plaster off the ceiling. Why, you must have been gorging yourself like a boa-constrictor, and been sleeping it off. Come, wake up, bumpkin, you're half stupid now."

"I'm quite awake, Sam. Had a pleasant day? I say, were you sitting on my head?"

"Was I doing what?" cried Sam. "No, I wasn't; but you want some one to sit upon you to bring you to your senses. Wake up; I want to talk."

Tom tried to rub the last traces of his drowsiness out of his eyes, and now sat up watching his cousin, who, after taking off collar and tie, unfastened his braces, and then, as if moved by a sudden thought, he tied the aforesaid suspenders about his waist. Then, grinning to himself, he stooped down, untied his Oxford shoes, pushed them off, took up one, and shouting "*Play*!" bowled it sharply at Tom where he sat up in bed on the other side of the room.

It was a bad shot, for the shoe whizzed by the lad's side, and struck the scroll-work of the iron bedstead with a sharp rap, and fell on the pillow.

"Play again!" cried Sam, and he sent the second shoe spinning with a vicious energy at the still confused and sleepy boy.

This time the aim was excellent, and Tom was too helpless to avoid the missile, which struck him heavily, the edge of the heel catching him on the chin, and making him wince.

"Well played—well bowled!" cried Sam, laughing boisterously. "I say, bumpkin, that's the way to wake you up."

Tom's face grew dark, and the hand which he held to his injured face twitched as if the fingers were trying to clench themselves and form a fist for their owner's defence; but the boy did not stir, only sat looking at his cousin, who now struck an attitude, made two or three feints, and then dashed forward hitting out sharply, catching Tom in the chest, and knocking him backward so heavily that it was his crown now that struck the scroll-work of the bed.

"That's your sort, countryman," cried Sam. "How do you like that style?"

"Don't! Be quiet, will you," said the boy in a suffocated voice, as he sat up once more.

"What for?" cried Sam. "Here, get up and have a round with the gloves. I feel as if I can hit to-night. It's the rowing. My arms are as hard as wood."

"No; be quiet," said Tom huskily. "They'll hear you down-stairs."

"Let 'em," said Sam, chuckling to himself as he dragged open a drawer, and brought out a couple of pairs of boxing-gloves, two of which he hurled with all his might like a couple of balls at his cousin's head.

But the boy was wide-awake now, and caught each glove in turn, letting it fall afterwards upon the bed before him.

"Now then, shove 'em on," cried Sam, as he thrust his own hands into the gloves he held. "Look sharp, or I'll knock you off the bed."

"No, no," cried Tom; "don't be so absurd. How can I when I'm undressed?"

"Put on your trousers then. D'yer hear? Be quick now, or you'll have it."

"You'll have uncle hear you directly if you don't be quiet."

"You'll have him hear you go off that bed lump if you don't jump out and get ready. Now then, are you going to begin?"

"No," said Tom sturdily. "I'm going to sleep."

He snuggled down in his place and drew the clothes up to his ear, but they did not stay there, for Sam began his attack, bounding forward and bringing the padded gloves *thud*, *thud*, down upon his cousin's head, as if bent upon driving it down into the pillow.

Tom sat up again quickly with his teeth set, and his eyes flashing.

"Will you be quiet?" he cried in a low, half-suffocated voice.

"Will you put on those gloves?" cried Sam.

"No; I'm not going to make such a fool of myself at this time of night," said Tom.

"Lie down then," cried Sam, and hitting out again cleverly he knocked his cousin back on to the pillow, following it up with other blows, each having the same result, for Tom struggled up again and again.

"Now, will you get up?" cried Sam.

"No," said Tom hoarsely; and down he went once more.

"You'd better jump up and do as I tell you, or it will be the worse for you."

"You'd better leave me alone before you get my temper up."

"Temper, bumpkin? Yes, you'd better show your teeth. Take that, and that, and that."

Tom did take them—heavy blows delivered with the soft gloves, but all falling hard enough to inflict a good deal of pain, and make the boy draw his breath hard.

"That's your sort," continued Sam, who danced about by the side of the bed, skilfully delivering his blows upon his defenceless cousin, and revelling in the pleasure he found in inflicting pain. "That'll knock some sense into your thick head, and so will that, and that, and that, and—Oh!"

Sam had gone too far, for after trying all he could to avoid the blows, Tom suddenly gathered himself together and shot out of bed full at his cousin's breast, sending him down heavily in a sitting position first and then backwards, so that his head struck heavily against the iron leg of his own bedstead.

Then, thoroughly up now, Tom flung himself upon his cousin, tore off his gloves, and stuffed them under his bed-clothes, and was looking for the others, when he was sent down in turn by Sam.

"You savage beast!" cried the latter. "I'll teach you to do that;" and flinging himself on Tom's chest, he nipped him with his knees, and began to belabour him with his fists.

Then a fierce struggle began. Sam was jerked off, and for a few moments there was an angry up-and-down wrestle, ending in Sam becoming the undermost, with Tom occupying his position in turn, and holding his cousin down just as the bedroom door was opened, and Mr James Brandon entered in his dressing-gown, and holding up a candle above his head.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he cried angrily, as Tom sprang up and darted into bed.

"Yes, you may well say that, father," cried Sam, rising slowly, and beginning to try and fasten the neck of his shirt, but vainly, for the button-hole was torn and the button off. "If that country wild beast is to stop here I shan't sleep in the same room."

Sam's father turned to Tom, who now lay in bed staring, mentally stunned by the tone his cousin had taken.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "How dare you, sir!"

"Why, he began at me, uncle, while I was asleep, and—"

"Silence, sir! I will not have the calm and repose of my house disturbed by such disgraceful conduct. Past twelve o'clock, you ought to be asleep, and here is a regular riot in the place."

"There, I told you how it would be," said Sam in an ill-used, remonstrative tone.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, but no more, for a hot feeling of indignation forced him to be silent, stung as he was by the injustice of the disturbance being laid at his door.

"*Oh*! indeed!" cried his uncle. "It is scandalous, sir. Out of charity and compassion for your forlorn state, I give you a home and brilliant prospects, and you set yourself to work in every way possible to make me repent my kindness. It is abominable. You make friends with the servants; you are idle and stupid and careless beyond belief; and when you come back at night to my peaceful quiet home, you must introduce your low, blackguardly habits, and begin quarrelling and fighting with your cousin."

"I can't speak—I won't speak," said Tom to himself, as he set his teeth hard. "And as for Sam, I'll—"

He had not time to say to himself what he would do to his cousin, for his uncle had worked himself up now to deliver a sounding tirade upon his base, disgraceful conduct, finding plenty of epithets suitable as he considered for the occasion, and making the poor lad writhe as he lay there, hot and panting beneath the undeserved reproaches till he was quite out of breath; while, to make matters worse, Sam put in a word or two in a murmuring tone—"He knew how it would be," and "It was of no use for him to speak," and the like. And all the time Tom's indignation made him feel more stubbornly determined to hold his peace.

"It's of no use for me to complain," he thought. "Uncle hates me, and he will not believe, and it's too hard to bear."

“Once for all, sir,” cried his uncle, “remember this—if you stay here there must be a marked improvement in your conduct, both as to your work at the office and your behaviour in my house. I won’t have it—do you hear? I won’t have it. That sulky way too won’t go down with me. Here you, Sam, undress and get to bed, and if he interferes with you again, call me at once; but if I do come up, unwilling as I should be, I shall feel called upon, out of my duty to his mother, to read him a very severe lesson, such as his schoolmaster should have read him years ago. Now silence, both of you; and as for you, sir, bear in mind what I have said, for, as you ought to know by this time, I am a man of my word.”

The door was shut loudly, and the resounding steps were heard, followed by the banging of the bedroom door on the next floor.

“There, now you know, bumpkin,” said Sam, with a sneering laugh.

Tom sat up in bed as if a spring had been touched.

“You sneak!” he cried.

“What?”

“I say you sneak—you miserable, cowardly sneak!”

“Look here,” cried Sam, “you say another word and I’ll call the guv’nor, and you know what he meant; he’ll give you a good licking, and serve you right.”

“Oh!” muttered Tom between his teeth, while his cousin went on quietly undressing.

“That would soon bring you to your senses. I wanted to be friendly with you, and have just a bit of a game, but you must turn nasty, and it just serves you right.”

“Oh!” muttered Tom again.

“I thought that would quiet you, my lad. He’d bring up his old rattan, and loosen that stiff hide of yours. There, go to sleep, bumpkin, and think yourself lucky you got off so well.”

A minute later the candle was extinguished, and Sam jumped into bed, to fall asleep directly, but Tom lay with his head throbbing till the pale dawn began to creep into the room; and then only did he fall into a troubled doze, full of unpleasant dreams one after the other, till it was time to rise, get his breakfast alone, and hurry off to the office. For breakfast was late, and aunt, uncle, and cousin did not put in an appearance till long after Tom had climbed upon his stool in Gray’s Inn.

Chapter Four.

That day and many following Tom sat over his books or copying, musing upon the injustice of the treatment he was receiving, and feeling more and more the misery of his new life. He looked with envy at nearly every boy he met, and thought of the happy, independent life they seemed to lead. But he worked hard all the same.

“I won’t give up,” he would say through his set teeth. “Uncle shall see that if I’m not clever I can persevere, and master what I have to learn.”

But in spite of his determination he did not progress very fast, for the simple reason that he expected to learn in a few months the work of many years.

The weeks did not pass without plenty of unpleasant encounters with his cousin, while pretty well every day there was a snubbing or downright bullying from his uncle.

“But never you mind, Mr Tom,” Pringle would say; “things always come right in the end.”

One of Tom’s greatest troubles was his home life, and the evident aversion shown to him by his aunt. She had received him coldly and distantly at the first, and her manner did not become warmer as the months wore on. Possibly she had once been a sweet, amiable woman, but troubles with her husband and son had produced an acidity of temper and habit of complaining which were not pleasant for those with whom she lived. Her husband escaped, from the fact that she held him in fear, while Sam was too much idolised to receive anything but the fondest attentions.

Tom’s perceptions were keen enough, and he soon saw for himself that his uncle repented his generosity in taking him into his home; while his aunt’s feeling for him was evidently one of jealousy, as if his presence was likely to interfere with her darling’s prospects.

She resented his being there more and more; and though Tom tried hard to win her love and esteem, he found at the end of six months that he was as far from his object as ever.

“I’m only in the way there,” he often said to himself; “I wish I could live always here at the office.”

But as he thought this he looked round with a slight shiver, and thought of how dreary it would be shut up there with the law-books, tin boxes, and dusty papers, and he gave up the idea.

Often of a night it was like a temptation to him—that intense longing to be free; and he would sit with a book before him, but his mind wandering far away, following the adventures of boys of his own age who had gone away to seek their fortunes, and if they had not found all they sought, had at least achieved some kind of success.

And how grand it would be, he thought, with his cheeks flushing, to be independent, and work his own way without encountering day by day his uncle’s sour sneers and reproaches, his aunt’s cold looks, and his cousin’s tyranny.

“I could make my way, I know I could,” he thought, and the outlook grew day by day more rosy. Those were pleasant paths, he told himself, that he wanted to tread, and it never occurred to him that if he went among strangers they might be harder than his uncle.

But the outcome of these musings was always the same: there was the stern figure of Duty rising before him to remind him of his promise to his mother, and with his brow knitting, his hands would clench beneath table or desk as he softly muttered to himself—

“I’m going to be a lawyer, and I will succeed.”

But it has been written by a wise man, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will,” and Tom Blount was soon to find out its truth.

Matters had been going very badly at Mornington Crescent, and the boy’s life was harder than ever to bear, for, presuming upon his patience, Sam Brandon was more tyrannical than ever. Words failing to sting sufficiently, he had often had recourse to blows, and these Tom had borne patiently, till, to his cousin’s way of thinking, he was about as contemptible a coward as ever existed.

One morning at the office Sam was seated opposite to his cousin writing, Pringle was busily employed in the other room, and Tom was putting stamps on some letters, when his eye lit upon one standing edgewise against a gum-bottle between him and his cousin.

Just then Mr Brandon bustled in looking very stern and angry, and he gave a sharp look round the office. Then his eyes lit upon Tom and his task.

“What letters are those?” he said.

“The tithe notices, sir, you told me to fill up and direct from the book,” replied Tom.

“Humph! yes, quite right. Oh, by the way, Samuel, did you post that letter to Mr Wilcox yesterday afternoon?”

“Yes, father,” said Sam promptly; and as he raised his eyes he saw his cousin’s gazing at the letter standing on edge between them.

Sam turned pale as he now met Tom’s keen look.

It was all momentary, in the interval of Mr Brandon’s first words and his next question. “Then how is it that Mr Wilcox has not received it, and been on to me at home full of anxiety about not having my answer to an important question?”

“I don’t know, father,” said Sam sharply.

“Are you sure you posted the letter?”

“Oh yes, father. No; I recollect now: some one came in on business, to ask for you, and I told Tom Blount here to take it directly. Oh!” he cried, “I say, it is too bad. Why, you didn’t take it, Tom. Here’s the letter, father, all the time.”

He took up and held out the unfortunate missive, shaking his head at Tom the while.

“You never told me to take any letter yesterday,” said Tom quietly.

“Oh—my! What a lie, to be sure!” cried Sam, as if perfectly astounded. “Pringle must have heard me at the time.”

“Of course,” said his father, speaking with his lips tightly compressed, so that his voice sounded muttering and indistinct. Then aloud—“Here, Pringle.”

Scroop went Pringle’s stool, and he hurried in. “You call, sir?”

“Yes. What time was it when you heard Mr Samuel tell his cousin to go out and post a letter?”

“Never heard anything of the kind, sir, at any time.”

“That will do,” said his employer.

“Row on,” thought Pringle. “I hope he isn’t going to catch it again.”

Then as the door closed Mr Brandon, whose countenance was flushed and his eyes angry-looking, turned upon his son.

“Do you think I am blind, sir?” he said sharply.

“No, father: I don’t know what you mean.”

“Then I’ll tell you, sir. I mean that you have told me a miserable falsehood—a disgraceful falsehood.”

“I haven’t, father. I told Tom here to take the letter;” and he gave his cousin a fierce look which evidently said, “Say I told you, or it will be the worse for you,” and he accompanied the look with a sharp kick under the desk, which took effect on Tom’s shin, rousing him to a pitch of fury and obstinate determination.

“Oh, you haven’t, eh?” said Mr Brandon. “Tom, did your cousin tell you to post that letter?”

“Yes, you know I did,” cried Sam.

“No, uncle.”

“I did. You’ve forgotten it, or else you’re saying that out of spite,” cried Sam desperately.

“I haven’t forgotten it, and I’m not saying what I did out of spite,” said Tom firmly. “Indeed I spoke the truth, uncle.”

“Yes; I believe you,” said Mr Brandon.

“Shall I go and post the letter now, sir?”

“No; it is too late. Here, Samuel, come into my room.”

Mr Brandon walked into his room, while Sam got down slowly from his stool, leaning over toward his cousin the while.

“I’ll serve you out for this,” he whispered, and then crossed to his father’s room.

There was a low murmur of voices from within as soon as the door was closed; but that door fitted too closely for any of the conversation to be heard. Not that Tom was listening, for he was feeling a kind of pity for his cousin’s position, and more warmly towards his uncle for his simple act of justice than he had felt for months.

Just then there was a faint creaking sound, and looking behind him, it was to see that the inner office door was open, and Pringle standing there framed as it were, and going through a pantomimic performance expressive of his intense delight, grimacing, rubbing his hands, and laughing silently. Then he gesticulated and pointed toward the private office, and rubbed his hands again, till there was a sound in the private room, and he darted back and closed the door.

All this was meant for Tom’s amusement, and as congratulation; but the boy did not feel in the least elated, but sat waiting for his cousin’s return, fully intending to offer him his hand and whisper, “I am sorry—but you should have told the truth.”

A good half-hour passed before Sam came out, looking very red in the face; but when he took his place on his stool, Tom did not reach across to offer his hand, for his cousin’s face repelled him, and he felt that something would come of all this—what he could not tell. Still there was one gratifying thing left: his uncle had taken his word before that of his cousin, and this little thing comforted him during the remainder of that unpleasant day.

Before the afternoon was half over Mr Brandon came to his door and called Sam, who went in, and then took his hat and went away, to Tom’s great relief, for it was far from pleasant to be sitting at a double desk facing one who kept on darting scowling looks full of threatenings.

An hour later Mr Brandon left, after sending Pringle upon some errand, and for the rest of the afternoon the boy had the office to himself.

Chapter Five.

In due time Tom locked up the safe and strong-room, saw that no important papers were left about, and started for Mornington Crescent in anything but the best of spirits, for he did not look forward with any feeling of pleasure to his next meeting with his cousin. Upon reaching home he found from divers signs that company was expected to dinner; for the cloth was laid for five, the best glass was on the table, there were flowers and fruit, and sundry fumes from the kitchen ascended into the hall, suggesting extra preparations there as well.

Tom had hardly reached this point when his cousin came out of the library scowling.

“Here, bumpkin,” he cried, “you’re to look sharp and put on your best things. It’s not my doing, I can tell you, but the pater says you’re to come in to dinner.”

“Who’s coming?” said Tom.

“What’s that to you? Pretty cheeky that. I suppose you ought to have been asked whether we might have company.”

“Oh, no,” said Tom, good-temperedly; “I only wanted to know.”

“Did you? Well, you won’t know till dinnertime. Now then, don’t stand staring there, but go and wash that dirty face, and see if you can’t come down with your hands and nails fit to be seen.”

“Clean as ever yours are,” was on Tom’s lips; but he remembered his cousin’s trouble of that morning, pitied him, and felt that he had some excuse for feeling irritable and strange.

“Well, go on; look sharp,” said Sam, manoeuvring so as to get behind his cousin.

“All right; I’m going,” replied Tom, who was suspicious of something coming after his cousin’s promise of revenge; and he wanted to remain facing any danger that might be threatening. But he felt that he could not back away, it would look so cowardly, and, daring all, he went slowly to the pegs to hang up his overcoat.

“Get on, will you,” cried Sam; “don’t be all night. We don’t want to wait for you.”

“Oh, I shan’t be long,” said Tom quietly; “I’ll soon be down.”

He was on the mat at the foot of the stairs as he said this, conscious the while that Sam was close behind; and he was in the act of stepping up, when he received so savage a kick that he fell forwards on to the stairs, striking his nose violently, and creating a sensation as if that member had suddenly been struck off.

“You got it that time, did you?” said Sam, with a satisfied chuckle. “You generally play the wriggling eel, but I was too

quick for you, my lad.”

Sam said no more, for his triumph was only short-lived. He was looking triumphantly at his cousin as the lad got up heavily, feeling his nose to find out whether it was there. The next instant Sam was feeling his own, for he had at last gone too far. Tom had borne till he could bear no more; and in the anguish of that kick he had forgotten company, dressing for dinner, everything but the fact that Sam was there, and quick as lightning he struck him full in the face.

This satisfied him—acting like a discharging rod for his electric rage?

Nothing of the kind: there was a supreme feeling of pleasure in striking that blow. It, was the outlet of any amount of dammed-up suffering; and seeing nothing now but his cousin’s malignant face, Tom followed up that first blow with a second, till, throwing his remaining strength into a blow intended for the last, it took effect, and Sam went over backwards, flung out his right hand to save himself, and caught and brought down a great blue china jar, which shivered to pieces on the floor, covering Sam with fragments, and giving him the aspect of having been terribly cut, for his nose was bleeding freely.

So was Tom’s, as he caught a glimpse of himself in the glass of the hall table, while his lip had received a nasty cut, and in the struggle the stains had been pretty well distributed over his face.

But he had no time to think of that, for the crash had alarmed those up-stairs as well as down, and hurrying steps were heard.

The first to arrive was the cook, who, on reaching the head of the kitchen stairs, uttered a kind of choking gasp as she saw Sam lying apparently insensible among the ruins of the china jar.

“Oh, Master Tom, what have you been and done?” she cried.

“Been and done?” came like an angry echo from the landing above, where Mr Brandon had arrived. But before he could say more there was a piercing shriek, he was pushed aside, and Mrs Brandon rushed down the remaining stairs crying wildly—

“Oh, my darling boy! my darling boy! He has killed him—he has killed him!”

She dropped upon her knees by where Sam lay, apparently insensible; but uttered a cry of pain and sprang up again, for the broken china was full of awkward corners.

“Oh, James! James! look what that wicked wretch has done!”

“Look, woman! Do you think I’m blind? That vase was worth fifty pounds, if it was worth a penny.”

“I—I wasn’t thinking about the ch-ch-ch-china,” sobbed Mrs Brandon, “but about my darling Sam. Oh, my boy! my boy! don’t say you’re dead!”

“Don’t you make an exhibition of yourself before the servants,” cried her husband angrily. “Here you, sir: I always knew that you’d make me repent. How came you to break that vase?”

“I didn’t, sir,” said Tom quietly; “Sam caught hold of it as he was falling.”

Sam was lying insensible the moment before, but this was reviving.

“I didn’t, father; he knocked me down, and then seized the vase and dashed it at me.”

“Yes, yes,” cried Mrs Brandon, as Sam lapsed into insensibility once more. “The wretch has had a spite against his cousin ever since he has been here. Oh, my darling, darling boy!”

Sam uttered a low groan which made his mother shriek and fling herself down by him again.

“Oh, Mary! cook!” she cried, “help—help!”

“Yes, mum,” said the former; “shall I bring a dustpan and brush, and take up the bits?”

“No, no! Water—sponge—help!”

“Indeed, indeed, I did not break the vase,” pleaded Tom, as his uncle suddenly caught him by the collar and drew a gold-headed malacca cane from the umbrella-stand.

“I’ll soon see about that,” said Mr Brandon, with a fierce drawing-in of the breath.

“Yes; beat him, beat him well, James, the wretch, the cruel wretch, and then turn him out of the house.”

“Don’t you interfere,” cried Mr Brandon, with a snap. Then to Tom—“I suppose you’ll say you were not fighting?”

“Yes, sir, I was fighting; but Sam began at me, and all because I wouldn’t screen him to-day.”

“Hah! never mind that,” said Mr Brandon.

“Don’t beat me, sir,” pleaded Tom, excitedly. “I can’t bear it.”

“You’ll have to bear it, my fine fellow. Here, come into the library.”

“Yes, James, beat the wretch well,” cried Mrs Brandon. “Oh, my darling, does it hurt you very much?”

“Oh!” groaned Sam, and his mother shrieked; while a struggle was going on between Tom and his uncle, the boy resisting with all his might.

“He has killed him! he has killed him!” sobbed Mrs Brandon; “and you stand there, cook, doing nothing.”

“Well, mum, what can I do? I’m wanted down-stairs. Them soles is a-burning in the frying-pan. You can smell ’em up here.”

“Yes; nice preparations for company,” said Mr Brandon, stopping to pant, for Tom had seized the plinth at the foot of the balustrade and held on with all his might. “Go down in the kitchen, cook, and see to the dinner.”

The cook turned to go, but stopped short and turned back.

“Oh, my darling! my darling!” cried Mrs Brandon.

“Oh-h-h-h!” groaned Sam.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said cook, speaking very loudly, “but please you ain’t going to whip Mr Tom, are you?”

“Silence, woman! Go down to your kitchen!” roared her master.

“Yes, sir—directly, sir; but Mr Sam’s allus at him, and he begun it to-night, for I heared him.”

“Will you go down and mind your own business, woman?”

“Yes, sir; but I can’t bear to see you lay your hand on that poor boy, as ain’t done nothing to deserve it, and I will speak out, so there.”

“Silence, woman!”

“No, sir, nor I won’t silence neither; and don’t you please call me woman, because I won’t take it from nobody, not for no wages. I behaves respectful to you and missus, and expect the same, so there.”

“Cook, you leave at a month’s end,” cried Mrs Brandon. “Oh, Sam, Sam, speak to your broken-hearted mother.”

“Cert’ny, mum, and very glad to go,” said cook, who was working herself up into a passion. “To-night if you like. No, I won’t; I’ll go now, as soon as I’ve packed my boxes; and if Mary’s the girl I take her for, she’ll go too, and not stand here sweeping up your nasty old china.”

“Am I to take you by the shoulders, woman, and bundle you down-stairs?” roared Mr Brandon.

“No, sir, you ain’t. Just you dare to touch me, that’s all; and what’s more, you ain’t a-going to beat Master Tom, so there now. I wouldn’t stand here and see him punished for what he don’t deserve. It’s all that Mr Sam, who’s ma’s spoilt him, and indulged him, till he’s grown into a nasty, overbearing, cigarette-smoking wretch, as treats servants as if they was the dirt under his feet.”

“Fanny,” cried the lawyer, who felt that he was losing dignity in an unequal struggle, “send this woman down-stairs. Now, sir, you let go of that balustrade and come here.”

“No,” cried Tom, between his teeth; “you shan’t beat me for nothing. It was all Sam.”

“Come here!” roared his uncle, making a savage drag at the boy, which was intercepted by cook forcing herself between, and trying to shelter him.

“You shan’t beat him, not while I’m here,” she cried.

“He is not going to beat him,” said a quiet, firm, grave voice; and all started to see that “the company,” who had been standing quite unobserved on the upper landing, a silent spectator of the scene, was now coming down.

“Oh, Richard!” cried Mrs Brandon; “look here! The wretch—the wretch!”

“Yes, he does look a pretty object certainly,” said the visitor. “Here you, sir, get up and go to your room, and wash yourself. Don’t lie groaning there.”

“Oh—oh—oh!” cried Mrs Brandon, hysterically, “I didn’t mean Sam.”

“If you’d go and stop in the drawing-room, Richard, and not interfere, I should feel obliged.”

“Nothing would have pleased me better, James,” said his brother coldly; “but the riot was getting too loud—I was obliged to come.”

“Then, now go and wait. The dinner will be ready soon.”

“That it just won’t,” cried cook viciously; “and if you’re a gentleman, though you are master’s own brother, you’ll come and help me.”

“There is no need,” said Uncle Richard, in his quiet way. “Mr Brandon is not going to beat his nephew. He was very angry, no doubt, but that’s all over now; and as to the dinner, my dear madam, while I act the peacemaker, I hope you will bear in mind that I am very hungry, and should be very glad of some of the good things you were preparing, when in your genuine, womanly way you felt yourself called upon to defend this boy.”

“Look here, Richard,” began Mr Brandon.

“Tut—tut—tut, man, be quiet. Tom, my lad, go up-stairs to your room and make yourself decent. Fanny, my good girl, you are spoiling an expensive dress put on in my honour. Mary, my child, there are two or three sharp pieces of the broken vase here. Would you mind? Thank you. These things are very sharp. Now you, Sam, jump up, and go and wash yourself. Do you hear?”

“Confound it all, Richard!” began Mr Brandon.

“Tut—tut, quiet, man!” said Uncle Richard; “there’s nothing the matter with the fellow.”

“He’s half killed—dangerously hurt,” protested Mrs Brandon.

“Not he, my dear Fanny. I saw him watching the proceedings with one eye open. Come, Sam, no nonsense. Get up, and go to your room; and don’t you dare to interfere with Tom, because if you do I shall come up myself. Let me see; I think I have a bit of a hold on you, have I not?”

Sam’s eyes both opened widely, and he rose to his feet, then directed an imploring look at his uncle, who drew back, pointed up the stairs, and the lad shivered slightly as he went slowly by him, and began to ascend.

“Hang it all, Richard, is this house mine or is it yours?” said James Brandon.

“Mine,” said his brother—“while I am your guest, of course. Thank you, Jem, I’ll take my cane, if you please. It is a favourite old malacca—a presentation.”

He took the cane quietly from his brother’s hand and replaced it in the stand, with the result that cook uttered a titter and hurried down-stairs, followed by Mary, bearing a dustpan full of broken sherds.

“Come, that’s better,” said Uncle Richard, disregarding his brother’s angry gesture. “Now, my dear Fanny, let me take you to the drawing-room. The storm’s over, and the sun is coming out. Don’t let’s spoil my visit because the boys fell out and broke a vase.”

“No, no, Richard,” said Mrs Brandon, half hysterically, as she yielded at once and took her brother-in-law’s arm. “But you don’t know. That boy has the temper of a demon.”

“What, Sam?”

“No, *no*, No! That boy Thomas. We haven’t had a day’s peace since he came into the house. And now a fifty-pound vase broken. Oh! the wicked boy.”

“I didn’t do it, aunt. It was Sam,” came from the head of the staircase.

“Ah! Silence there, sir!” shouted Uncle Richard. “How dare you stand there listening! Be off, and make yourself decent for dinner.”

“Richard!” cried Mrs Brandon, in a tone of remonstrance, “you surely would not have that boy down to dinner now!”

“Why not, my dear sister?” he said, as they reached the drawing-room floor.

“After breaking that vase?”

“Never mind the vase, Fanny.”

“And nearly killing his cousin?”

“Nonsense, my dear, partial, motherly judge. Lookers-on see most of the game,” said Uncle Richard good-humouredly. “I was looking on from the landing for some time, and from what I saw, I have no hesitation in saying that Master Tom got as good as he gave.”

“But oh, Richard!”

“Tut—tut! Listen to me, my dear. Boys will quarrel and fight sometimes. I can remember a good many sets-to with Jem when we were young. These two have fought, and it’s all over.”

“But you really don’t know,” began Mrs Brandon.

“Oh yes, I do. Master Tom is not perfect. There, there, forget it all now; and let me send you a vase to replace the one broken. By the way, I hope they will not be long with that dinner.”

“Oh no, it will not be long now—that is, if that insolent woman will condescend to send us up some.”

“But she will,” said Uncle Richard good-humouredly. “If she does not, and the worst comes to the worst, we’ll storm her kitchen and finish the cooking ourselves. I’m a good cook in my way. Bachelors have their whims.”

“Ah, you don’t know what London servants are.”

“No,” said Uncle Richard, smiling pleasantly at the flurried lady, who was still troubled by the domestic storm through which she had just passed. “Mrs Fidler is a very good old soul in her way, and the maid has been with me some time now, and has evidently made up her mind to stop. I don’t give them much trouble, except with my fads.”

“And do you still go on with—with those—those—”

"Crazes?" said Uncle Richard smilingly. "To be sure I do. Ah, here's James. Well, old fellow, is it all right again?"

"Right again?" said Mr Brandon, who had just entered the room; "no, it is not. But there, I'm sorry there should be all this disturbance when you are here. It all comes of being charitable in the course of duty. But there, I'll say no more."

"That's right," said Uncle Richard, just as Mary entered the room with—

"If you please, ma'am, dinner is served."

"Hah!" cried Uncle Richard, rising to offer his arm to his sister-in-law. "But the boys are not down."

"No; and they are not coming," said Mr Brandon angrily.

"Oh, James dear!" protested Mrs Brandon.

"My dear Jem!" said Uncle Richard, smiling, "I put in my petition. The fight is over, so now let's have peace and—dinner."

"Oh, very well," said Mr Brandon. "Mary, go and tell Mr Samuel that we are waiting dinner for him."

"And, Mary, you will convey the same message to Mr Thomas," said Uncle Richard.

"Yes, sir," said the girl, with a smile; and before her master could protest she was gone.

Five minutes elapsed, during which Uncle Richard seemed to have forgotten his dinner in eager explanation of some piece of mechanism that he was making, and about which he had come up to town. At the end of that time Tom entered nervously, looking as if he had had his share of cuts and bruises; but to his great satisfaction no one said a word; and then Sam came in, looking very puffy about the eyes, and with one side of his mouth drawn down into a peculiar swollen smile.

"Oh!" exclaimed his mother, and she rose to fly to his side; but Uncle Richard was prepared for her, and took her hand to draw through his arm.

"That's right," he cried. "I am awfully hungry;" and he led her out of the room, followed by Mr Brandon, while Tom and Sam followed in silence down the stairs, each intent upon the plans he had in his breast, and fully determined to carry them out.

Chapter Six.

It was a capital dinner, but Sam felt that he could not eat a bit for mental troubles, while his cousin felt the same from bodily reasons connected with a terrible stiffness at one angle of his lower jaw.

Consequently Sam made a very poor dinner, to his mother's grief; but Tom ate heartily and enjoyed everything, forgetting his cares for the time being, as he listened in astonishment to the way in which his cold, grave uncle could brighten up, and keep the whole table interested by his conversation relating to discoveries in the world of science, especially in connection with light, and researches in what he spoke of as "The Vast Abyss."

Then came tea in the drawing-room, and on the part of the two boys an early movement in the direction of bed.

Tom was on his guard as soon as they were alone, fully expecting that his cousin would in some way renew hostilities, the more especially as neither Mr nor Mrs Brandon had had an opportunity of speaking to them with warning or appeal.

But Sam did not even look at him, undressing himself in sulky silence, throwing his clothes here and there, and plunging into bed and turning his face to the wall as he began to make his plans respecting a campaign he intended to carry out for the destruction of his cousin's peace, without running risks of getting himself injured as he had been that night.

"For," said Sam to himself, "everything seems to be against me. I only forgot that letter, and instead of helping a fellow out of a hole that beastly young sneak betrayed me. Then when I meant to pay him out, all the luck was on his side; and lastly, old moony Uncle Dick must turn upon me about that money affair. But wait a bit, I'll pay him back, and then he may tell the guv'nor if he likes. What did he say when I went and told him what a hole I was in over that account, and was afraid the guv'nor would know;—that it was embezzlement, and a criminal offence, and that if I had done such a thing for a regular employer, I might have found myself in the felon's dock? Rubbish! I only borrowed the money for a few weeks, and meant to pay it back. He shall have it again; and let him tell the old man if he dares. A coward, to throw that in my teeth! Wonder if they'll ask him what he meant. But all right, Master Tom Blount, you shall pay for this."

Meantime the object of his threatenings had undressed in silence too, extinguished the light, remembered by his bedside the old mother-taught lesson, and added a prayer for pardon in regard for that which he had made up his mind to do. Then, as his head pressed the pillow, he lay thinking of all that had taken place since he had been at his uncle's, and came finally to the conclusion that he could bear no more.

"I can't help being a fool," he said to himself, dolefully. "I have tried, but all these law things slip out of my head as fast as I read them. Of course it makes uncle bitter and angry, when he has tried to help me, and would go on trying if it was not for Sam."

Then the long, weary time of his stay came up, and in succession the series of injuries and petty annoyances to which he had been subjected by his cousin passed before him, strengthening his determination.

But in spite of all these, he would have fought down the desire so strong upon him if it had not been for the past evening's scene. Even as he lay in bed his face flushed, and he quivered with shame and indignation. For here it all was

vividly before his mind's eye. What had he done to deserve it? Nothing. He had spoken the truth, and declined to take his cousin's lapse upon his own shoulders about that letter; and then on getting home Sam had turned upon him, and any boy, Tom argued, would have done as he did, and struck back. He'd have been a mean-spirited coward if he had not.

"No, I can't stand it," he muttered, with his head beneath the clothes. "He was going to beat me in spite of all I said, and it was too horrible. I wouldn't have minded so much if I had been in the wrong, but even then it was too cruel before aunt—before the servants, and with Sam lying there shamming to be so bad, and watching all the time in his delight. No, I won't alter my mind in the morning. Poor father used to say, 'Sleep on it, my lad;' but I can't sleep on this. I must go now before things get worse."

He threw the clothes from his face and lay listening, to try and make out whether his cousin was awake. He was not, for a heavy stuffy breathing could be heard, consequent upon Sam's mouth being open, a peculiar puffy swelling about the nose preventing him from breathing in the usual way.

This brought a gleam of mental sunshine into Tom's sad and blackened horizon. Naturally a bright, merry lad, for months past he had not had a hearty laugh; but now, as he recalled his cousin's appearance, the smile broadened, and for a few moments he shook with suppressed laughter.

But the mirth passed away directly, for the matter was too serious, and he now lay with knitted brows, listening to his cousin's breathing, and continuing his plans.

He would wait another hour, and then begin.

He waited for some time listening till the last sound had died out in the house, thinking that he must move about very silently, for his uncle's room was beneath, and the servants were only separated from them by a not too thick wall.

"Poor cook! poor Mary!" he thought. "I should like to kiss them and say good-bye. How brave cook was; and she is sure to lose her place for taking my part. Aunt and uncle will never forgive her. How I wish I had a home of my own and her for housekeeper. But perhaps I shall never have one now, for what am I going to do when I go?"

That was the great puzzle as he lay there gazing at the window-blind, faintly illumined by the gas-lamps in the Crescent. What was he to do? Soldier?—No; he was too young, and wanting in manly aspect. Sailor?—No. He would like to go to sea, and have adventures; but no, if his father and mother had lived it would have given them pain to know that he had run away to enlist, or get on board some coasting vessel.

No; he could not do that. It might be brave and daring, but at the same time he had a kind of feeling that it would be degrading, and he would somehow do better than either of those things, and try and show his uncles, both of them, and Sam too, that if he was a fool, he was a fool with some good qualities.

But it was quite an hour since it had struck twelve, and it was time to act. The first thing was to test Sam's sleep—whether he was sound enough to enable him to make his preparations unheard.

What would be the best thing to do? came again. How could he get work without a character? What answer could he give people who asked him who he was, and whence he came?

No answer came, think hard as he would. All was one black, impenetrable cloud before him, into which he had made up his mind to plunge, and what his future was to be he could not tell. But let it be what it would, he mentally vowed that it should be something honest, and he would not let the blackness of that cloud stay him. No; his mind was fully made up now. This was his last night at his uncle's house, and he would take his chance as to where he would next lay his head.

"I shall be free," he muttered half aloud; "now I am like a slave."

It was time to act. Not that he meant to leave the house that night. No; his mind was made up. He would pack a few things in the little black bag in which he took his law-books to and fro, place it ready in the hall as usual, and go in to his breakfast; and when he started for the office, just call in and say good-bye to Pringle, who would not hinder him. On the contrary, he would be sure to give him advice, and perhaps help him as to his future.

"Poor old Pringle won't say stay," he muttered; and reaching out of bed, he felt in his trousers pocket on the chair for a halfpenny. He could not spare it, but it was the only missile he could think of then, and he held it poised ready to throw as he listened to his cousin's heavy breathing.

He threw the coin forcibly, so that it struck the wall just above Sam's head, and fell upon his face.

There was no movement, and the heavy, guttural breathing went on.

Tom waited a few minutes, and then slipped out of bed, crossed to his cousin's side, and gave the iron bedstead a slight shake, then a hard one. Next he touched his shoulder, and finished by laying a cold hand upon his hot brow.

But the result was always the same—the heavy, hoarse breathing.

Satisfied that he might do anything without arousing his cousin, he returned to his own bed, slipped on his trousers, and sat down to think.

There was the bag of books on the top of his little chest of drawers, and he had only to take them out, lay them down, and after carefully pulling out the drawer, pack the bag full of linen, and add an extra suit. It would be a tight cram, but he would want the things, and they would prove very useful.

But there was a hitch here. All these things were new, his old were worn-out, and his uncle had paid for all these in spite of his aunt's suggestion, that there were a good many of Sam's old things that might be altered to fit.

He stumbled over this. They were not his; and at last, in a spirit of proud independence, he ignored his own services to his uncle, and stubbornly determined that he would take nothing but the clothes in which he stood.

“And some day I’ll send the money to pay for them,” he said proudly, half aloud.

“Gug—gug—gug—ghur-r-r-r,” came from his cousin’s bed as if in derision.

But Tom’s mind was made up, and undressing once more he lay down to think, but did not, for, quite satisfied now as to his plans, no sooner had his head touched the pillow than, utterly wearied out, he dropped asleep.

It seemed to him that he had only just closed his eyes, when, in a dreamy way, he heard the customary tapping at his door, followed by a growl from Sam, bidding Mary not make “that row.”

Then Tom was wide-awake, thinking of his over-night plans.

And repentant?

Not in the least. He lay there thinking fiercely, only troubled by the idea of what he would do as soon as he had made his plunge penniless into that dense black cloud—the future.

But there was no lifting of the black curtain. He could see his way to the office to bid Pringle good-bye. After that all was hidden.

At the end of a quarter of an hour he jumped up and began to dress, while Sam lay with his back to him fast asleep, or pretending.

It did not matter, for he did not want to speak to him; and after dressing, and duly noting that there was only a scratch or two, no swelling about his face, he went down with his bag of books to the breakfast-room, to read as usual for an hour before his uncle and aunt came down.

In the hall he encountered the cook, who had to “do” that part of the housework, and she rose from her knees to wish him so hearty a good-morning, that a lump rose in Tom’s throat, there was a dimness in his eyes, and his hand went out involuntarily for a silent good-bye.

To his surprise a pair of plump arms were flung round him, and he received two hearty kisses, and then there was a warm whisper in his ear—

“Don’t you mind a bit, my dear. You didn’t deserve it; and as for Mr Sam, he’s a beast.”

“Thank you, cook,” said Tom huskily, “thank you. Good-bye.”

“What! Oh no, it ain’t good-bye neither, my dear. They’d like me to go, and so I won’t. I’ll stop just to spite them, so there!”

Cook went off to seize a door-mat, carry it out on the front steps, and then and there she banged it down, and began to thump it with the head of the long broom, as if in imagination she had Sam beneath her feet.

“She didn’t understand me,” said Tom to himself, as he hurried into the breakfast-room, feeling that after all it would be very painful to go, but not shaken in his determination.

“Morning, Mr Tom,” said Mary, who looked bright and cheerful in her clean print dress, as she made pleasant morning music by rattling the silver spoons into the china saucers. “Ain’t it a nice morning? The sun’s quite hot.”

“Yes, a beautiful morning,” said Tom sadly, as he gave the girl a wistful look, before going into a corner, sitting down and opening *Tidd’s Practice* for what his cousin called a grind.

Then with a sigh he went on reading, giving quite a start when Mary had finished her preparations for breakfast, and came to whisper—

“Cook ain’t going, sir; she says she wouldn’t go and leave you here alone for nothing, and I won’t neither.”

Tom felt as if he could not speak, and he had no need to, for the maid slipped out of the room, and the next minute Uncle Richard entered to nod to him gravely.

“Morning, my lad,” he said rather sternly. “That’s right—never waste time.”

How cold and repellent he seemed: so different to his manner upon the previous night, when the boy had felt drawn towards him. The effect was to make Tom feel more disposed than ever to carry out his plan, and he was longing for the breakfast to be over, so that he could make his start for the office.

But it wanted half-an-hour yet, and the boy had just plunged more deeply into his book, when Uncle Richard said—

“And so you don’t like the law, Tom?”

The boy started, for there was a different ring in the voice now. It sounded as if it were inviting his confidence, and he was about to speak, when his elder went on—

“To be sure, yes; you told me so last time I saw you.”

“I have tried, sir, very hard,” said Tom apologetically; “but it seems as if my brains are not of the right shape to understand it.”

“Humph, perhaps not,” said his uncle, gazing at him searchingly; and Tom coloured visibly, for it seemed to him that those penetrating eyes must be reading the secret he was keeping. “And you don’t like your cousin Sam either?”

Tom was silent for a few moments.

"Why don't you answer my question, sir?"

"I was thinking, uncle, that it is Cousin Sam who does not like me."

"How can he when you knock him down, and then dash china vases at him, sir?"

"I suppose I did knock him down, uncle, but not until he had kicked and struck me. Throw vases at him!" cried the boy indignantly; "I wouldn't be such a coward."

"Humph!" grunted his uncle, taking up the morning paper that Mary had just brought in; and without another word he sat back in his chair and began to read, while Tom, with his face still burning, turned once more to his book, with a strange elation beginning to take the place of the indignation he felt against his uncle, for it had suddenly occurred to him that this was the last time he would have to make his head ache over the hard, brain-wearying work. Then the elation died out again, for what was to be his future fate?

He was musing over this, and wondering whether after all he dare trust Pringle, when the door suddenly opened, Uncle Richard rustled and lowered the paper, and Mrs Brandon entered the room, looking wonderfully bright and cheerful.

"Good-morning, Richard," she cried; "I am so sorry I am late. James will be down directly. Good-morning, Tom."

Tom jumped in his chair at this pleasantly cordial greeting, and stared dumbfounded at his aunt.

"Not a bit late," said Uncle Richard, after a glance at his watch. "You are very punctual. Hah, here is James."

For at that moment Mr Brandon, looking clean-shaven and pleasant, entered the room.

"Morning, Dick," he cried; "what a lovely air. Ah, Tom, my boy, got over the skirmish?"

Tom babbled out something, and felt giddy. What did it mean? Could they have divined that he was about to run away, and were going to alter their treatment; or had Uncle Richard, who seemed again so grave and cold, been taking his part after he had gone to bed?

But he had very little time for dwelling upon that; the question which troubled him was, How could he go away now?

The thoughts sent him into a cold perspiration, and he glanced anxiously at the clock, to see that it was a quarter past eight, and that in fifteen minutes, according to custom, he must start for the office—for the office, and then—where?

Just then Mary entered with the breakfast-tray, and, chatting pleasantly, all took their seats. Mary whisked off two covers, to display fried ham and eggs on one, hot grilled kidneys on the other.

Tom grew hotter and colder, and asked himself whether he was going out of his mind, for there was no thin tea and bread-and-butter that morning.

"Tea or coffee, Tom?" said his aunt; and Tom's voice sounded hoarse as he chose the latter.

He was just recovering from this shock when his uncle said—

"Ham and eggs or kidneys, Tom? There, try both—they go well together."

"Thank you, uncle," faltered the boy; and he involuntarily looked up at Uncle Richard, who sat opposite to him, and saw that, though his face was perfectly stern and calm, his eyes were fixed upon him with a peculiar twinkling glitter.

"Bread, my boy?" he said quietly, and he took up a knife and the loaf.

"Try a French roll, Tom," said his aunt, handing the dish.

"How can I run away?" thought Tom, as he bent over his breakfast to try and hide his agitation, for his breast was torn by conflicting emotions, and it was all he could do to continue his meal. "It's of no use," he said to himself, as the conversation went on at the table; and though he heard but little, he knew that it was about the guest departing that morning for his home in Surrey.

"Yes," said Uncle Richard, "I must get back, for I'm very busy."

"And not stay another night?" said Aunt Fanny sweetly.

"No, not this visit, thanks. I'll get back in good time, and astonish Mrs Fidler. Hallo, squire, you're late; Tom has half finished the kidneys."

"Morning, uncle," said Sam sourly; "I didn't know it was so late. I've got a bad headache this morning, ma."

"Have you, dear?—I am so sorry. But never mind, I've a nice strong cup of tea here, and I'll ring for some dry toast."

"No, don't, ma," said Sam, scowling at Tom, and looking wonderingly at his cousin's plate. "I'll have coffee and a hot roll."

"But they will be bad for your head, love."

Sam made no reply, but felt his plate, which was nearly cold, and then held it out to his father for some kidneys.

"Oh, Sam, my darling, don't have kidneys, dear. I'm sure they'll be bad for you."

"No, they won't, ma," he said pettishly; and his father helped him liberally.

Uncle Richard went on with his breakfast, making believe to see nothing, but Tom noticed that his keen eyes glittered, and that nothing escaped him. Those eyes were wonderful, and fascinated the boy.

Suddenly, just as he had made a very poor breakfast, the clock on the chimney-piece gave a loud *ting*. It was the half-hour, and Tom rose quickly after a hasty glance at his uncle and aunt. He had had breakfast for the last time, and feeling that this change of treatment was only due to his Uncle Richard's presence, he was more determined than ever to go.

"Good-bye, Uncle Richard," he said firmly, but there was a husky sound in his voice.

"No, no, sit down, Tom," was the reply. "We won't say good-bye yet."

Sam stopped eating, with a bit of kidney half-way to his mouth, and stared.

"Yes, sit down, Tom," said Mr Brandon, giving a premonitory cough, after a glance at his wife. "The fact is, my lad, your uncle and I had a little conversation about you after you were gone to bed last night."

Tom, who had subsided into his chair, took hold of the table-cloth, and began to twist it up in his agitation, as a peculiar singing noise came in his ears; and as he listened he kept on saying to himself—"Too late—too late; I must keep to it now."

"Yes, a very long talk," said Uncle Richard.

"Very," acquiesced his brother; "and as we—as he—"

"As *we*, James," said Uncle Richard.

"Exactly—could not help seeing that you do not seem cut out for the law—er—hum—do not take to it—he has been kind enough to say that he will give you a trial with him down in the country."

Tom's head, which had been hanging down, was suddenly raised, and the words were on his lips to say No, he could not go, when he met the keen, bright, piercing eyes fixed upon his, and those words died away.

"He has not definitely decided as to what he will put you to, but means to test you, as it were, for a few months."

The singing in Tom's ears grew louder.

Go with that cold stern man, who had never seemed to take to him? It would be like jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire. Impossible! He could not—he would not go.

"There," said Mr Brandon in conclusion, after a good deal more, of which Tom heard not a word; "it is all settled, and you will go down with your uncle this morning, so you had better pack up your box as soon as we leave the table. Now what have you to say to your uncle for his kindness?"

"No: I will not go," thought Tom firmly; and once more he raised his eyes defiantly to that searching pair, which seemed to be reading his; but he did not say those words, for others quite different came halting from his lips—"Thank you, Uncle Richard—and—and I will try so hard."

"Of course you will, my boy," said the gentleman addressed, sharply. "But mind this, the country's very dull, my place is very lonely, all among the pine-trees, and you will not have your cousin Sam to play with."

"Haw haw!"

This was a hoarse laugh uttered by the gentleman in question.

"I beg your pardon, Sam?" said Uncle Richard, raising his eyebrows.

"I didn't speak, uncle," said Sam, "but I will, and I say a jolly good job too, and good riddance of bad rubbish."

"Sam, dear, you shouldn't," said his mother, in a gentle tone of reproof.

"Yes, I should; it's quite true."

"Hold your tongue, sir."

"All right, father; but we shall have some peace now."

"And I am to have all the disturbance, eh?" said Uncle Richard; "and the china vases thrown at me and smashed, eh?"

Tom darted a quick look at his uncle, and saw that he was ready to give him a nod and smile, which sent a thrill through him.

"You'll have to lick him half-a-dozen times a week," continued Sam.

"Indeed," said Uncle Richard good-humouredly; "anything else?"

"Yes, lots of things," cried Sam excitedly; "I could tell you—"

"Don't, please, my dear nephew," said Uncle Richard, interrupting him; "I could not bear so much responsibility all at once. You might make me repent of my determination."

"And you jolly soon will," cried Sam maliciously; "for of all the—"

"Hush, Sam, my darling!" cried his mother.

"You hold your tongue now, sir," said Mr Brandon; "and I should feel obliged by your making haste down to the office. You can tell Pringle that your cousin is not coming any more."

Tom started, and looked sharply from one to the other.

"Mayn't I go and say good-bye to Pringle, uncle?" he cried.

"No, sir," said his Uncle James coldly; "you will only have time to get your box packed. Your uncle is going to catch the ten fifty-five from Charing Cross."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard; "and you can write to your friend."

"Or better not," said Mr Brandon. "Tom has been rather too fond of making friends of people beneath him. There, my lad, you had better go and be getting ready; and I sincerely hope that you will make good use of your new opportunity."

Tom hardly knew how he got out of the room, for he felt giddy with excitement. Then he was not going to run away, but to be taken down into Surrey by his Uncle Richard—and for what?

Would he behave well to him? He looked cold and stern, but he was not on the previous night. Young as he was, Tom could read that there was another side to his character. Yes, he must go, he thought; and then he came face to face with Mary, who came bustling out of a bedroom.

"La! Master Tom, how you startled me. Not gone to the office?"

"No, Mary. I'm going away for good with Uncle Richard."

"Oh, I am glad! No, I ain't—I'm sorry. But when?"

"This morning—almost directly."

"My! I'll go and tell cook."

Tom reached his room, packed up his things as if in a dream, and bore the box down-stairs, his cousin having left the house some time. Then, still as if in a dream, he found himself in the breakfast-room, and heard Mary told to whistle for a cab.

Ten minutes later his uncle's Gladstone was on the roof side by side with the modest old school box; and after saying good-bye to all, they were going down the steps.

"Jump in first, Tom," said Uncle Richard, "and let's have no silly crying about leaving home."

Tom started, and stared at his uncle with his eyes wonderfully dry then, but the next moment they were moist, for two female figures were at the area gate waving their handkerchiefs; and as the boy leaned forward to wave his hand in return, mingled with the trampling of the horse, and the rattle of the wheels, there came his uncle's voice shouting Charing Cross to the cabman from the kerb, and from the area gate—

"Good-bye, Master Tom, good-bye!"

"Why, the boy's wet-eyed!" said Uncle Richard in a peculiarly sneering voice. "What a young scoundrel you must have been, sir, to make those two servants shout after you like that! There, now for a fresh home, boy, and the beginning of a new life, for your dear dead mother's sake."

"Uncle!" gasped Tom, with the weak tears now really showing in his eyes, for there was a wonderful change in his companion's voice, as he laid a firm hand upon his shoulder.

"Yes, Tom, your uncle, my boy. I never quarrel with my brother James or his wife, but I don't believe quite all that has been said about you."

All thought of running away to seek his fortune faded out of Tom Blount's brain, as he sat there with his teeth pressed together, staring straight away between the horse's ears, trying hard to be firm.

But after long months of a very wretched life it was stiff work to keep his feelings well within bounds.

Chapter Seven.

"Now, Tom, cloak-room; come along. I've got some tackle to take down with us. Only ten minutes before we start. Here, porter, luggage—quick!"

A man came forward with a barrow, and after taking the luggage from the cab, followed to the cloak-room, from whence sundry heavy, peculiar-looking packages and a box were handed out and trundled to the train; and in a few minutes, with his heart beating wildly, and a feeling of excitement making him long to jump up and shout aloud, Tom sat

there watching the houses and trees seem to glide more and more swiftly past the windows as the speed increased. For to him it was like being suddenly freed from prison; and instead of the black cloud which had been hanging before his eyes—the blank curtain of the future which he had vainly tried to penetrate—he was now gazing mentally ahead along a vista full of bright sunshine and joy.

There were two other passengers in the carriage, who, like his uncle, were soon absorbed in their papers, and not a word was spoken until these two got out at the first stopping-place, twenty miles from town; and as soon as the porter had given the door that tremendous unnecessary bang so popular with his fraternity, and the train was speeding on again, Uncle Richard threw down his paper with a loud "Hah!" and turned to his nephew.

"Well, Tom," he said, "I don't know what I am to do with you now I have got you. You don't want to go on with the law?"

"Oh no, sir, I am too stupid," said Tom quickly.

"Why do you say 'sir,' my boy? Will not uncle do for your mother's brother?"

"Uncle James told me always to say 'sir,' sir—uncle I mean."

"Ah, but I'm not your Uncle James, and I like the old-fashioned way. Well, as you are too stupid for the law, I suppose I must try you with something easier—say mathematics."

Tom looked at him aghast.

"A nice pleasant subject, full of calculations. But we shall see. I suppose you will not mind helping me?"

"I shall be glad to, uncle."

"That's right; but you don't know yet what I want you to do. You will have to take your coat off sometimes, work hard, put on an apron, and often get dirty."

"Gardening, uncle? Oh, I shall like that."

"Yes; gardening sometimes, but in other ways too. I do a deal of tinkering now and then." Tom stared.

"Yes, I mean it: with tin and solder, and then I try brass and turning. I have a regular workshop, you know, with a small forge and anvil. Can you blow bellows?"

Tom stared a little harder as he gazed in the clear grey eyes and the calm unruffled countenance, in which there was not the dawn of a smile.

"I never tried," said Tom, "but I feel sure I could."

"And I feel sure you cannot without learning; some of the easiest-looking things are the hardest, you know. Of course any one can blow forge bellows after a fashion, but it requires some pains to manage the blast aright, and not send the small coal and sparks flying over the place, while the iron is being burned up."

"Iron burned up?" said Tom.

"To be sure. If I put a piece in the forge, I could manage the supply of oxygen so as to bring it from a cherry heat right up to a white, while possibly at your first trial you would burn a good deal of the iron away."

"I did not know that," said Sam.

"And I suppose there are a few other little things you do not know, my boy. There's a deal to learn, Tom, and the worst or best of it is, that the more you find out the more you realise that there is no end to discovery. But so much for the blacksmith's work."

"But you are not a blacksmith, uncle."

"Oh yes, I am, Tom, and a carpenter too. A bad workman I know, but I manage what I want. Then there is my new business too at the mill."

"Steam mill, uncle?"

"Oh no, nor yet water. It's a regular old-fashioned flour-mill with five sails. How shall you like that business?"

Tom looked harder at his uncle.

"Well, boy, do I seem a little queer? People down at Furzebrough say I am."

"No, sir," said Tom, colouring; "but all this does sound a little strange. Do you really mean that you have a windmill?"

"Yes, Tom, now. My very own, my boy. It was about that I came up yesterday—to pay the rest of the purchase-money, and get the deeds. Now we can set to work and do what we like."

Tom tried hard, but he could not help looking wonderingly at his uncle, of whom he had previously hardly seen anything. He knew that he had been in India till about a year before, and that his mother had once spoken of him as being eccentric. Now it appeared that he was to learn what this eccentricity meant.

"Did you learn any chemistry when you were at school, Tom?" said his uncle, after a pause.

"Very little, uncle. There were some lectures and experiments."

"All useful, boy. You know something about physics, of course?"

"Physics, uncle?" faltered Tom, as he began to think what an empty-headed fellow he was.

"Yes, physics; not physic—salts and senna, rhubarb and magnesia, and that sort of thing; but natural science, heat and light, and the wonders of optics."

Tom shook his head.

"Very little, uncle."

"Ah, well, you'll soon pick them up if you are interested, and not quite such a fool as your uncle made out. Do you know, Tom, that windmill has made me think that I never could have been a lawyer."

Tom was silent. Things seemed to be getting worse.

"Four times have I had to come up to town and see my lawyer, who had to see the seller's lawyer over and over again—the vendor I ought to have said. Now I suppose you wouldn't have thought that I was a vendee, would you?"

"Oh yes, I know that," said Sam. "You would be if you bought an estate."

"Come, then, you do know something, my lad. But it has been a tiresome business, with its investigation of titles and rights of usance, and court copyhold fines, and—Bother the business, it has taken up no end of time. But there, it's all over, and you and I can go and make the dust fly and set the millstones spinning as much as we like. Thumpers they are, Tom, three feet in diameter. I wish to goodness they had been discs of glass instead of stone."

"Do you, uncle?" said Tom, for his companion was evidently waiting for an answer.

"Yes; we could have tried some fine experiments with them, whereas they will be useless and unsalable I expect."

To Tom's great relief the conversation reverted to his life at Gray's Inn and Mornington Crescent, for the impression would keep growing upon him that what people said about his uncle's queerness might have some basis. But this opinion was soon shaken as they went on, for he was questioned very shrewdly about his cousin and all that had passed between them, till all at once his companion held out his hand.

"Shake hands, Tom, my boy. We are just entering Furzebrough parish, and I want to say this:—You came to me with an execrable character—"

"Yes, uncle; I'm very sorry."

"Then I'm not, my lad. For look here: I have been questioning you for the last hour, and I have observed one thing—in all your statements about your cousin, who is an abominably ill-behaved young whelp, you have never once spoken ill-naturedly about him, nor tried to run him down. I like this, my lad, and in spite of all that has been said, I believe that you and I will be very good friends indeed."

"Thank you, uncle," said Tom, huskily. "I mean to try."

"I know that, or I wouldn't have brought you home. There, there, look! quick! before it runs behind that fir clump, that's the old madman's windmill."

Tom turned sharply to the window, and caught sight of a five-sailed windmill some five miles away, on a long wooded ridge.

"See it?"

"Yes, uncle; I just caught sight of it."

"That's right; and in five minutes, when we are out of the cutting, you can see Heatherleigh in the opening between the two fir-woods."

"That's your house, uncle?"

"Yes, my lad—that's my house, where I carry on all my diabolical schemes, and perform my incantations, as old Mother Warboys says. You didn't know what a wicked uncle you had."

"No, sir," said Tom, smiling.

"Oh, I'm a dreadful wretch; and you did not know either, that within five-and-thirty miles of London as the crow flies, there is as much ignorance and superstition as there was a couple of hundred years or so ago, when they burnt people for being witches and wizards, and the like. There, now look; you can just see Heatherleigh there. No; too late—it's gone."

Tom felt puzzled. One minute he was drawn strongly towards his uncle, the next he felt uneasy, for there was something peculiar about him. Then he grew more puzzled as to whether the eccentricity was real or assumed. But he soon had something else to think of, for five minutes after a run through a wild bit of Surrey, that looked gloriously attractive with its sandy cuttings, commons, and fir-trees, to a boy who had been shut up closely for months in London, his uncle suddenly cried, "Here we are!" and rose to get his umbrella and overcoat out of the rack.

"Let's see, Tom," he said; "six packages in the van, haven't we? Mind that nothing is left behind."

The train was slackening speed, and the next minute they were standing on the platform of a pretty attractive

station, quite alone amongst the fir-trees. The station-master's house was covered with roses and clematis, and he and the porters were evidently famous gardeners in their loneliness, for there was not a house near, the board up giving the name of the station as Furzebrough Road.

"Shall I take the luggage, sir?" said a man, touching his hat; and at the same moment Tom caught sight of a solitary fly standing outside the railings.

"Yes; six packages. By the way, Mr Day, did a box come down for me?"

This to the station-master, who came up as the train glided off and disappeared in a tunnelled sandhill a hundred yards farther.

"Yes, sir; very heavy box, marked 'Glass, with care.' Take it with you?"

"Yes, and let it be with care. Here, I'll come and pay the rates. Tom, my lad, see that the things are all got to the fly."

Tom nodded; and as his uncle disappeared in the station-master's office, he went to where the two porters were busy with a barrow and the luggage.

They were laughing and chatting with the flyman, and did not notice Tom's approach, so that he winced as he heard one of the porters say—

"Always some fresh contrapshum or another. Regular old lunatic, that's what he is."

"What's he going to do with that old mill?" said the other.

"Shoot the moon they—Is this all, sir?" said the flyman, who caught sight of Tom.

The boy nodded, and felt indignant as well as troubled, for he had learned a little about public opinion concerning his uncle.

"Be careful," he said; "some of those things are glass."

"All right, sir; we'll be careful enough. Look alive, Jem. Where will you have the box as come down by's mornin's goods?"

"On the footboard. Won't break us down, will it?"

"Tchah! not it. On'y about a hundredweight."

By the time the luggage was stowed on and about the fly, Uncle Richard came out, and expressed his satisfaction.

"Rather a lonely place in winter, Tom," he said, as he entered the stably-smelling old fly.

"Yes, but very beautiful," replied Tom. "Have we far to go?"

"Three miles, my lad, to the village, and a quarter of a mile further to the house."

It was a very slow ride, along sandy lanes, through which, as soon as there was the slightest suggestion of a hill, the horse walked; but everything looked lovely on this bright summer day. High banks where ferns clustered, plantations of fir, where brilliantly-plumaged pheasants looked up to see them pass, and every now and then rabbits scuttled up the steep sandy slopes, showing their white cottony tails before they disappeared amongst the bracken, or dived into a hole. Wild-flowers too dotted the sides of the lane, and as Tom sat gazing out of the window, drinking in the country sweets, his uncle nodded and smiled.

"Will it do, my boy?" he said.

"Do!" cried Tom, ecstatically; "it's lovely!"

"Humph! yes. Sun shines—don't rain."

In due time they reached and passed through a pretty flowery village, dotted about by the sides of a green, and with several houses of a better class, all looking as if surrounded by large gardens and orchards. Then, all at once, Tom's companion exclaimed—

"Here's the mill!" and he had hardly glanced at the tall round brick tower, with its wooden movable cap, sails, and fan, all looking weather-beaten and dilapidated, when his uncle exclaimed—"Here we are!" and down on a slope, nearly hidden in trees, he saw the red-tiled gables of a very attractive old English house, at whose gate the fly stopped.

"Drive in, sir?"

"Yes, of course. I'll have the boxes in the stable-yard. Pull up at the door first. But ring, and the gardener will come to help."

The gate was swung back and the fly was led in, now, between two wide grassy borders, with the soft, sandy gravel making hardly a sound beneath the wheels. This drive wound in and out, so that a couple of minutes had elapsed before they came in sight of the front of the house, with its broad porch and verandah.

"Welcome to Heatherleigh, Tom—our home," said his uncle. "Ah, here's Mrs Fidler."

This was as a very grim, serious-looking, grey-haired woman appeared in the porch.

"Back again, Mrs F.," cried Uncle Richard cheerily. "Here, this is my nephew, who has come to stay. Get my telegram?"

"Oh yes, sir, and everything's ready, sir."

Just then a sun-browned man, with a blue serge apron rolled up and tucked in round his waist, came up, touched his hat, and looked at the luggage.

"Morning, David. The box and portmanteau for indoors. The boxes to be very carefully placed in the coach-house. Glass, mind. Here, driver, give your horse some hay and water; David will see to it, while you go round to the kitchen for a crust of bread-and-cheese. Mind and be careful with those packages."

"Oh yes, sir, certainly," said the man; and he led the horse on amongst the shrubs; while as Tom followed his uncle into the prettily-furnished museum-like hall, he thought to himself—

"I wonder whether uncle knows how they laugh at him behind his back."

"Dinner at two, Mrs Fidler, I suppose?" said Uncle Richard just then.

"Yes, sir, precisely, if *you* please," was the reply.

"That's right. Here, Tom, let's go and see if they have smashed the glass in the packages."

Uncle Richard led the way out through a glass door, and across a velvety lawn, to a gate in a closely-clipped yew hedge. This opened upon a well-gravelled yard, where the rusty-looking old fly was standing, with its horse comfortably munching at the contents of its nose-bag, and David the gardener looking on with a pail of water at his feet.

"Why, David, how was it that the horse was not put in the stable and given a feed?"

"He's having his feed, sir," said the gardener. "Them's our oats. The driver said he'd rather not take him out, because the harness do give so, sir, specially the traces; so he had the nose-bag pretty well filled, and the horse have been going at 'em, sir, tremenjus."

"Boxes all right?"

"Yes, sir; I don't think we've broke anything; but that big chest did come down pretty heavy."

"What?" cried his master; and he hurried into the coach-house to examine the packing-case. "Humph! I hope they have not broken it," he muttered; "I won't stop to open it now. Come, Tom, we'll just walk round the garden, so that you may see my domain, and then I'll show you your room."

The domain proved to be a fairly extensive garden in the most perfect order, and Tom stared at the tokens of abundance. Whether he was gazing at fruit or flowers, it was the same: the crop looked rich and tempting in the extreme.

"We won't stop now, my lad. Let's go and see if Mrs F. has put your room ready."

Uncle Richard led the way, with Tom feasting his eyes upon the many objects which filled him with wonder and delight; and even then it all seemed to be so dreamlike, that he half expected to wake up and find that he had been dozing in the hot office in Gray's Inn.

But it was all real, and he looked with delight at the snug little room, whose window opened upon the garden, from which floated scents and sounds to which he had long been a stranger.

"Look sharp and wash your hands, boy, the dinner-bell will ring in ten minutes, I see, and Mrs Fidler is very particular. Will your room do?"

"Do, uncle!" cried Tom, in a tone which meant the extreme of satisfaction.

"That's right. You see they've brought up your box. Come down as soon as you are ready."

He went out and closed the door; and, with his head in a whirl, Tom felt as if he could do nothing but stand there and think; but his uncle's words were still ringing in his ears, and hurriedly removing the slight traces of his journey, he took one more look from his window over the soft, fresh, sloping, far-stretching landscape of garden, orchard, fir-wood, and stream far below in the hollow, and then looked round to the right, to see standing towering up within thirty yards, the windmill, with its broken sails and weatherworn wooden cap.

He had time for no more. A bell was being rung somewhere below, and he hurried down, eager to conform to his uncle's wishes.

"This way, Tom," greeted him; and his uncle pointed to the hat-pegs. "You'd better take to those two at the end, and stick to them, for Mrs Fidler's a bit of a tyrant with me—with us it will be now. Place for everything, she says, and everything in its place—don't you, old lady?"

"Yes, sir," said the housekeeper, who was just inside the little dining-room door, in a stiff black silk dress, with white bib and apron, and quaint, old-fashioned white cap. "It saves so much trouble, Master Tom, especially in a household like this, where your uncle is always busy with some new contrivance."

"Quite right," said Uncle Richard. "So take your chair there, Tom, and keep to it. What's for dinner? We're hungry."

Mrs Fidler smiled as she took her place at the head of the table, and a neat-looking maid-servant came and removed the covers, displaying a simple but temptingly cooked meal, to which the travellers did ample justice.

But Tom was not quite comfortable at first, for Mrs Fidler seemed to be looking very severely at him, as if rather resenting his presence, and sundry thoughts of his being an interloper began to trouble the lad, as he wondered how things would turn out. Every now and then, too, something was said which suggested an oddity about his uncle, which would give rise to all sorts of unpleasant thoughts. Still nothing could have been warmer than his welcome; and every now and then something cropped up which made the boy feel that this was not to be a temporary place of sojourning, but his home for years to come.

"There," exclaimed Uncle Richard, when they rose from the table, "this is a broken day for you, so you had better take your cap and have a good look round at the place and village. Tea at six punctually. Don't be late, or Mrs Fidler will be angry."

"I don't like to contradict you, sir," said the housekeeper, smiling gravely; "but as Master Tom is to form one of the household now, he ought, I think, to know the truth."

"Eh? The truth? Of course. What about?"

"Our way of living here, Master Tom," said the housekeeper, turning to him. "I should never presume to be angry with your uncle, sir; I only carry out his wishes. He is the most precise gentleman I ever met. Everything has to be to the minute; and as to dusting or moving any of the things in his workshop or labour atory, I—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Uncle Richard, grinding his teeth and screwing up his face. "My good Mrs Fidler, don't!"

"What have I done, sir?" exclaimed the housekeeper.

"Say workshop, and leave laboratory alone."

"Certainly, sir, if you wish it."

"That's right. Well, Tom, what are you waiting for?"

"I thought, if you wouldn't mind, I should like to help you unpack the boxes."

"Oh, by all means, boy. Come along; but I'm going to have a look over the windmill first—my windmill, Mrs Fidler, now. All settled."

"I'm very glad you've got over the bother, sir."

"Oh, dear me, no," said Uncle Richard, laughing; "it has only just began. Well, what is it?"

"I didn't speak, sir."

"No, but you looked volumes. What have they been saying now?"

"Don't ask me, sir, pray," said the housekeeper, looking terribly troubled. "I can't bear to hear such a good man as you are—"

"Tut! stuff, woman. Nothing of the kind, Tom. I'm not a good man, only an overbearing, nigger-driving old indigo planter, who likes to have his own way in everything. Now then, old lady, out with it. I like to hear what the fools tattle about me; and besides, I want Tom here to know what sort of a character I have in Furzebrough."

"I—I'd really rather not say, sir. I don't want to hear these things, but people will talk to David and cook and Jenny, and it all comes to me."

"Well, I want to hear. Out with it."

"I do wish you wouldn't ask me, sir."

"Can't help it, Mrs Fidler. Come."

"Bromley the baker told cook, sir, that if you were going to grind your own flour, you might bake your own bread, for not a loaf would he make of it."

"Glad of it. Then we should eat bread made of pure wheat-meal without any potatoes and ground bones in it. Good for us, eh, Tom?"

"Better, uncle," said the boy, smiling.

"Well, what next?"

"Doctor told David out in the lane that he was sure you had a bee in your bonnet."

"To be sure: so I have; besides hundreds and thousands in the hives. Go on."

"And Jane heard down the village that they're not going to call it Pinson's mill any more."

"Why should they? Pinson's dead and gone these four years. It's Richard Brandon's mill now."

"Yes, sir, but they've christened it Brandon's Folly."

"Ha, ha! So it is. But what is folly to some is wisdom to others. What next? Does old Mother Warboys say I am going to hold wizards' sabbaths up in the top storey, and ride round on the sails o' windy nights?"

"Not exactly that, sir," said Mrs Fidler, looking sadly troubled and perplexed; "but she said she was sure you would be doing something uncanny up there, and she hoped that no evil would descend upon the village in consequence, for she fully expected that we should be smitten for your sins."

"Did she tell you this?"

"No, sir; she said it to Mr Maxted."

"Told the vicar?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what did he say?"

"She says he insulted her, sir, and that she'll never go into his church any more. She's been telling every one so—that he called her a silly, prejudiced old woman."

"Is that all?"

"It's all I can remember, sir."

"And enough too. Look here, Tom, you had, I think, better call David, and tell him to put the pony in and drive you back to the station. I'm sure you would rather go back to your uncle James, and be happy with your cousin Sam."

Tom smiled.

"You can't want to stay here."

"Are you going up to the mill now, uncle?" said Tom, with a quaint look.

"Oh yes, directly, if you are going to risk it. Ready?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Then come on."

Chapter Eight.

Uncle Richard frowned and looked very serious, but he uttered a low chuckle as he led the way into a snug little room, half-library, half-museum. A long, heavy chest stood on one side, formed of plain, dark-coloured wood; but upon its being opened, Tom saw that it was all beautifully polished ornamental wood inside, and full of drawers, trays, and fittings for bright saws, hammers, chisels, and squares.

"My old tool-chest, Tom. I used to have that at Sattegur in my bungalow, and do most of my carpentering myself, for the natives there are not much of hands when you want anything strong. When you want a tool—bradawl, gimlet, pincers, anything—here they all are." He opened and shut drawers rapidly as he spoke. "Nails, screws, tacks, you'll know where to find them, only put things back when done with. What did I come for? Oh, a rule. Here we are." He took a new-looking boxwood rule from its place, closed the lid, and then led the way out into the garden, up a flight of steps formed of rough pieces of tree, and leading in a winding way through a shrubbery to a doorway in a wall. Passing through this, they were in a narrow lane, and close to the yard which enclosed the great brick tower of the mill.

"Nice and handy for conveying the flour-sacks to and fro, Tom, eh?" said Uncle Richard, smiling. "Now then, let's have another inspection of the new old property."

He took out a bunch of old keys, unlocked the gate, and entered; and then they crossed the yard, which was littered with old wood, and with here and there a worn-out millstone leaning against the walls, two extra large ones bound with rusty iron standing up like ornaments on either side of the mill-tower door, one above whitened with ancient flour, having evidently been used for loading carts drawn up close beneath.

"Splendid place, eh, Tom?" said Uncle Richard, as he unlocked the door, which uttered a low groan as its unoiled hinges were used, and a peculiar odour of old mildewed flour came from within. "We shall have a place now in case of invasion or civil war, ready for retreat and defence. We can barricade the lower doors, and hurl down the upper and nether millstones on the enemies' heads, set the mill going, and mow them down with the sails, and melt lead ready to pour down in ladlefuls to make them run from the scalding silver soup. A grand tower for practising all those old barbaric delights."

"Yes, sir," said Tom uneasily, for his uncle looked at him penetratingly, as if expecting an answer.

"Is he serious, or only joking me?" thought Tom the next moment. "He must be a little wrong. Got windmills in his head, like Don Quixote."

"Yah! yah! Who shot the moon?" came in a coarse yell from outside the gate.

Tom started, flushed, and turned round angrily, with his fists involuntarily clenching.

"Yah! yah! old wind-grinders!" cried the voice again, followed by several heavy bangs on the gate, evidently delivered with a stick.

"The impudent scoundrel!" cried Uncle Richard. "Go and tell that fellow that—"

But he got no further, for, taking all this as an insult meant for his uncle, Tom had darted off for the gate, which he

threw open, and found himself face to face with a big, shambling, hobbledehoy sort of fellow of about eighteen or nineteen, who stepped back for a yard or two, swinging a heavy stick to and fro, while a mangy-looking cur, with one eye and a very thin tail like a greyhound's, kept close at his heels.

"What is it?" said Tom hotly. "Did you knock at the gate like that?"

"What's it got to do with you?" said the lad, insolently. "Get in, or I'll set the dog at yer."

Tom glanced at the dog and then at its master, and felt as he often had when his cousin Sam had been more than usually vicious.

"I'll jolly soon let yer know if yer give me any o' your mouth. Here, Badger, smell him, boy—ciss—smell him!"

The cur showed his teeth, and uttered a low snarling growl, as its master advanced urging him on; while Tom drew one leg a little back ready to deliver a kick, but otherwise stood his ground, feeling the while that everything was not going to be peaceful even in that lovely village.

But before hostilities could begin, and just as the dog and his master were within a yard, the gate was suddenly snatched open, and Uncle Richard appeared, when the lout turned sharply and ran off along the lane, followed by his dog, the fellow shouting "Yah! yah! yah!" his companion's snapping bark sounding like an imitation.

"Come in, Tom," said Uncle Richard. "I don't want you to get into rows with Master Pete Warboys. Insolent young rascal!"

Tom looked at his uncle inquiringly.

"That's the pest of the village, Tom. Nice young scoundrel. An idle dog, who has had a dozen places and will not stay in them, though he has no Cousin Sam to quarrel with."

Tom winced, for the words were a decided hit at him.

"So he has settled down into a regular nuisance, who does a bit of poaching, steals fruit, breaks windows, and generally annoys every one in the place. If he were not such an ugly, shambling cub some recruiting sergeant might pick him up. As it is, we have to put up with him and his ways."

"Yah!" came from a distance; and Tom's nerves tingled, for he did not like to hear the insult directed at his uncle, however strange he might be.

"There, let's go on with our inspection, my boy," and the gate was closed again, and they walked together up the slope into the mill.

There was not much to see on the ground-floor, save the whitened brick walls, a huge pillar or post in the middle, and a ladder-like flight of steps on one side, up which Uncle Richard led the way; and as Tom emerged from a trap-door, he found himself in a circular chamber, a little less than the one below, with three windows at the sides, the doorway he had seen from without, and three pairs of millstones placed horizontally, and connected by shafts with the mechanism above the cobwebby and flour-whitened ceiling. There was a flight of steps, too, here, and Tom now noticed that there was a trap-door overhead, formed with two flaps and a hole in the middle, while a similar one was at his feet.

"For sending the sacks up and down," said Uncle Richard. "The floors are thoroughly solid, and made of good stuff. Excellent," he continued. "Let's go up to the top."

He led the way up the second flight of steps into the next chamber, which was wonderfully like the floor below, minus the millstones; but the roof, instead of being a flat ceiling of boards and beams, was a complication of rafters, ties, posts, and cog-wheels, while at one side was the large pivot passing out through well-greased and blackened bearings, which bore the five sails of the mill, balanced to a great extent by the projecting fan, which, acted upon by the wind, caused the whole of the wooden cap which formed the top to revolve.

"There's the way out to repair the sails, or oil the great fan," said Uncle Richard, pointing to a little sloping doorway in the curved cap roof. "Think the place will do? It's a good fifteen feet from the floor to the curve."

"Do, sir?"

"Do, *uncle*, please. Yes, do! The whole top revolves easily enough, and will do so more easily when there are no sails or fan."

"Do you mean for defence, uncle?" stammered Tom.

"Defence?—nonsense. Attack, boy. The roof will only want modifying, and a long narrow shutter fitting, one that we can open or close easily from within. The place when cleaned, scraped, painted, and coloured will be all that one could wish, and is strong enough to bear anything. We can mount a monster here."

Tom looked more puzzled than ever. Monster?

"In the floor below make our laboratory, and keep chemicals and plates."

"Yes, uncle," said Tom; for he could understand that.

"And on the ground-floor do our grinding and fining."

"But the millstones are on the floor above," said Tom.

"Yes, I know, my boy, for the present; but I'll soon have them lowered down. There, the place will do splendidly, and

Mrs Fidler will be at peace.”

Tom did not see how Mrs Fidler could be at peace if the corn was ground on the basement-floor of the mill, but he said nothing.

“Now we’ll go down,” said Uncle Richard. “I’m more than satisfied. I’ll have two or three stout fellows to lower down the stones; the rest we will do ourselves.”

He led the way down, locked up the mill again and the outer gate, and then entered the garden and crossed it to the coach-house, where the packages brought down were waiting.

“Go to the tool-chest and fetch an iron chisel and the biggest hammer,” said Uncle Richard. “No, it’s screwed down. Bring the two largest screw-drivers.”

Tom hurried away, and soon returned, to find that his uncle had opened one of the packages he had brought down, and was untying some brown paper, which proved to contain brass tubes and fittings, with slides and rack-work.

“Know what these are?” said Uncle Richard.

“They look like part of a photographic camera,” said Tom.

“A good shot, my lad, but not right. Now for the big chest. I hope they are not broken. Try and get out some of the screws.”

These were gradually drawn from the very stout chest, the lid lifted, a quantity of thickly-packed straw removed, and a round package of brown paper was revealed.

“Out with it, Tom,” said his uncle. “No, don’t trust to the string.”

Tom bent down to lift out the package, but failed, and his uncle laughed.

“Let’s both try,” he said, and getting their fingers down, they lifted out something exceedingly heavy, and bore it to a stout bench. “Now for the other,” said Uncle Richard; and after removing more straw, a second package was seen precisely like the first, which on being taken out and opened, proved to be a great solid disc of ground-glass made fairly smooth but quite opaque.

“Bravo! quite sound,” cried Uncle Richard. “Now the other.”

This proved also to have borne the journey well, and Tom looked from the two great discs to his uncle.

“Well,” said the latter; “do you see what these are for?”

“To grind flour much finer?”

“To grind grandmothers, boy! Nonsense! Not to grind, but to be ground. Out of those Tom, you and I have to make a speculum of tremendous power.”

“A looking-glass, sir?” said Tom, feeling rather depressed at his uncle’s notion. For what could a sensible man want with looking-glasses made round, and weighing about a hundredweight each?

“Yes, a looking-glass, boy, for the sun and moon, and Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Saturn, and the rest to see their faces in, or for us to see them. I can’t afford to give five or six hundred pounds for a telescope, so you and I will make a monster.”

“Telescope!” cried Tom, as scales seemed to fall from before his eyes. “Oh, I see!”

“Well, didn’t you see before?”

“No, uncle, I couldn’t make it out. Then that’s what you want the windmill for, to put the telescope in, with the top to turn round any way?”

“To be sure; it will make a splendid observatory, will it not?”

“Glorious, uncle!” cried the boy, whose appearance underwent a complete change, and instead of looking heavy and dull, his eyes sparkled with animation as he exclaimed eagerly, “How big will the telescope be?”

“A little wider than the speculum—about eighteen inches across.”

“And how long?”

“Fifteen feet, boy.”

“Yes,” cried Tom, excitedly. “And when are you going to begin, uncle?”

“Now, my boy. At once.”

Chapter Nine.

“Uncle James was always calling me a fool,” said Tom the next morning; “and I must be, or I shouldn’t have thought poor Uncle Richard half crazy. What a lot of stuff I did get into my head.”

He was dressing with his window wide open; the sun was shining warmly, though it was only about six o'clock, and a delicious scent floated in from the garden and the pine-woods beyond.

"Grinding corn and turning miller!" he said, and he burst into a merry fit of laughter, and then stopped short with a hair-brush in his hand, staring at his face in the glass, for he hardly knew it; he looked so different to the sad, depressed lad whose countenance had gazed wearily at him from the mirror when he rose of a morning in London.

"It must be the fresh country air," he said to himself; but all the same he felt that it must be something more, and he hastened to finish dressing and go down, so as to have a good look round before breakfast punctually at eight.

"Seems like coming out for a holiday, or being at home again," he thought, as he went down-stairs softly, wondering whether he could easily get out, but to find that the front door was wide open, and hear the servants busy in the kitchen; while, as he stepped out on to the lawn, he suddenly heard the musical sound of a scythe being sharpened, and the next minute he was alongside of David, who had just begun to sweep the keen implement round and lay the daisies low.

"Mornin', sir, mornin'. Going to be reg'lar hot day.—Eh? Want to get up into the pine-woods. Best go straight to the bottom of the garden, and out into the field, and then strike up to your left."

Tom hurried through the bright grounds, followed the directions, and in a few minutes he was climbing a slope of rough common-land, here velvety short turf full of wild thyme, which exhaled its pungent odour as his feet crushed its dewy flowers, there tufted with an exceedingly fine-growing, soft kind of furze, beyond which were clumps of the greater, with its orange and yellow blooms, and rough patches of pale-bloomed ling and brilliant yellow broom.

Beyond this wide strip the closely-growing fir-trees began, forming a dense, dark-green wood.

It was for this that he was aiming; but as he reached the edge, he turned to stand in the bright sunshine looking down at the village.

There was the square-towered, ivy-covered church, with its clock-face glistening, and the hands pointing to twenty minutes past six. Beyond it, what seemed to be an extensive garden beside the churchyard, and the ivy-covered gables of a house that he immediately concluded was the Vicarage. Other attractive cottage-like houses were dotted about. Then he caught sight of the green, with its smaller places. Another more pretentious place or two, and as his eyes swept round, he reached, close at hand, his uncle's home—his home now, with the windmill towering above it just on the top of the ridge.

"What nonsense!" he said half aloud; and then he burst into a merry laugh, which ceased as he heard what sounded like a mocking echo, and a long-tailed black and white bird flew out of a fir-tree, with the sun glistening upon its burnished green and purple tail feathers. "Why it's a magpie!" he cried, and another flew out to follow the first.

As he stood watching them, his eyes rested upon a flashing of water here and there, showing where a stream ran winding through the shallow valley; while a couple of miles beyond it he could trace the railway now by a heavy goods train panting slowly along, with the engine funnel leaving a long train of white flocculent steam behind.

"Oh, it's lovely," he said softly. "Who could help being happy down here!"

There was rather a swelling in his throat, for he felt the change for a few moments. But the next minute the exploring desire was strong upon him, and he plunged in amongst the bronze, pillar-like stems of the fir-trees, and began wandering on and on in a kind of twilight, flecked and cut by vivid rays of sunshine, which came through the dense, dark-green canopy overhead. The place was full of attractions to such a newly-released prisoner, and his eyes were everywhere, now finding something to interest him in the thick soft carpet of pine-needles over which his feet glided. Then he caught sight of a squirrel which ran up a fir-tree, and stopped high up to watch the intruder. Then he came to an open place where trees had been felled; the stumps and chips dotted the ground, and bluebells had sprung up abundantly, along with patches of briar and heath revelling in the sunshine.

Here the sandy ground was showing soft and yellow in places, where it had been lately turned over, and in a minute or two he knew what by, for a rabbit sprang up from close to his feet, ran some fifty yards, and disappeared in a burrow; while from the trees beyond came a series of harsh cries, and he caught sight of half-a-dozen jays jerking themselves along, following one another in their soft flight, and showing the pure white patch just above their tails.

"There must be snakes and hedgehogs, and all kinds of wild things here," thought Tom, with all a boy's eagerness for country sights and sounds; "and look at that!"

He obeyed his own command, stopping short to watch, as he heard first a peculiar squealing sound, and directly after saw another rabbit come loping into sight, running in and out among the pine stumps, and keeping up the pitiful squealing sound as it ran.

"Must have been that," he thought; and he was about to run after it, when he suddenly saw something small and elongated appear among the bluebells. For a moment it appeared to be a large snake making its way unnaturally in an undulating, vertical way, instead of horizontally; but he directly after made out that it was a weasel in pursuit of the rabbit, going steadily along, evidently hunting by scent, and the next minute it had disappeared.

"I must not go much further," thought Tom after a while. "I ought to be back punctually to breakfast, and get my boots cleaned first."

He looked down at them, to see that the dew and sand had taken off all the polish, and stepping out now, he hurried for a mound, intending to make it the extent of his journey, and walk back from there to the village.

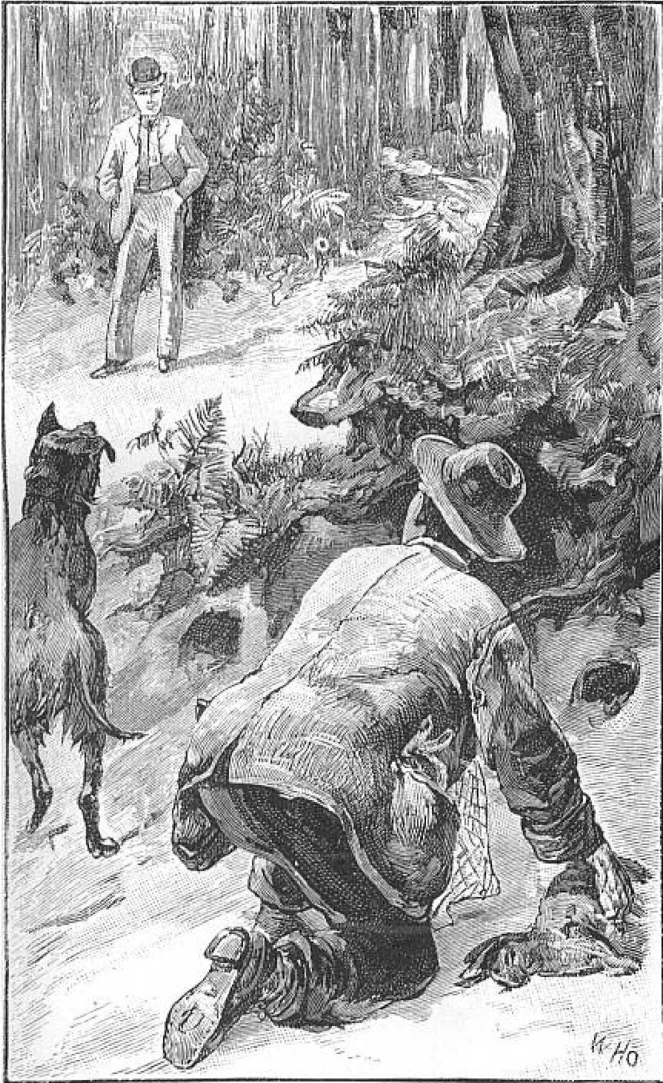
The mound was pine-crowned, and he had nearly reached the top, noting that the sand was liberally burrowed by rabbits, when all at once one of the little white-tailed creatures darted over the top into sight and rushed towards him; there was another rush, a big dog came into sight, overtook the rabbit before it could take refuge in a hole; there was a craunch, a squeal, and the dog was trotting back with the little animal drooping down on each side from its steel-trap jaws, quite dead.

"Poor rabbit," muttered Tom. "Why, it's that boy's dog."

He increased his pace, following the dog up the sandy mound; while the animal paid no heed to him, but went steadily on, with its thin, greyhound-like, bony tail hanging in a curve, till reaching the highest part of the eminence, the forepart with the rabbit disappeared, and then the tail curved up for a moment in the air and was gone.

Tom Blount felt interested, and hurried up now over the sand and fir-needles, till his head was above the top of the slope; and the next minute he was looking down at the back of the dog's master, as he was calmly stuffing the body of the defunct rabbit inside the lining of his coat, a slit in which served for a pocket. The dog was looking on, and just in front lay another rabbit, while a couple of yards away there was a hole scratched beneath the root of a tree, and the clean yellow sand scattered all about over the fir-needles.

The next moment Tom's sharp eyes detected that a couple of holes near at hand were covered with pieces of net, one of which suddenly began to move, and the dog drew its master's attention by giving a short low bark.



Tom and the poacher.—p. 106.

The warning had its effect, for the lad rose from his knees, stepped to the hole, and picked up something which Tom saw at once to be a long, reddish, writhing ferret. This snaky animal the lad thrust into his breast, stuffed the little piece of net into his pocket, picked up three more scraps from the mouths of other holes, and finally took the rabbit from the ground to pack inside his jacket lining, when the dog caught sight of Tom, and gave a sharp, angry bark.

The boy looked round, saw that he was observed, and started to run. But realising the next moment who it was, he hesitated, stopped, and hurriedly getting the second rabbit out of sight, put on a defiant air.

Tom smiled to himself.

"Poaching, or he wouldn't have begun to run.—I say," he said aloud, "whose wood is this?"

"What's that got to do with you?" cried the lad insolently. "'Tain't yours. And just you lookye here, if I ketches you sneaking arter and watching me again, I'll give you something as'll make that other side o' your face look swelled."

Tom involuntarily raised his hand to a tender spot on his right cheek, left from his encounter with his cousin, and the lad grinned.

"No, not that side, t'other," said the fellow. "Now then, just you hook it. You 'ain't no business here."

"As much business as you have," said Tom stoutly, for the lad's manner made his blood begin to flow more freely.

"No, you 'ain't; you're only a stranger, and just come."

"Anybody must have a right to come through here so long as he isn't poaching."

The lad gave a sharp look round, and then turned menacingly to Tom, with his fist doubled, and thrust his face forward.

"Just you say as I've been poaching agen, and I'll let you know."

His manner was so menacing that the dog read war, and set up a few hairs on the back of his neck, and uttered a low snarl.

"Yes, and I'll set the dog at yer too. Who's been poaching? Just you say that again."

"You look as if you had," said Tom stoutly, but with a very uncomfortable feeling running through him, for the dog's teeth were white and long, and looked just the kind to get a good hold of a running person's leg.

"Oh, I do, do I?" said the lad. "I'll soon let you know about that. Just you tell tales about me, and I'll half smash yer. I don't know as I won't now."

His manner was more menacing than ever, and Tom was beginning to feel that he would be compelled to place himself upon his defence, and signalise his coming to Furzebrough with another encounter, when, faintly-heard, came the striking of a church clock, borne on the soft morning breeze, arousing Tom to the fact that he must be a good way on towards an hour's walk back to his uncle's, and bringing up memories of his punctuality.

"Mustn't be late the first morning," he thought, just as the young rabbit poacher gave him a thrust back with his shoulder, and turning sharply he darted among the trees, and began to run toward his new home.

"Yah! coward!" was yelled after him, and a lump of sandy iron-stone struck him full in the back, making him wince; but he did not stop, only dodged in and out among the pine-trees, taking what he believed to be the right direction for the village. Then he ran faster, for he heard his assailant's voice urging on the dog.

"Ciss! Fetch him, Bob!" and glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the mongrel-looking brute was in full pursuit, snarling and uttering a low bark from time to time.

Tom's first and natural instinct was to run faster, in the hope that the dog would soon weary of the pursuit, and faster he did run, suffering from an unpleasant feeling of fear, for it is by no means pleasant to have a powerful, keen-toothed dog at your heels, one that has proved its ability to bite, and evidently intending to repeat the performance.

Tom ran, and the dog ran, and the latter soon proved that four legs are better for getting over the ground than two; for the next minute he was close up, snapping at the boy's legs, leaping at his hands, and sending him into a profuse perspiration.

"Ciss! fetch him down, boy!" came from a distance, and the dog responded by a bark and a snap at Tom's leg, which nearly took effect as he ran with all his might, and made him so desperate that he suddenly stopped short as the dog made a fresh snap, struck against him, and then from the effort rolled over and over on the ground.

Before it could gather itself up for a fresh attack Tom, in his desperation, stooped down and picked up the nearest thing to him—to wit, a good-sized fir-cone, which he hurled at the dog with all his might. It was very light, and did not hit its mark, but the young poacher's dog was a bad character, and must have known it. Certainly it had had stones thrown at it before that morning, and evidently under the impression that it was about to have its one eye knocked out or its head split, it uttered a piercing whining cry, tucked its thin tail between its legs, and began to run back toward its master as fast as it could go, chased by another fir-cone, which struck the ground close by it, and elicited another yelp.

Tom laughed, and at the same time felt annoyed with himself.

"Why didn't I do it at first?" he said; "and that isn't the worst of it—that fellow will think I ran away because I was afraid of him."

This last thought formed the subject upon which Tom dwelt all the way back, and he was still busy over an argument with himself as to whether he had been afraid of the young poacher or no, when, after missing the way two or three times among the firs, he caught sight of the church clock pointing to a quarter to eight.

"Just time to get in," he said, as he increased his pace; and then—"Yes, I suppose it was afraid of him, for he is a good deal bigger and stronger than I am."

"Hullo, Tom! been for a walk?" saluted him, as he was hurrying at last along the lane which divided his uncle's grounds from the new purchase.

Tom looked up quickly, and found that Uncle Richard was looking over the wall of the mill-yard.

"That's right," continued his uncle. "What do you think of the place?"

"Glorious!" said Tom.

"Hungry?"

"Terribly, uncle."

"That's right. Come along, Mrs Fidler's waiting for us by now."

Chapter Ten.

Directly after breakfast Tom followed his uncle to the coach-house, and from there up a ladder fastened to the side into the loft, where he looked around wonderingly, while his companion's face relaxed into a grim smile.

"It was originally intended for botanical productions, Tom," he said; "for a sort of *hortus siccus*, if you know what that means."

"*Hortus*—garden; *siccus*—I don't know what that means, uncle, unless it's dry."

"That's right, boy. Glad you know some Latin beside the legal. Dry garden, as a botanist calls it, where he stores up his specimens. But only a few kinds were kept here: hay, clover, oats, and linseed, in the form of cake. Now, you see, I've turned it into use for another science."

"Astronomy, uncle?"

"To be sure; but it's *very* small and inconvenient. But wait till we get the windmill going."

"Is this your telescope?" cried Tom.

"Yes, Tom; but it's too small. You'll have to work hard on my big one."

"Yes, uncle," said Tom, with quiet confidence, as he eagerly examined the glass with its mounting, and the many other objects about the place, one of which was a kind of trough half full of what seemed to be beautifully clear water, covered with a sheet of plate-glass.

"There, as soon as you've done we'll go to the mill, for I don't want to lose any time."

"I could stay here for hours, uncle," said Tom. "I want to know what all these things are for, and how you use them; but I'm ready now."

"That's right. The men are coming this morning to begin clearing away."

"So soon, uncle?"

"Yes, so soon. Life's short, Tom; and at my age one can't afford to waste time. Come along."

Tom began thinking as he followed his uncle, for his words suggested a good deal, inasmuch as he had been exceedingly extravagant with the time at his disposal, and much given to wishing the tedious hours to go by.

"Here they are," said Uncle Richard; for there was the sound of a horse's hoofs, and the crushing noise made by wheels in the lane.

"But I thought you were going to make the place into an observatory yourself, uncle, with me to help you?"

Uncle Richard smiled.

"It would be wasting valuable time, Tom," he said, "even if we could do it; but we could not. I've thought it over, and we shall have to content ourselves with making the glass."

On reaching the mill-yard it was to find half-a-dozen people there with ladders, scaffold-poles, ropes, blocks, and pulleys. There was a short consultation, and soon after the men began work, unbolting the woodwork of the sails, while others began to disconnect the millstones from the iron gearing.

This business brought up all the idlers of the village, who hung about looking on—some in a friendly way, others with a sneering look upon their countenances, as they let drop remarks that contained anything but respect for the owner of the place. But though they were careful not to let them reach Uncle Richard's ears, it seemed to Tom that more than once an extra unpleasant speech was made expressly for him to hear; and he coloured angrily as he felt that these people must know why the mill was being dismantled.

The work went on day after day, and first one great arm of the mill was lowered in safety, the others following, to make quite a stack of wood in a corner of the yard, but so arranged that one side touched the brickwork, as there was no need to leave room now for the revolution of the sails.

By this time the building had assumed the appearance of a tower, whose sides curved up to the wooden dome top, and the resemblance was completed as soon as the fan followed the sails.

Meanwhile the iron gearing connected with the stones had been taken down inside; then the stones had followed, being lowered through the floors into the basement, and from thence carefully rolled, to be leaned up against the wall.

"Hah!" said Uncle Richard, "at the end of a week," as he went up to the top-floor of the mill with his nephew.

"Is it only a week, uncle?" said Tom. "Why, it seems to me as if I had been here for a month."

"So long and tedious, boy?"

"Oh no, uncle," said Tom confusedly. "I meant I seem to have been here so long, and yet the time has gone like lightning."

"Then you can't have been very miserable, my boy?"

"Miserable!" cried Tom.

That was all; and Uncle Richard turned the conversation by pointing to the roof.

"There," he said, "that used to swing round easily enough with the weight of those huge sails, which looked so little upon the mill, but so big when they are down. It ought to move easily now, boy."

Tom tried, and found that the whole of the wooden top glided round upon its pivot with the greatest ease.

“Yes, that’s all very well,” said his uncle, “but it will have to be disconnected from the mill-post. I shall want that to bear the new glass.”

“That?” said Tom, gazing at the huge beam which went down through the floor right to the basement of the mill.

“Yes, boy; that will make a grandly steady stand when wedged tight. To a great extent this place is as good as if it had been built on purpose for an observatory. I shall be glad though when we get rid of the workmen, and all the litter and rubbish are cleared away.”

That afternoon a couple of carpenters began work, devoting themselves at first to the wooden dome-like roof, which they were to furnish from top to bottom with a narrow shutter, so formed that it could be opened to turn right over on to the roof, leaving a long slip open to the sky.

That night, after he had gone up to his bedroom, Tom threw open his window, to sit upon the ledge, reaching out so as to have a good look at the sky which spread above, one grand arch of darkest purple spangled with golden stars. To his right was the tower-like mill, and behind it almost the only constellation that he knew, to wit, Charles’s Wain, with every star distinct, even to the little one, which he had been told represented the boy driving the horses of the old northern waggon.

“How thick the stars are to-night,” he thought, as he traced the light clusters of the Milky Way, noting how it divided in one place into two. Then he tried to make out the Little Bear and failed, wondered which was the Dog Star, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn, and ended by giving his ear a vicious rub.

“A fellow don’t seem to know anything,” he thought. “How stupid I must seem to Uncle Richard. But I mean to know before I’ve done. Hark!”

He listened attentively, for in the distance a nightingale was singing, and the sweet notes were answered from somewhere beyond, and again and again at greater distances still, the notes, though faint, sounding deliciously pure and sweet.

“Who would live in London?” he said to himself; and a curiously mingled feeling of pleasure and sadness came over him, as he dwelt upon his position now, and how happy life had suddenly become.

“And I thought of running away,” he said softly, as he looked down now at the dimly-seen shrubs about the lawn. “Uncle Richard doesn’t seem to think I’m such a fool. Wonder whether I can learn all about the stars.”

Just then he yawned, for it was past ten, and the house so quiet that he felt sure that his uncle had gone to bed.

“Yes, I’ll learn all about them and surprise him,” he said. “There are plenty of books in the study. Then I shall not seem so stupid when we begin. What’s that?”

He had put out his candle when he opened the casement to look at the stars, so that his room was all dark, and he was just about to close the window, and hurry off his clothes, when a faint clinking sound struck upon his ear.

The noise came from the mill-yard to his right, where he could dimly make out the outlines of the building against the northern sky; and it sounded as if some of the ironwork which had been taken down—bolts, nuts, bands, and rails—and piled against the wall had slipped a little, so as to make a couple of the pieces clink.

“That’s what it is,” thought Tom, and he reached out to draw in his casement window, when he heard the sound again, a little louder.

“Cat walking over the iron,” thought Tom; but the noise came again, only a faint sound, but plain enough in the stillness of the night.

All at once a thought came which sent the blood flushing up into the boy’s cheeks, and nailed him, as it were, to the window.

“There’s some one in the yard stealing the old iron.”

The lad’s heart began to beat heavily, and thoughts came fast. Who could it be? Some one who knew where it all was, and meant to sell it. Surely it couldn’t be David!

Tom leaned out, gazing in the direction of the sounds, which still continued, and he made out now that it was just as if somebody was hurriedly pulling bolts and nuts out of a heap, and putting them in a bag or a sack.

Hot with indignation, as soon as he had arrived at this point, against whoever it could be who was robbing his uncle, Tom half turned from the window to go and wake him.

No, he would not do that. It must be some one in the village, and if he could find out who, that would be enough, and he could tell his uncle in the morning.

Tom had only been a short time at Furzebrough, but it was long enough to make him know many of the people at sight, and, in spite of the darkness, he fancied that he would be able to recognise the marauder if he could get near enough.

He did not stop to think. There was a heavy trellis-work covered with roses and creepers all over his side of the house, and the sill of his window was not much over ten feet from the flower-beds below.

He had no cap up-stairs, and he was in his slippers, but this last was all the better, and with all a boy’s activity he climbed out of the window, got a good hold of the trellis, felt down with his feet for a place, and descended with the greatest ease, avoided the narrow flower border by a bit of a spring, and landed upon David’s carefully-kept grass.

Here for a moment or two he paused.

The gate would be locked at night, and it would be better to get out at the bottom of the garden.

Satisfied with this, he set off at a trot, the velvety grass deadening his steps. Then, getting over the iron hurdle, he passed through a bit of shrubbery, found a thick stick, and got over the palings into the lane.

Here he had to be more cautious, for he wanted to try and make out who was the thief without being seen, and perhaps getting a crack over the head, as he put it, with a piece of iron.

The lane would not do, and besides, the gate would be locked, and the wall awkward to climb.

Another idea suggested itself, and stopping at the end of the mill-yard, he passed into a field, and with his heart increasing its pulsations, partly from exertion, as much as from excitement, he hurried round on tiptoe to the back of the mill-yard, and cautiously raising himself up, peered over the top of the wall, and listened.

To his disappointment, he found that though he could look over the top of the wall, it was only at the mill—all below in the yard was invisible, but the place was all very still now. Not a sound fell upon his ear for some minutes, and then a very faint one, which sounded like a load being lifted from the top of the wall, but right away down by where he had entered the field.

Tom stole back, bending low the while, but saw nothing, nobody was carrying a burden, and he was getting to be in despair, when all at once there was the sound of a stifled sneeze, evidently from far along the lane.

That was enough. Tom was back in the lane directly, keeping close to the hedge, and following, he believed, some one who was making his way from the village out toward the open country.

At the end of a minute he was sure that some one was about thirty yards in front of him, and perfectly certain directly after that whoever it was had turned off to the right along a narrow path between two hedges which bounded the bottom of his uncle’s field.

The path led round to the outskirts of the village, where there were some scattered cottages beyond the church, and feeling sure that the thief—if it was a thief—was making for there, Tom followed silently, guided twice over by a faint sniff, and pausing now and then to listen for some movement which he heard, the load the marauder carried brushing slightly against the hedge.

Then all at once the sounds ceased, and though Tom went on and on, and stopped to listen again and again, he could hear nothing. He hurried on quickly now, but felt that nobody could be at hand, and hurried back, peering now in the darkness to try and make out where the object of his search had struck off from the narrow way.

But in the obscurity he could make out nothing, for he was very ignorant about this track, never having been all along it before; and at last, thoroughly discouraged, he went back, growing more and more annoyed at his ill-success, and wishing he had made a rush and seized the thief at once.

And now, feeling thoroughly tired, as well as damped in his ardour, Tom reached the paling, climbed over into the shrubbery, reached the lawn, over which he walked slowly toward the darkened house, where he paused, and reached over to grasp the stout trellis, and spare David’s flower-bed.

It was very easy, almost as much so as climbing a ladder, and in a minute he had reached first one arm and then the other over the window-sill, and was about to climb in, when he almost let go and nearly dropped back into the garden.

For there was a loud scratching noise, a line of light, and a wax-match flashed out, and then burned steadily, lighting up Uncle Richard’s stern face and the little bedroom, as he stood a couple of yards back from the window.

“Now, sir, if you please,” came in severe tones. “What is the meaning of this?”

Chapter Eleven.

It did not mean apples nor pears from the garden, for they were nearly as hard as wood, and it did not mean going out to carry on some game with a companion, for Tom knew no one there.

Uncle Richard was aware of this when he heard Tom stealing down the trellis, and peeped at him from a darkened window. Hence his stern question.

“Oh, uncle!” said Tom, in a subdued voice, “how you frightened me.”

“I’m glad of it, sir,” said Uncle Richard, holding the little match to the candle and increasing the illumination as Tom climbed in. “I meant to. Now, sir, if you please, explain.”

“Yes, uncle,” said Tom calmly, and making his uncle frown.

“The impudent young dog!” he said to himself; and then he stood nodding his head, and gradually growing more satisfied that he had after all been right in his estimate of his nephew, though the night’s business had rather shaken his faith.

“Then you didn’t make out who it was, Tom,” he said, when Tom had explained.

“No, uncle; it was very stupid of me, I suppose.”

“Very foolish to be guilty of such an escapade.”

"Foolish!" said Tom, growing more damped than before; "but he was stealing the ironwork."

"Yes, evidently carrying it off; but it was old iron."

"But it was just as bad to steal old iron as new, uncle," said Tom.

"Ahem! yes, of course, my boy; but you must not be so venturesome. I mean that it was not worth while for you to risk being stricken down for the sake of saving some rubbish. Thieves are reckless when caught."

"I wasn't thinking of saving the old iron, uncle; I wanted to see who it was, so as to be able to tell you. I didn't think of being knocked down."

"Well, perhaps it was all a mistake, Tom," said Uncle Richard, "for it was in the dark."

"Yes, uncle, but I feel sure that some one was helping himself to the pieces of iron."

"Look in the morning, my boy. Get to bed now, and never do such a thing as that again. Good-night."

Uncle Richard nodded to the boy kindly enough and left him, while Tom soon turned in to bed, to lie dreaming that the man came back to fetch more iron, and kept on carrying it off till it was all gone. Then he came back again, lifted the mill sails as if they were mere twigs, and took them away, and lastly he was in the act of picking up one of the millstones, and putting it on his head, when Tom awoke, and found that it was a bright sunshiny morning.

It did not take him very long dressing, by which time it was nearly six, and he hurried down so as to get into the mill-yard before the carpenters came to work.

Sure enough, when he reached the heap of iron in the left-hand corner of the place, it was plain to see that a number of small pieces had been taken away, for not only had the heap been disturbed by some being removed, but the surface looked black, and not rusty like the rest, showing that a new surface had been exposed.

Satisfied that he was right, and there being no embargo placed upon his acting now, Tom went over the ground he had traversed the night before, and upon reaching the corner of the yard close to the lane, he came upon the spot where the bag must have been rested in getting it over; and as ill-luck would have it for the thief, the head of a great nail stuck out from between two bricks, a nail such as might have been used for the attaching of a clothes-line. This head had no doubt caught and torn the bag, for an iron screw nut lay on the top of the bricks.

Tom seized it, leaped the wall, and got into the lane, to find another nut in the road just where his uncle's field ended, and the narrow path went down between the two hedges.

This was a means of tracking, and, eager now to trace the place where the thief must have turned off, Tom went on with his hunt, to find the spot easily enough just at the corner of a potato field, where the hedge was so thin that a person could easily pass through.

"This must have been the place," thought Tom. "Yes, so it is. Hurrah!" he cried, and pressing against the hedge the hawthorn gave way on each side, and he pounced upon a piece of iron lying on the soft soil between two rows of neatly earthed-up potatoes. Better still, there were the deeply-marked footprints of some one who wore heavy boots, running straight between the next two rows, and following this step by step, Tom found two more nuts before he reached, the hedge on the other side of the field, and passed out into the lane in front of the straggling patch of cottages, from one of which the blue wood smoke was rising, and a little way off an old bent woman was going toward the stream which ran through this part of the village. She was carrying a tin kettle, and evidently on her way to fill it for breakfast.

Tom stopped in this lane undecided as to which way to go, for the thief might just as likely have passed to the left or right of these to another part of the village as have entered one of them.

He looked for the footprints, but they were only visible in the freshly-hoed field. There was not a sign in the hard road, and feeling now that he was at fault, he walked slowly down the lane, and then returned along the path close in front of the cottages. Just as he reached the gate leading into the patch of garden belonging to the one with the open door, and from which came the crackling of burning wood, his attention was taken by the loud yawning of some one within, and a large screw lying upon the crossbar of the palings which separated this garden from the next.

This screw was about four yards from the little gate, and it might have belonged to the occupants, but, as Tom darted in, certain that it was part of the plunder, he saw that it was muddy and wet, and just in front of him there was its imprint in the damp path, where it had evidently been trampled in and then picked out.

Tom felt certain now; and just then the little gate swung to, giving a bang which brought the yawner to the doorway in the person of the big lad who had shouted after Uncle Richard on the afternoon of Tom's first arrival, and next morning had been caught poaching. In fact, there was a ferrets' cage under the window with a couple of the creatures thrusting out their little pink noses as if asking to be fed.

The boys' eyes met, and there was no sleepiness in the bigger one's eyes as he caught sight of the screw in Tom's hand.

"Here!" he cried, rushing at him and trying to seize the piece of iron; "what are you doing here? That's mine."

"No, it isn't," cried Tom sturdily. "How did it come here?"

"What's that to you? You give that here, or it'll be the worse for you."

"Where did you get it?" cried Tom.

"It's no business of yours," cried the lad savagely. "Give it up, will yer."

He seized Tom by the collar with both hands, and tried then to snatch away the screw, but Tom held on with his spirit

rising; and as the struggle went on, in another minute he would have been striking out fiercely, had not there been an interruption in the arrival of the old woman with the newly-filled kettle.

"Here, what's this?" she croaked, in a peculiarly hoarse voice; and as Tom looked round he found himself face to face with a keen-eyed, swarthy, wrinkled old woman, whose untended grey hair hung in ragged locks about her cheeks, and whose hooked nose and prominent chin gave her quite the aspect of some old witch as fancied by an artist for a book.

"Do you hear, Pete, who's this?" she cried again, before the lad could answer. "What does he want?"

"Says that old iron screw's his, granny."

"What, that?" cried the old woman, making a snatch with her thin long-nailed finger at the piece of iron Tom held as far as he could from his adversary.

She was more successful than the lad had been, for she obtained possession of it, and hurriedly thrust it into some receptacle hidden by the folds of her dirty tea-leaf-coloured dress.

"Mine!" she cried, "mine! Who is he? Want to steal it?"

"Yes. D'yer hear? Be off out of our place, or I'll soon let you know."

"I shall not go," cried Tom, who was now bubbling over with excitement. "You stole the iron from our place—from the mill last night."

The old woman turned upon him furiously.

"The mill," she cried; "who pulled the poor old mill down, and robbed poor people of their meal? No corn, no flour. I know who you are now. You belong to him yonder. I know you. Cursed all of you. I know him, with his wicked ways and sins and doings. Go away—go away!"

She raised her hands threateningly, after setting down the kettle; and Tom shrank back in dismay from an adversary with whom he could not cope.

"Not till he brings out the iron he came and stole," cried Tom.

"Stole?—who stole? What yer mean?" cried the lad. "Here, let me get at him, granny. He ain't coming calling people stealers here, is he? It's your bit o' iron, ain't it?"

"Yes, mine—mine," cried the old woman; "send him away—send him away before I put a look upon him as he'll never lose."

"D'yer hear? you'd better be off!" cried the lad; and, completely beaten, Tom shrank away, the old woman following him up, with her lips moving rapidly, her fingers gesticulating, and a look in her fiercely wild eyes that was startling. He was ready in his excitement to renew his struggle with the lad, in spite of a disparity of years and size; but the old woman was too much, and he did not breathe freely till he was some distance away from the cottages, and on his way back to Heatherleigh.

The first person he encountered was his uncle, who was down the garden ready to greet him with—

"Morning, Tom, lad; I'm afraid you were right about the iron."

"Yes, uncle; and I found who stole it. I traced it to one of the cottages," and he related his experience.

"Ah!" he said; "so you've fallen foul of old Mother Warboys. You don't believe in witches, do you, Tom?"

"No, uncle, of course not; but she's a horrible old woman."

"Yes, and the simple folk about here believe in her as something no canny, as the Scotch call it. So you think it was Master Pete Warboys, do you?"

"Yes, uncle, I feel sure it was; and if you sent a policeman at once, I dare say he would find the bag of iron."

"Hardly likely, Tom; they would have got rid of it before he came there if I did send one, which I shall not do."

"Not send—for stealing?"

"No, Tom," said Uncle Richard quietly. "Police means magistrates, magistrates mean conviction and prison. Master Pete's bad enough now."

"Yes, uncle; he poaches rabbits."

"I dare say," said Uncle Richard; "and if I sent him to prison, I should, I fear, make him worse, and all for the sake of a few pieces of old iron. No, Tom, I think we'll leave some one else to punish him. You and I are too busy to think of such things. We want to start upon our journey."

"Are we going out, uncle?" said Tom eagerly.

"Yes, boy, as soon as the great glass is made: off and away through the mighty realms of space, to plunge our eyes into the depths of the heavens, and see the wonders waiting for us there."

Tom felt a little puzzled by Uncle Richard's language, but he only said, "Yes, of course," and did not quite understand why Master Pete Warboys, who seemed to be as objectionable a young cub as ever inhabited a pleasant country village,

should be allowed to go unpunished.

That day was spent in the mill, where the carpenters were working away steadily; and as the time sped on, the wooden dome-like roof was finished, the shutter worked well, and a little railed place was contrived so that men could go out to paint or repair, while at the same time the railings looked ornamental, and gave the place a finish. Then some rollers were added, to make the whole top glide round more easily; and the great post which ran up the centre of the mill was cut off level with the top chamber floor, and detached from the roof.

"That will be capital for a stand," said Uncle Richard; "and going right down to the ground as it does, gives great steadiness and freedom from vibration."

A few days more, and white-washing and a lining with matchboard had completely transformed the three floors of the mill, a liberal allowance of a dark stain and varnish giving the finishing touches, so that in what had been a remarkably short space of time the ramshackle old mill had become a very respectable-looking observatory, only waiting for the scientific apparatus, which had to be made.

The next thing was the clearing out of the yard, where, under David's superintendence, a couple of labouring men had a long task to cut up old wood and wheel it away, to be stacked in the coach-house and a shed. The great millstones were left—for ornament, Uncle Richard said; and as for the old iron, he said dryly to Tom, as they stood by the heap—

"Seems a pity that so many of these pieces were too heavy to lift."

"Why; uncle? Two men can lift one."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard; "but one boy can't, or it would all have been cleared away for me."

Tom looked in the dry quaint face, which appeared serious, although the boy felt that his uncle was in one of his humorous moods.

"There must be a strange fascination about stealing, Tom," he continued, "for, you see, quite half of that old iron is gone."

"More," said Tom.

"Yes, more, my boy. Strange what trouble rogues will take for very little. Now, for instance, I should say that whatever might have been its intrinsic worth, whoever stole that old iron could not possibly altogether have sold it for more than five shillings, that is to say, about one shilling per week."

"Is it five weeks since the men began to pull down, uncle?"

"Five weeks yesterday; and that amount could have been earned by an industrious boy in, say, four days, and by a labouring man in two. I'm afraid, Tom, that dishonesty does not pay."

David, who was close by, helping to load the remainder of the old iron into a cart, edged up to Tom as soon as Uncle Richard had gone into the mill.

"Strikes me, Master Tom," he said, "as I could put my hand on him as stole that there old iron."

"Who do you think it was, David?"

"Not going to name no names, sir," said David, screwing up his lips, and tightening a roll of blue serge apron about his waist. "Don't do to slander your neighbours; but if you was to say it was old Mother Warboys' hulking grandson, I wouldn't be so rude as to contradick you; not as I say it is, mind you, but I've knowed that chap ever since he was a dirty little gipsy whelp of a thing, and I never yet knowed him take anything as was out of his reach."

Tom laughed.

"But I just give him fair warning, Master Tom, that if he comes after my ribstons and Maria Louisas this year—"

"Did he come last year?" said Tom eagerly.

"Never you mind that, Master Tom. I don't say as he did, and I don't say as he didn't; but I will say this, and swear to it: them Maria Louisas on the wall has got eyes in their heads, and stalks as does for tails, but I never see one yet as had legs."

"Nor I neither, David," said Tom, laughing.

"No, sir; but all the same they walked over the wall and out into the lane somehow. So did lots of the ribstons and my king pippins. But tchah! it's no use to say nought to your uncle. If somebody was to come and steal his legs I don't b'lieve he'd holler 'Stop thief!' but when it comes to my fruit, as I'm that proud on it grieves me to see it picked, walking over the wall night after night, I feel sometimes as it's no good to prune and train, and manoor things."

"Ah, it must be vexatious, David!"

"Waxashus is nothing to it, sir. I tell you what it is, sir: it's made me wicked, that it has. There's them times when I've been going to church o' Sundays, and seen that there Pete Warboys and two or three other boys a-hanging about a corner waiting till everybody's inside to go and get into some mischief. I've gone to my seat along with the singers, sir, and you may believe me when I tell you, I've never heered a single word o' the sarmon, but sat there seeing that chap after my pears and apples all the time."

"Then you do give Pete Warboys the credit of it, David?"

“No, I don’t, sir. I won’t ’cuse nobody; but what I do say is this, that if ever I’m down the garden with a rake or hoe-handle in my hand, and Pete Warboys comes over the wall, I’ll hit him as hard as I can, and ask master afterwards whether I’ve done right.”

“David,” said Tom eagerly, “how soon will the pears be ripe?”

“Oh, not for long enough yet, sir; and the worst of it is, if you’re afraid of your pears and apples being stole, and picks ’em soon, they s’rivels up and has no taste in ’em.”

“Then we must lie in wait for whoever it is, when the fruit is ripe, and catch them.”

David shut both of his eyes tight, wrinkled his face up, and shook himself all over, then opened his eyes again, nodded, and whispered solemnly—

“Master Tom, we just will.”

Then he went off to the loading of the iron, saw the last load carted out, and was back ready, after shutting the gate, to take his master’s orders about turning the mill-yard into a shrubbery and garden.

A week with plenty of help from the labourers completely transformed the place. Then plenty of big shrubs and conifers were taken up from the garden, with what David called good balls to their roots, and planted here and there, loads of gravel were brought in, the roller was brought into action, and a wide broad walk led with a curve to the mill-door; there was a broad border round the tower itself, and a walk outside that; and Tom and Uncle Richard stood looking at the work one evening in a very satisfied frame of mind.

“There, Tom, now for tying up my money-bag. That’s all I mean to spend. Now you and I will have to do the rest.”

The next day was devoted to furnishing the interior with the odds and ends of scientific apparatus. The small telescope was mounted in the top-floor, the new apparatus, boxes, bottles, and jars were placed on tables and shelves in the middle floor, and the two great glass discs were carefully carried into the stone-floored basement, where a cask was stood up on end, a hole made in the head, and barrowful after barrowful of the fine silver sand plentiful in amongst the pine-trees was wheeled up and poured in, like so much water, with a big funnel, till the cask was full.

“What’s that for?” said Uncle Richard, in response to an inquiry from his nephew. “That, Tom, is for a work-bench, meant to be so solid that it will not move. Try if you can stir it.”

Tom gave it a thrust, and shook his head.

“I don’t think three men could push it over, uncle,” he said.

“Two couldn’t, Tom. There, that will do. We mustn’t have any accident with our speculum. Now then, to begin. Ready? Tuck up your sleeves.”

Tom obeyed, and helped his uncle to lift one of the glass discs on to the top of the cask, where it was easily fixed by screwing three little brick-shaped pieces of wood on to the head close against the sides of the glass.

Uncle Richard paused after tightening the last screw, and stood looking at his nephew.

“What a queer boy you are, Tom,” he said.

“Am I, uncle?” said the lad, colouring.

“To be sure you are. Most boys would be full of questions, and ask why that’s done.”

“Oh,” cried Tom, who smiled as he felt relieved, “I’m just the same, uncle—as full of questions as any boy.”

“But you don’t speak.”

“No, uncle; it’s because I don’t want you to think I’m a trouble, but I do want to know horribly all the same.”

“I’m glad of it, boy, because I don’t want what the Germans call a dummkopf to help me. I see; I must volunteer my information. To begin with then, that disc of glass is—”

“For the speculum,” said Tom eagerly; “and you’re going to polish it.”

“Wrong. That’s only for the tool. The other is for the speculum, and we are going to grind it upon the tool.”

He turned to the other flat disc of ground-glass, where it lay upon a piece of folded blanket upon a bench under the window, and laid his head upon it.

“Doesn’t look much, does it, Tom?” he said.

“No, uncle.”

“And I’m afraid that all we have to go through may seem rather uninteresting to you.”

“Oh no, uncle; it will be very interesting to make a telescope.”

“I hope you will feel it so, boy, for you do not stand where I do, so you must set your young imagination to work. For my part, do you know what I can see in that dull flat piece of glass?”

Tom shook his head.

"Some of the greatest wonders of creation, boy. I can look forward and see it finished, and bringing to our eyes the sun with its majestic spots and ruddy corona, fierce with blazing heat so great that it is beyond our comprehension; the cold, pale, dead, silver moon, with its hundreds of old ring-plains and craters, scored and seamed, and looking to be only a few hundred miles away instead of two hundred and forty thousand; Jupiter with its four moons—perhaps we shall see the fifth—its belts and great red spot as it whirls round in space; brilliant Venus, with her changes like our moon; bright little Mercury; Saturn, with his disc-like ring, his belts and satellites; leaden-looking Neptune; ruddy Mars; the stars that look to us of a night bright points of light, opened out by that optic glass, and shown to be double, triple, and quadruple. Then too the different misty nebulas; the comets and the different-coloured stars—white, blue, and green. In short, endless wonders, my boy, such as excite, awe, and teach us how grand, how vast is the universe in which our tiny world goes spinning round. Come, boy, do you think you can feel interested in all this, or will you find it dry?"

"Dry, uncle! Oh!" panted Tom, with his eyes flashing with eagerness, "it sounds glorious."

"It is glorious, my boy; and you who have read your *Arabian Nights*, and stories of magicians and their doings, will have to own that our piece of dull glass will grow into a power that shall transcend infinitely anything the imagination of any storyteller ever invented. Now, what do you say? for I must not preach any more."

"Say, uncle!" cried Tom. "Let's begin at once!"

"I beg pardon, sir," said a pleasant voice; "but would you mind having a bell made to ring right in here?"

"No, Mrs Fidler," said Uncle Richard; "we will lay down iron pipes underground to make a speaking-tube, so that you can call when you want me. What is it—lunch?"

"Lunch, sir!" said Mrs Fidler; "dear me, no; the dinner's waiting and getting cold."

"Bother the old dinner!" thought Tom.

"Come, my lad, we must eat," said Uncle Richard, with a smile. "We shall not finish the telescope to-day."

Chapter Twelve.

"Now then, we'll begin," said Uncle Richard; "and the first thing is to make our mould or gauge, for everything we do must be so exact that we can set distortion at defiance. We must have no aberration, as opticians call it."

"Begin to polish the glass, uncle?"

"Not yet. Fetch those two pieces of lath." Tom fetched a couple of thin pieces of wood, each a little over twelve feet long. These were laid upon the bench and screwed together, so as to make one rod just over twenty-four feet long.

Then at one end a hole was made, into which a large brass-headed nail was thrust, while through the other end a sharp-pointed bradawl was bored, so as to leave its sharp point sticking out a quarter of an inch on the other side.

"So far so good," said Uncle Richard. "Do you know what we are going to do, Tom?" Tom shook his head.

"Strike the curve on that piece of zinc that we are to make our speculum."

"Curve?" said Tom; "why, it's quite round now."

"Yes; the edge is, but we are going to work at the face."

"But arn't you going to polish it into a looking-glass?"

"Yes; but not a flat one—a plane. That would be of no use to us, Tom; we must have a parabolic curve."

"Oh," said Tom, who only knew parabolas from a cursory acquaintance with them through an old Greek friend called Euclid.

"Be patient, and you'll soon understand," continued Uncle Richard, who proceeded to secure the sheet of zinc to a piece of board by means of four tacks at its corners, and ended by carrying it out, and fixing the board just at the bottom of the border, close to the window.

A couple of strong nails at the sides of the board were sufficient, and then he led the way in.

"Now, Tom, take that ball of twine and the hammer, and go up to the top window, open it, and look out."

The boy did not stop to say "What for?" but ran up-stairs, opened the window, and looked out, to find his uncle beneath with the long rod.

"Lower down the end of the string," he cried; and this was done, Tom watching, and seeing it tied to the end of the rod where the brass nail stuck through.

"Haul up, Tom."

The twine was tightened, and the end of the rod drawn up till Tom could take it in his hand.

"Now take away the string."

This was done.

“Get your hammer.”

“It’s here on the window-sill, uncle.”

“That’s right. Now look here: I want you to lean out, and drive that nail in between two of the bricks, so that this marking-point at my end may hang just a few inches above the bottom of my piece of zinc. I’ll guide it. That’s just right. Now drive in the nail.”

“Must come an inch higher, so that the nail may be opposite a joint.”

“Take it an inch higher, and drive it in.”

This was done, and the rod swung like an immensely long wooden pendulum.

“That’s right,” cried Uncle Richard; “the nail and this point are exactly twenty-four feet apart. Now keep your finger on the head of the nail to steady it while I mark the zinc.”

Tom obeyed, and looked down the while, to see his uncle move the rod to and fro, till he had scored in the sheet of zinc a curve as neatly and more truly than if it had been done with a pair of compasses.

“That’s all, Tom,” he said. “Take out the nail and lower the rod down again carefully, or it will break.”

All this was done, and Tom descended to find that both the rod and the sheet of zinc had been carried in, the latter laid on the bench, and displaying a curve deeply scratched upon it where the sharp-pointed bradawl had been drawn.

“There, Tom,” said Uncle Richard, “that curve is exactly the one we have to make in our speculum, so that we may have a telescope of twelve feet focus. Do you understand?”

“No,” said Tom bluntly.

“Never mind—you soon will. It means that when we have ground out the glass so that it is a hollow of that shape, all the light reflected will meet at a point just twelve feet distant from its surface. Now we have begun in real earnest.”

He now took a keen-edged chisel, and pressing the corner down proceeded to deepen the mark scored in the zinc with the greatest care, until he had cut right through, forming the metal into two moulds, one of which was to gauge the lower disc, the other the upper. The edges of these were then rubbed carefully together as they lay flat upon the bench, till their edges were quite smooth; then some of the unnecessary zinc was cut away, a couple of big holes punched in them, and they were hung upon a couple of nails over the bench ready for use.

“Next thing,” cried Uncle Richard, “is to begin upon the speculum itself, so now for our apparatus. Here we have it all: a bowl of fine sifted silver sand, a bucket of water, and a sponge. Very simple things for bringing the moon so near, eh?”

“But is that all we want, uncle?”

“At present, my boy,” said Uncle Richard, proceeding to wet some of the sand and pretty well cover the disc of glass fixed upon the cask-head. “That’s for grinding, as you see.”

“Yes, uncle; but what are you going to rub it with?”

“The other disc. Here, catch hold. Be careful.”

Tom obeyed, and the smooth piece of plate-glass was laid flat upon the first piece, crushing down the wet sand, and fitting well into its place.

“Now, my boy, if we rub those two together, what will be the effect?”

“Grind the glass,” said Tom. “I once made a transparent slate like that, by rubbing a piece of glass on a stone with some sand and water. But I thought you wanted to hollow out the glass?”

“So I do, Tom.”

“But that will only keep the pieces flat.”

“I beg your pardon, my boy. If we rub and grind them as I propose, one of the discs will be rounded and the other hollowed exactly as I wish.”

Tom stared, for this was to his way of thinking impossible.

“Are you sure you are right, uncle? Because if you are not, it would be so much trouble for nothing.”

“Let’s prove it,” said Uncle Richard, smiling. “Go to the kitchen door, and ask the cook for a couple of good-sized pieces of salt and the meat-saw.”

The cook stared, but furnished the required pieces, which were soon shaped into flat slabs with the saw. Then a sheet of newspaper was spread, and one of the flat pieces of salt placed upon the other.

“There you are, Tom,” said his uncle. “I want you to see for yourself; then you will work better. Now then, grind away, keeping the bottom piece firm, and the top going in circular strokes, the top passing half off the bottom every time.”

Tom began, and worked away, while from time to time the lower piece was turned round.

"Nice fine salt," said Uncle Richard; "cook ought to be much obliged."

"It will be as flat as flat," said Tom to himself, "but I don't like to tell him so."

"There, that will do," said Uncle Richard, at the end of ten minutes. "Now then, are the pieces both flat?"

"No, uncle; the bottom piece is rounded and the top hollowed, but I can't see why."

"Then I'll tell you: because the centre gets rubbed more than the sides, Tom. There, take paper and salt back, and we'll begin."

Tom caught up the paper, and soon returned, eager to commence; and after a little instruction as to how he was to place his hands upon the top glass, Uncle Richard placed himself exactly opposite to his nephew, with the upturned cask between them.

"Now, Tom, it will be a very long and tedious task with this great speculum; hot work for us too, so we must do a bit now and a bit then, so as not to weary ourselves out. Ready?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Then off."

"It will be a tiresome job," thought Tom, as, trying hard to get into regular swing with his uncle, the top glass was pushed to and fro from one to the other; but at each thrust Uncle Richard made a half step to his left, Tom, according to instructions, the same, so that the glass might be ground regularly all over. At the end of a quarter of an hour it was slid on one side, and more water and sand applied. Then on again, and the grinding continued, the weight of the glass making the task very difficult. But Tom worked manfully, encouraged by his uncle's assurance that every day he would grow more accustomed to the work, and after two more stoppages there was a cessation.

"There!" cried Uncle Richard; "one hour's enough for the first day. It wants faith to go on with such a business, Tom."

As he spoke the future speculum was carefully lifted off the lower one, sponged with clean water, and on examination proved to be pretty well scratched in the middle in a round patch, but the marks grew less and less, till at the edge of the glass it was hardly scratched at all.

"There, you see where we bite hardest," said Uncle Richard; "now we'll give it a rest, and ourselves too."

"But we shall never get done like this," cried Tom.

"Oh yes, we shall, boy; and I'm not going to leave off our work. Let's see: this we must call the workshop, the floor above our laboratory, and the top of course the observatory. Now then, let's go up into our laboratory, and I'll give you a lesson in elutriation."

Chapter Thirteen.

"I haven't got a dictionary here, uncle," said Tom, with a smile, as they stood at the massive table under the window in the laboratory. "I don't know what elutriation means."

"I dare say not. I didn't till I was nearly fifty, Tom, but you soon shall know. Fetch that tin off the shelf."

Tom obeyed, and found a label on the top, on which was printed "Best Ground Emery."

"Well, you know what that is?"

"Emery? Powdered glass," said Tom promptly.

"Wrong. Diamond cuts diamond, Tom, but we want something stronger than powdered glass to polish itself. Emery is a mineral similar in nature to sapphire and ruby, but they are bright crystals, and emery is found in dull blocks."

"Then it's very valuable?" said Tom.

"Oh, no. It is fairly plentiful in Nature, and much used. Now then, we want coarse emery to grind our speculum after we have done with the sand, and then different degrees to follow, till we get some exquisitely fine for polishing. How are we to divide the contents of that tin so as to graduate our grinding and polishing powder?"

"Sift it, of course, uncle."

"And where would you get sieves sufficiently fine at last?"

"Muslin?"

"Oh, no. Here is where elutriation comes in, Tom; and here you see the use of some of the things I brought back from London the other day. To work. Bring forward that great pan."

This was done.

"Now empty in the contents of this packet."

Tom took up a little white paper of something soft, opened it, and poured the contents into the pan.

"Powdered gum arabic?" he said.

"Yes. Now empty the tin of emery upon it."

Tom opened the tin, and found within a dark chocolate-looking powder, which felt very gritty between his finger and thumb. This he emptied upon the gum arabic, and, in obedience to instructions, thoroughly mixed both together.

"To make the fine emery remain longer in suspension," said his uncle, "keep on stirring, Tom."

"All right, uncle. What, are you going to pour water in? It's like making a Christmas pudding."

For Uncle Richard took up a can of water, and began to pour a little in as Tom stirred, changing the powder first into a paste, then into a thick mud, then into a thin brown batter, and at last, when a couple of gallons or so had been poured in and the whole well mixed, the great pan was full of a dirty liquid, upon the top of which a scum gathered as the movement ceased. This scum Uncle Richard proceeded to skim off till the surface was quite clear, and then he glanced at his watch.

"Is that scum the elutriation?" said Tom, with a faint grin.

"No, boy, the impurity; throw it down the sink. Now, Tom, we want to get our finest polishing emery out of that mixture, and it will take an hour to form—sixty-minute emery, the opticians call it; so while it is preparing, we'll go and have another turn at the speculum."

They descended, leaving the pan standing on the heavy table, and after spreading wet sand upon the lower disc of glass, the loose one was once more set in motion, and uncle and nephew, with quarter-hour rests for examination and wetting the surfaces, patiently ground away for an hour, by which time, upon the speculum being sponged, it was found that the greater part of the upper glass was deeply scratched.

"This is going to be an awfully long job," thought Tom.

"Yes, it is," said his uncle, who aptly read his thoughts, "a very long job, Tom; but good things have to be worked for, boy."

"Oh, I'm not going to be tired, uncle. It's like working for a grand prize."

"It is. Now then, let's see to the emery. Our finest must be ready by now. Now I want all the water, from which the emery has settled down to the bottom, drawn off into that great white basin. How is it to be done?"

"Pour it off," said Tom.

"No; couldn't be done without disturbing the bottom. Let's try syphoning."

Uncle Richard placed the basin upon a stool below the level of the table, took up a glass tube bent somewhat in the shape of a long-shanked hook, placed the short end gently beneath the surface of the nearly clear water, his lips to the long end, drew out the air, and the water followed directly from the atmospheric pressure, and ran swiftly into the basin.

As it ran, and Tom watched, Uncle Richard carefully held the short arm of the syphon, guiding it till the sediment at the bottom of the pan was nearly reached, when he quickly withdrew it, and the basin was then placed beside the pan.

"There, Tom," said Uncle Richard, "that's our sixty-minute emery."

"But I thought you said you wanted it very fine. You've only washed it."

"We're playing at cross purposes, Tom," said Uncle Richard. "You are talking about the contents of the pan, I about those of the basin."

"What! the clear water—at least nearly clear?"

"Ah, there you have hit it, boy—nearly clear. That water contains our finest polishing powder, and it will have to stand till to-morrow to settle."

"Oh!" said Tom, who felt very much in the dark, and he followed his uncle to the neat sink that had been fitted in the laboratory, and helped him wash a series of wide-mouthed stoppered bottles, which were afterwards carefully dried and labelled in a most methodical way.

"Saves time, Tom, to be careful," said Uncle Richard, who now took up a pen and wrote upon the label of the smallest bottle "Emery, 60 min."

"There, that's for the contents of the big basin."

"Want a genii to get a pailful into that little bottle, uncle," said Tom, laughing.

"We'll get all we want into it to-morrow, Tom," was the reply. "Now then, how do you feel—ready for one hour's more grinding at the speculum, or shall we leave it till to-morrow?"

"I want to finish it, and see the moon," said Tom sturdily, as he rolled up his sleeves a little more tightly. "Let's get on, uncle, and finish it."

"Or get an hour nearer," said Uncle Richard; and they went down and ground till Mrs Fidler summoned them to their meal.

Chapter Fourteen.

The next morning came a letter from Mornington Crescent, announcing that James Brandon had met with an accident, and been knocked down by a cab. The letter was written by Sam, evidently at his father's dictation, and on the fly-leaf was a postscript self-evidently not at James Brandon's dictation, for it was as follows—

> "P.S.—Dear Uncle, there isn't much the matter, only a few bruises, only the pater makes such a fuss. Thought you'd like to know."

"Charming youth, your cousin," said Uncle Richard, as he rose and went into his little study to answer the letter, leaving Tom at liberty for a few minutes, which he utilised by going down the garden to where David was busy.

"Morning, sir. How's the machine getting on?"

"Capitally, David."

"That's right, sir. I hope you and the master 'll make some'at out of it, for people do go on dreadful about it down the village."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Well, sir, of course it's their higgorance. You and me knows better, and I shouldn't like master to know, but they lead me a horful life about it all. They say master's got a crack in his head about that thing he's making, and that he ought to be stopped."

"Why?" said Tom, laughing.

"Oh, it's nothing to laugh about, sir. They say the place won't be safe, for he'll be having a blow-up one of these days with his contrapshums."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, sir, I don't know about that. He did have one, and singed all his hair off, and blew out his libery window."

"Tom!"

"Coming, uncle."

"Don't you say a word to him, sir, please."

"Oh, no; all right, David; and next time the people say anything to you about uncle's experiments, you tell them they're a pack of bull-geese!"

"Bull-geese!" said David, turning the word over two or three times as if he liked it, "bull-geese! Yes, sir, I will," and he began to chuckle, while Tom joined his uncle, who was already on his way to the mill.

As Tom reached the lane he was just in time to meet Pete Warboys, who came slouching along with his hands as far down in his pockets as he could reach, his boots, two sizes too large, unlaced, and his dog close behind him.

Pete's body went forward as if all together, but his eyes were on the move the while, searching in every direction as if for prey, and settled upon Tom with a peculiarly vindictive stare, while the dog left his master's side, and began to sniff at Tom's legs.

"Not afraid of you now," thought the boy, as he remembered the fir-cones, and felt sure that a stone would send the dog flying at any time. But as he met Pete's eye he did not feel half so sure. For Pete was big-boned and strong, and promised to be an ugly customer in a battle.

"And besides, he's so dirty," thought Tom, as he passed on to the gate, through which his uncle had just passed.

Pete said nothing until Tom had closed the gate. Then there was the appearance of a pair of dirty hands over the coping of the wall, the scraping noise made by a pair of boot toes against the bricks, and next Pete's head appeared just above the wall, and he uttered the comprehensive word expressive of his contempt, defiance, and general disposition to regard the boy from London as an enemy whose head he felt disposed to punch. Pete's word was—

"Yah!"

Tom felt indignant.

"Get down off that wall, sir!" he cried.

This roused Pete Warboys, who, as the daring outlaw of Furzebrough, desired to play his part manfully, especially so since he was on the other side of the said wall; and, wrinkling up his snub nose, he cried—

"She-arn't! 'Tain't your wall."

"Get down!" cried Tom fiercely.

"Get down yerself. Who are you, I should like to know?"

Tom stooped and picked up a clod of earth, and Pete ducked his head, the motion causing his toes to slip out of a

crevice between two bricks, and he disappeared, but only to scramble up again.

"You heave that at me," he cried fiercely, "and I'll come over and smash yer."

Tom felt disposed to risk the smashing, and drew back his hand to throw the clod, when his wrist was caught, for his uncle had heard what passed, and returned to the door.

"Don't do that, my boy," he said quietly. Then to Pete, "Get down off that wall."

"She-arn't! Who are you?" cried the great hulking fellow, and he scrambled a little more upward, so as to hang over with his elbows on the top bricks.

"Then stop there," said Uncle Richard quietly. "Don't take any notice of him, Tom; the fellow is half an idiot."

"So are you!" yelled Pete. "Yah! Who pulled the—"

Whack!

"Ow! ah!" A scramble, and Pete disappeared as an angry voice was heard on the other side of the wall.

"How dare you, sir? Insolent young scoundrel! Be off with you!"

"Don't you hit me!" came in a yelping, snivelling tone. "Don't you hit me! You hit me, and I'll—Get out!"

There was a dull thud, a yell, and the succession of cries uttered by a dog in pain, generally known as "chy-ike." For, unable to vent his spleen upon his aggressor, Pete had turned upon his wretched dog, which was unfortunate enough to get between his master's legs, nearly sending him down as he backed away from a quivering malacca cane. The dog received an awful kick, and ran down the narrow lane, and Pete followed him in a loose-jointed, shambling trot, turned into the pathway between the hedges at the bottom of Uncle Richard's field, thrust his head back, relieved his feelings by yelling out "Yah!" and disappeared.

By this time Tom and his uncle were down at the yard gate, which they threw open, to find themselves face to face with the vicar, a little fresh-coloured, plump, grey man of five-and-forty. His brow was wrinkled with annoyance, and his grey hair and whiskers seemed to bristle, as he changed the stout cane into his left hand, pulled off his right glove, and shook hands.

"Good-morning," he cried; "good-morning—nephew, arn't you? Glad to know you. Only came back last night, Brandon, and the first thing I encounter in my first walk is that young scoundrel insulting you."

"Oh, it's nothing," said Uncle Richard, smiling.

"But it is something, my dear sir. After all the pains I took with that boy at our school—when I could get him there—he turns out like this. Really," he continued, laughing very good-humouredly, and looking down at his cane, "I ought not to have done it,—not becoming in a clergyman,—but the young dog was insulting you, and he was stretched over the wall so tightly. Really—ha, ha!—it was so tempting that I felt obliged."

"Yes, it must have been tempting," said Uncle Richard. "Well, have you come back quite strong?"

"Seems like it," said the vicar, laughing. Then seriously, "Yes, thank heaven, I feel quite myself again."

"That's good," said Uncle Richard. "I am very glad."

"I know you are. And oh, Brandon, you can't think how glad I am to get back to the dear old place again. My garden looks delightful; and yours?"

"Capital."

"But, my dear fellow, what in the world are you doing with the old mill. I heard you had bought it. Sails gone, mended, painted. Why, surely—yes—no—yes, I have it—observatory."

"Right."

"Splendid idea. Capital. You ought to have a big telescope for that."

"Making it," said Uncle Richard laconically.

"Glad of it. Wish I could join you. There, good-bye, so much to do; can't tell me, I suppose, what to do with that lad Pete Warboys?"

Uncle Richard shook his head, and the vicar shook his hand. Then as he went through the same process with Tom, he said—

"Glad to know you; I'm sure we shall be very good friends;" and then he hurried away, and the others closed the gate and went into the workshop, where the speculum was waiting to be ground.

"You'll like Mr Maxted," said Uncle Richard quietly. "A thorough, true-hearted gentleman, who preserves all the best of his boyhood; but come now, work."

"Grinding?" said Tom, stripping off his jacket.

"Not yet—elutriation, Tom," said Uncle Richard, as he led the way up to the laboratory, where the big pan was lifted down upon the stool, and the syphon used to pour the water in the white basin back again.

But not quite all. It was clear now, and at the bottom there was just a film of chocolate mud, which was most carefully trickled off with some of the water into the ready labelled little bottle.

“There, Tom, that tiny spoonful or two of paste is our finest emery, and valuable in the extreme—to us. The next thing is to get a grade coarser.”

“The same way?” said Tom.

“Nearly. Stir the whole up again.”

This was carefully done, but there was no scum now.

“We left the other sixty minutes, Tom,” said Uncle Richard; “this time we’ll leave it thirty minutes. Come along; time for two quarter-hour grinds at the speculum.”

They went down, wetted the sand, and ground away for fifteen minutes; washed the glass, started again, and at the end of another fifteen minutes went up to repeat the process of drawing off the thick water into the basin. This was left to stand till evening, when the water was poured back, and about a double quantity of thin paste to that obtained in the morning placed in a size larger bottle, and labelled “thirty-minute emery.”

Again the whole was well stirred, and left for fifteen minutes; the process repeated, and a much larger quantity obtained and bottled.

The next day the emery was stirred, and allowed to settle for five minutes; then for two minutes, and the remainder bottled by itself, this being by far the largest quantity, and in fact so much strong sharp grit.

“There!” cried Uncle Richard; “now, going backwards, we have six different grades of material, beginning with the coarse, and going up to the fine sixty-minute powder or paste for polishing, for these things have to be made exquisitely fine.”

At the next attack upon the glass to dig it out into a hollow, the sand was all carefully washed away, showing the disc to be thoroughly scratched all over, and looking somewhat like the inside of a ground-glass globe.

“So far so good, Tom,” said Uncle Richard; “now let’s try our mould.”

He took down the convex-shaped piece of zinc, and placed it upon the newly-ground-glass, into whose face it descended a little way, but only a very little.

“Not deep enough yet, Tom,” he said; “the mould ought to fit into it exactly.”

“Yes, I understand now,” said Tom; “we have got to grind more out of the middle.”

“Exactly.”

“Shall I fetch the sand back?”

“No, we will use the coarsest emery now; I dare say that will dig out enough. Now then, number one.”

The large-stoppered bottle was fetched from its shelf, and a small portion of the most coarse ground emery taken out with a spatula, spread upon the fixed glass, the speculum carefully laid upon it, and turned a little to spread the material more equally, a few drops of water having been added, and the slow, tedious grinding went on again.

“Hard work, my boy,” said Uncle Richard, as they paused at last from their laborious work, the disc they moved to and fro and round and round, as they slowly changed their positions, being exceedingly heavy.

But Tom, as soon as he got his breath, was too much interested to mind the labour, and after helping to lift one disc from the other, he looked on eagerly at his uncle’s busy fingers, as he carefully sponged and cleaned both glasses.

“See how the coarse emery we began with has become ground down.”

“Yes, into a slime,” said Tom.

“Partly glass,” said Uncle Richard, as he drew attention now to the face of the speculum, which was scratched more deeply already, and displayed a different grain.

Fresh emery out of the bottle was applied, moistened a little more, and the grinding went on for a while. Then there was a fresh washing, more of the coarse emery applied, and so the task went on hour after hour that day and the next, when in the afternoon when the zinc mould was applied to the surface it fitted in almost exactly, and Tom gave a cheer.

“Yes, that will do,” said Uncle Richard, whose face glowed with the exertion.

“What next then?” said Tom eagerly.

“The next grade of emery, boy,” was the reply; “our task is of course now not to grind the speculum deeply, but to grind out all these scratches till it is as limpid as the surface of pure water.”

“Don’t look possible,” said Tom. “Well, we will try.”

The next morning they worked for an hour before breakfast in precisely the same way, gave a couple of hours to the task after breakfast, two more in the afternoon, and one in the evening—“a regular muscle-softener,” Uncle Richard called it; but when for the last time the finely-ground emery number two was washed off, and the speculum examined, its surface looked much better, the rougher scratchings having disappeared.

Tom was all eagerness to begin the next day, when the number three emery was tried in precisely the same way. Then came work with the number four, very little of which was used at a time; and when this was put aside for number five, Tom again cheered, for the concave surface had become beautifully fine.

"Two more workings, and then the finishing," said Uncle Richard. "Think we shall polish out all the scratchings?"

"Why, they are gone now," cried Tom.

"Yes, it shows what patience will do," said Uncle Richard; "a man can't lift a house all at once, but he could do it a brick at a time."

The speculum was carefully placed aside after its cleansing, and the pair of amateur opticians locked up the place after hanging up their aprons.

"Wouldn't do to break that now, Tom, my boy."

"Break it?" cried the boy; "oh, it would be horrible. Why, we should have to make another, and go through all that again."

"Yes, Tom, but we could do it. I know of a gentleman who made a hundred of these specula with his own hands. But there will be something more interesting for you to see to-morrow."

"What, shall we get it done?"

"By no means; but first thing of all I must test it, and to do this easily, we must be up early when the sun is shining in at the east window of our workshop. Do you think you can call me by five?"

"I'm sure of it, uncle," cried Tom.

Chapter Fifteen.

Tom kept his word, for he started into wakefulness in the grey dawn out of an uncomfortable dream, in which he had seen the unfinished speculum fall off the bench on to the stone-floor, roll like a wheel out of the door, down the slope to the gate, bound over, and then go spinning down the lane and across the green, straight for the ragstone churchyard wall, where it was shivered to pieces.

"Only a dream," he said, as he leaped out of bed, ran to the window, and saw by the church clock that it was only half-past four.

"Time to go over and see if it is all right," he said, as he finished dressing, "and then come back and call uncle."

Going down-stairs, he took the keys of the mill from where they hung by the front door, went out into the garden, unlocked the gate, and went across to the mill, where, on peering through the window, he could see the glass lying just as it had been left.

"That's all right," said Tom; and he walked round by the back of the tower to see how the flowers and shrubs looked, when, to his startled surprise, he found footprints made by a heavy, clumsy pair of boots on the border beneath the wall.

Their meaning was plain enough. Some one had walked along there, and got out of the yard over the wall, while, upon a little further search, he found the spot where whoever it was had entered the yard by jumping down, the prints of two heels being deeply-marked in the newly-dug earth.

"That must have been Pete," said Tom, flushing; and he looked over the wall, half expecting to see the slouching figure of the lad.

But there was no one within sight, and he looked round the yard in search of the visitor's object. There was nothing but the old millstones stealable, and they stood here and there where they had been leaned against tower and wall; and at ten minutes to five, after noting that the sun was shining brightly, Sam went back to his uncle and called him, and at half-past five they went together to the mill-yard, where the footprints were pointed out.

"Have to keep the door carefully locked, Tom," said Uncle Richard. "Hah! capital! the sun will be shining right through that window in a few minutes."

They entered the workshop, where a bench was drawn opposite to the last window, and about twelve feet away. To this, with Tom's help, the partly-polished speculum was borne.

"Not very bright for a reflector, Tom," said Uncle Richard. "What am I to do to make it brighter?"

"Go on polishing, uncle."

"Ah, but I want to test it this morning, to see if we have a good curve," said Tom's elder, smiling. "Fill the sponge with clean water and bring it here."

This was done, and the finely-ground surface was freely wetted, with the effect that it became far more luminous directly.

"Now, Tom," said his uncle, "I'm going to show you something in reflection. The sun is not quite high enough for the speculum, so give me that piece of looking-glass."

This was handed to him, and he held it on high, so that the low-down sun shone into it, and a reflection was cast from it back upon the wall just above the window.

"See that?"

"Yes, uncle. Done that many a time. Used to call it making jack-o'-lanterns."

"Well, that is the effect of a reflection from a flat or plane surface; the rays of light strike back at the same angle as they hit the surface. Now then, I'll show you what happens from a curved surface."

He passed the sponge rapidly over the ground speculum again, so as to glaze it—so to speak—with water, raised it upon its edge with the carefully-ground face directed at the window just as the sun rose high enough to shine in; and then by turning the great mirror slightly, the light reflected from it struck upon the wall at the side of the window.

"Now, Tom, what do you see?"

"A round spot of light about as big as a two-shilling piece," said the boy.

"Yes; all the rays of light which fall upon our mirror, gradually drawn together to where they form an image of the sun. It is only dull, my boy, but so far finely perfect, and we can say that we have gone on very successfully."

As he spoke he laid the mirror down upon its back.

"Is that all you are going to do?" asked Tom.

"Yes; I can test it no better till it is more advanced, my boy. It may seem a little thing to you, but it is enough to show me that we may go on, and not begin our work all over again. Now for a good turn until breakfast-time. Two good hours' work ought to produce some effect."

The lower disc, now become convex, was wetted and lightly touched over with number five emery, which seemed soft enough for anything; the well-advanced mirror was turned over upon it, fitting now very closely, and with the sweet morning air floating in from the pine-woods, and the birds singing all around, the monotonous task went on with its intermissions till Uncle Richard gave the final wash off, and said—"Breakfast!"

They were so far advanced now that Tom was as eager to recommence as his uncle, and by that evening so much progress had been made that the setting sun was made to shine in upon it, to be reflected back in a bright spot on the wall without the aid of water; while two evenings later, when the great round glass was stood all dry the polish upon it was limpid, and seemed to be as pure as could be. There was not the faintest scratch visible, and Tom cried in triumph—

"There, now it is done! Oh, uncle, it is grand!"

"Grand enough so far, my boy. We have succeeded almost beyond my expectations; but that is only the first stage."

"First—stage?" faltered Tom, looking at his uncle aghast.

"Yes, boy; we have succeeded in making a beautiful spherical concave mirror, which could be of no use whatever for my purpose."

"Then why did we make it?" cried Tom. "For practice?"

"No, boy; because it is the step towards making an ellipse, or, as they call it when shaped for a reflecting telescope, a parabola. You know what an ellipse is?"

"Gooseberry," said Tom bluntly.

"Gooseberry-shaped," said his uncle. "Well then, what is a parabola?"

"One of those things we used to learn about in geometry."

"Good. Well, to-morrow we must begin polishing, or rather I must, to turn our glass from a spherical-curved mirror into a parabola."

"You'll let me help, uncle?"

"As much as I can, my boy; but the amount I have to polish off, in what is called figuring, is so small that it requires the most delicate of treatment, and first of all we have to prepare a small polisher to work by hand."

This was formed of lead in the course of the next day—a nearly flat but slightly convex disc, with a handle upon its back, and when made perfectly smooth it was covered with hot pitch, which, as it cooled, was made to take the exact curve of the nearly finished mirror, by being pressed upon it, the pitch yielding sufficiently for the purpose.

This done the pitch was scored across and across, till it was divided into squares, with little channels between them, so that the polishing powder and water might run freely between; then a final pressure was given upon the mirror and the implement was left to harden till the next day.

"Now for a few hours' polishing," said Uncle Richard the next morning, as he took up the curved pitch tool and moistened it, no longer with emery, but with fine moistened rouge; "and if I am successful in slightly graduating off the sides here, and flattening them in an infinitesimal degree, we shall have a good reflector for our future work."

But upon testing it the result that evening was not considered satisfactory. There were several zones to be corrected.

It was the same the next day, and the next. But on the fourth Uncle Richard cried "Hold: enough! I think that is as good as an amateur can make a speculum, and we'll be content."

That night Tom slept so soundly that he did not dream till morning, and then it was of the sun resenting being looked

at, and burning his cheek, which possessed some fact, for the blind was a little drawn on one side, and the bright rays were full upon his face.

"All that time spent in making the reflector!" thought Tom; "and all that work. I wonder what the next bit will be."

Chapter Sixteen.

"Now, uncle, what's the next thing to be done?" said Tom at breakfast that morning.

"I think we may begin the body of the telescope now, Tom," said his uncle.

"The body?"

"Yes; the speculum is what we might call the life of the whole instrument, and the rest will be simplicity itself. We've got to bring a little mechanical work to bear, and the thing is done."

"But it will want a lot of glasses fixed about in a big tube, won't it?"

"No; nothing but the flat and eye-pieces, and I have the lenses to make these. By the way, I have some letters to write, and shall be busy all the morning. Your uncle seems to be still unwell, and I must write to him, for one thing. I tell you what I want done. We have no place there for keeping papers or drawings in, and where one can sit down and write at times, and lock up afterwards. I've been thinking that I'll have the big old bureau desk with its drawers taken out of the study, and carried up into the laboratory. It can stand beneath the shelves on the right of the east window; and you might take up a chair or two, and a piece of old carpet as well. Get David to help you."

"All right, uncle."

So when breakfast was over, Tom went out and found David, who was sticking stakes along the outside of the asparagus bed, and tying tarred twine from one to the other, so as to keep the plume-like stems from blowing about and breaking.

"Mornin', Master Tom," he said. "I say, my Maria Louisas are swelling out fast. We shall soon have to be on the look-out for pear-ketchers."

"All right, David, I'll help you. I hope it is Pete Warboys. I should like to give him stick."

"We'll give him stake instead, Master Tom."

"Never mind that now. I want you to help me move that chest of drawers and desk out of uncle's study to the laboratory."

"Very good, sir; but you might call a spade a spade."

"What do you mean?" said Tom, staring.

"Labor hatory, sir! why don't you say windmill?"

"Because it has been made into an observatory, laboratory, and workshop all in one," said Tom, rather stiffly.

"Just as you like, Master Tom; but you may take the sails off, and the fan, and put all the rattle-traps in it you like, but it can't make it anything but what it was born to be, and that was a windmill."

"Well, we won't argue," said Tom. "Come along."

He led the way to the study, where Uncle Richard was seated at a table writing, and it being a particularly dry day, David spent about five minutes wiping nothing off his shoes on every mat he passed, to Tom's great amusement. Then after making a bow and a scrape to his master which were not seen, he gave his nose a rub with his cuff, and went back to put his hat outside the door.

"Come along, David," said Tom. "This is it."

The gardener went on tiptoe to the end of the old escritoire, stooped, lifted it, and shook his head.

"You can't manage one end o' that, Master Tom," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"No, too weighty," said his master; and without looking round he passed his keys. "Take out the drawers, they're heavy, and carry them separately."

This plan was followed out, each taking a drawer and carrying it out through the garden, and across the lane to the yard gate, which Tom unlocked after resting his drawer on the wall; leaving it there while he ran up and unlocked the tower door, then going back for the load he had left.

These two drawers were carried into the stone-floored workshop, where the bench under the window was covered with an old blanket, another doing duty as cover for the glass tool which had been replaced on the head of the cask.

"My word! what a differ there is here," said David, as he glanced round with the drawer in his hands. "What yer put to bed under they blankets, sir?"

"Specula, David."

“Speckle-hay? What, are you forcing on ’em?”

“Forcing?” said Tom, laughing.

“Yes; are they coming up?”

“Nonsense! Here are those two great pieces of glass uncle brought down. We’ve been polishing one.”

“Oh! them,” cried David. “My word! Wonder what old miller would ha’ said to see his place ramfoozled about like this?”

“Come along,” cried Tom; and the drawers were carried up, each being crammed full of papers and books, and laid on the floor close to the old mill-post.

“Worser and worser,” said David, looking round. “Dear, dear! the times I’ve been up here when the sacks was standing all about, some flour and some wheat, and the stones spinning round, the hopper going tippenny tap—tippenny tap, and the meal-dust so thick you could hardly breathe. I ’member coming out one night, and going home, and my missus says to me, ‘Why, Davy, old man, what yer been a-doing on? Yer head’s all powdered up like Squire Winkum’s footman.’ It was only meal, yer know.”

“And now you can come and go without getting white, David,” said Tom, moving a stool from under the newly put up shelves. “This is where the bureau is to go.”

“Is it now?” said David, scratching his head. “Why that’s where the old bin used to be. Ay, I’ve set on that bin many’s the time on a windy night, when miller wanted to get a lot o’ grist done.”

“Back again,” said Tom; and two more drawers were carried over. Then the framework and desk were fetched, with Mrs Fidler standing ready, dustpan and brush in hand, to remove any dirt and fluff that might be underneath.

“Tidy heavy now, Master Tom,” said David, as they bore the old walnut-wood piece of furniture across the garden and up to the mill, only setting it down once just inside the yard by way of a rest, and to close the gate.

Then the piece of furniture was carried in, and after some little scheming, hoisted up the steep ladder flight of steps, David getting under it and forcing it up with his head.

“Wonderful heavy bit o’ wood, Master Tom,” said the gardener.

“It’s an awkward place to get it up, David,” replied the boy. “Now then, just under those shelves. It will stand capitally there, and get plenty of light for writing.”

But the bureau did not stand capitally there, for the back feet were higher than the front, consequent upon the floor having sunk from the weight of millstones in the middle.

“She’ll want a couple o’ wedges under her, Master Tom,” said David.

“Yes. I’ve got a couple of pieces that will just do—part of a little box,” cried Tom. “I’ll fetch them, and the saw to cut the exact size. You wait here.”

“And put the drawers in, sir?”

“Not till we’ve got this right,” replied Tom, who was already at the head of the steps; and he ran down and across to the house, obtained the saw from the tool-chest, and hurried back to the mill, where he found David down in the workshop, waiting for him with his hands in his pockets.

“Didn’t yer uncle ought to leave his tool-chest over here, sir?” said the gardener.

“Oh yes, I suppose he will,” said Tom. “It would be handier. Halloo, did you open that window?”

“No, sir. I see it ajar like when we first came, and it just blowed open like when the door was swung back.”

Tom said no more, but led the way up-stairs, where the pieces of wood were wedged in under the front legs, sawn off square, and the drawers were replaced.

“Capital, Master Tom,” cried the gardener. “You’d make quite a carpenter. I say, what’s it like up-stairs?”

“Come and see,” said Tom, ready to idle a little now the work was done, and very proud of the place he had helped to contrive.

David tightened his blue serge apron roll about his waist, and followed up into the observatory, smiling, but ready to depreciate everything.

“Ay, but it’s a big change,” he said; “no sacks o’ wheat, no reg’lar machinery. There’s the master’s tallow scoop; he give me a look through it once, and there was the moon all covered with spots o’ grease like you see on soup sometimes. Well, it’s his’n, and he’s a right to do what he likes with the place. Ah, many’s the time I’ve been up here too. Why, Jose the carpenter chap’s cut away the top of the post here. You used to be able to move a bit of an iron contrapshum, and that would send the fan spinning, and the whole top would work round till the sails faced the wind.”

“Well, the whole top will work round now, David.”

“Not it, sir, without the sails.”

“But I tell you it will,” said Tom, moving a bar, and throwing open the long shutter, which fell back easily, letting in a

long strip of sunshine, and giving a view of the blue sky from low-down toward the horizon to the zenith.

“Well, you do get plenty of ventilation,” said David oracularly. “Nothing like plenty of air for plants, and it’s good for humans too. Make you grow strong and stocky, Master Tom. But the top used to turn all round in the old days.”

“So it does now, so that uncle can direct his telescope any way. Look here!”

The boy moved to the side, and took hold of an endless rope, run round a wheel fixed to the side, pulled at the rope, and the wheel began to revolve, turning with it a small cogged barrel, which acted in turn upon the row of cogs belonging to the bottom of the woodwork dome, which began to move steadily round.

“Well, that caps me,” said David. “I thought it was a fixter now.”

“And you thought wrong, Davy,” said Tom, going up two or three steps, and passing out through the open shutter, and lowering himself into the little gallery that had once communicated with the fan, and here he stood looking out.

“All right there, Master Tom?”

“Yes.”

“May I move the thing?”

“If you like.”

David, as eagerly as a child with a new toy, began to pull at the rope, when the top began to revolve, taking the little gallery with it, and giving Tom a ride pretty well round the place before the gardener stopped, and turned his face through the opening left by the shutter.

“Goes splendid!” he said, as Tom came in and closed the shutter. “I wouldn’t ha’ believed it. And so the master’s going to build a big tallow scoop up there, is he?”

“Yes; and we’ve got a good deal of it done. There, let’s get down. Uncle may want me.”

“Ay, and I must get back to my garden, sir. There’s a deal to do there, and I could manage with a lot of help.”

“Uncle was talking of making this place quite a study, and putting a lot of books here, the other day,” said Tom, as they descended to the laboratory.

“Was he now? Rare windy place, though, sir, isn’t it? Windy milly place, eh?”

“Well, you said air was good,” said Tom, laughing; and they went down into the workshop. “Mustn’t have that window left open though,” said Tom; and, going to the side, he reached over the bench with the blanket spread over it, drew in the iron-framed lattice window, and fastened it, and was drawing back, when the blanket, which had been hanging draped over a good deal at one end, yielded to that end’s weight, and glided off, to fall in a heap upon the stones.

Tom stooped quickly to pick it up, but as his head was descending below the level of the great bench-table, he stopped short, staring at its bare level surface, rose up, turned, and looked sharply at the gardener, and then in quite an excited way stepped to where the upturned cask stood covered with its blanket, and raised it as if expecting to find something there.

But the glass disc his uncle spoke of as a tool lay there only; and with a horrible feeling of dread beginning to oppress him, Tom turned back to the heap of blanket lying upon the floor, stooped over it, but feared to remove it—to lift it up from the worn flagstones.

“Anything the matter, sir?” said David, looking at him curiously from the door.

“Matter? Yes!” cried Tom, who was beginning to feel a peculiar tremor. “David, you—you opened that window.”

“Nay, sir, I never touched it,” said the gardener stoutly.

“Yes; while I was gone for the saw and wedges.”

“Nay, sir, I come down and just looked about, that’s all; I never touched the window.”

“But—but there was the beautiful, carefully-ground speculum there on that bench, just as uncle and I had finished it. We left it covered over last night—with the blanket—and—and—” he added in a tone of despair, “it isn’t there now.”

“Well, I never touched it, sir,” said the gardener; “you may search my pockets if you like.”

Tom could not see the absurdity of the man’s suggestion, and in his agony of mind, feeling as he did what must have happened if any one had dragged at the blanket, he stooped down once more to gather it up, but paused with his hand an inch or two away from the highest fold, not daring to touch it.

“It’s broken,” he moaned to himself; “I know it is!” and the cold perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

“I shouldn’t ha’ persoomed to touch none o’ master’s contrapshums, sir,” broke in the gardener, rather sharply, “so don’t you go and tell him as I did. I know how partickler he always is.”

“Broken—broken!” murmured Tom. “The poor speculum—and after all that work.”

Then slowly taking the fold of the blanket in his hand he raised it up, and drew it on one side, faintly hoping that he might be wrong, but hoping against hope, for the next moment he had unveiled it where it lay, to see his worst fears

confirmed—the beautiful limpid-looking object lay upon the flag at the end, broken in three pieces, one of which reflected the boy's agitated face.

Chapter Seventeen.

"Oh, David!" cried Tom at last, "how could you touch?"

There was so much agony of spirit in the boy's tones that the gardener felt moved, and remained for a few moments silent. Then rousing himself—

"I didn't, Master Tom; I never touched it. Go and swear I didn't 'fore all the judges in the land."

"Don't tell a lie to hide it," said Tom bitterly.

"Lie! me tell a lie! S'elp me, Master Tom, it's as true as true."

"But you reached over to open the window, and knocked it off, David."

"Swear as I never went a-nigh the window, sir. Don't you go and say it was me when it was you."

"I?" cried Tom, flushing.

"Well, sir, you say it was me, and I see you reach out, and the blanket all falled down—now didn't I, sir?"

"Yes; the blanket went down, but the speculum was not in it, or we should have heard it fall."

"Not if it was all wrapped up in that there blanket, sir."

"I tell you we should," cried Tom, in his angry despair. "You don't know how heavy it was. What shall I do? What will uncle say?"

"Well, sir, if you put it like that, and own to it fair, I should say as he'll kick up the jolliest row he ever made since I broke the whole of the greenhouse light by making it slip right off, and letting it go smash. And then I'd gone straight to him and told him, as I should advise you to do, sir, at once. Master don't like to find things out."

"But I did not break it," cried Tom.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, sir. It was an accident, of course; but I'd go straight to him and tell him."

"David!" cried Tom fiercely, "you're a miserable, cowardly wretch! I did not break it, and you know it. How can I go and take all the blame?"

"Well, sir, how can I, as am as innocent as one o' my best blooms?" cried David. "Well, in all my born days, I never did."

"Why don't you speak out and own to it, sir?" said Tom indignantly. "It's horrible enough after the way we've worked at that speculum to have it broken; but you make it ten times worse by denying it."

"I'd say I did it, sir, in a minute," replied David indignantly; "but it goes hard to see a young gent like you, master's own nevvy, ready to try and bring the whole business down on a poor working-man's head, and so I tell you to your face. If any one's cowardly, it arn't me, and I'm ready to come across to master and tell him so. I'm ashamed of you, sir, that I am. I thought you was a real gentleman, and was beginning to like you; but it's all over between us, sir, for you arn't the sort of lad I thought you. Me break it? You know I never did. Why, I've never been in the place since you and master have been in here busy. Shame on you, Master Tom! Go and tell your uncle, like you ought. It's an accident; but don't you go and make it worse," and with these words David stumped out of the lower part of the old mill, and made his way back to his garden, leaving Tom hot with indignation against him, and half choking with a feeling of misery.

"And uncle has got to know," he said half aloud; "uncle has got to know."

Chapter Eighteen.

The speculum that was never to reflect the bright face of the moon was easily moved now, and Tom stooped down and picked up one by one the three triangular pieces, and laid them upon the bench, to find then that a good-sized elliptical piece, something in shape like a fresh-water mussel-shell, yet remained upon the stones. This he raised, and found that it fitted in at the edge beneath.

There was nothing to be gained in what he did, but Tom stood there carefully fitting the fractures together, and spending a great deal of time over the task, while the mirror reflected his sorrowful face as he bent over it. And as he ran his fingers along the three lines of union, the boy's thoughts went back to the scene that evening at Mornington Crescent, when the big china vase was dragged down, to break to shivers in the hall.

"And Sam said I broke that, just as David says I broke this, and all to escape blame. I don't want to tell uncle that David broke it, but I must; I'm not going to take the blame myself, for it would be cowardly as well as lying. But it is so hard. He will be so angry."

So Tom communed as he pieced the fragments of the mirror together, ending by getting the sponge, rinsing it well, and carefully removing a few smears and finger-marks, before taking a clean cloth and wiping it quite dry.

"That's no good," he said bitterly. "I'm only doing it so as to keep from going and telling uncle, and I must tell him—I

must tell him, and the sooner the better."

But still he did not stir. He picked up the blanket, and folded that up neatly, to lay it beside the speculum, and then looked round for something else to do.

This he found in the window, which he opened and shut two or three times over, before drawing away from it, with a sigh, and going to the door to look across at the house, where his uncle would be writing.

"I ought to go and tell him, but it is so hard to do. Suppose he thinks it is my work—suppose David goes and accuses me of having broken it to escape himself."

Tom stood aghast at the idea, and was for rushing across at once, but something seemed to hold him back, and a good half-hour passed before he fully strung himself up to go.

Then, closing and locking the door, he did the same by the gate; and now, pale and firm enough, he hung up the keys, and then went straight to the study door, paused for a few moments to think what to say first, and then walked straight in.

"Uncle, I've come to give you very bad news," he said in a husky voice, and then he stopped short.

There was no one in the room, and on going out into the hall, he found that his uncle's hat and stick were missing, and consequently he must have gone down the village to post his letters, and perhaps drop in at the Vicarage on his return.

"Oh, how tiresome!" thought Tom; "just too when I felt I could tell him. Now I must begin all over again."

It was not until nearly two o'clock that Uncle Richard returned, looking very serious; and as they went into the little dining-room alone, Mrs Fidler having stopped back to give some orders respecting the dinner, Tom screwed himself up to make the announcement, which would have come easily enough if it had not been for David's charge, and a shrinking feeling which it had engendered, that Uncle Richard might fancy the same thing. But at last the boy, in his consciousness of innocence, was ready to speak, and turned to him.

"Uncle," he said quickly, "I want to say something to you about the speculum."

"Not now, my boy; I have something else to think about. Let that rest."

Tom's lips parted, and he drew a deep breath of relief at what seemed to him to be a reprieve. Then Mrs Fidler entered the room, and dinner commenced, with Uncle Richard looking very thoughtful.

It was impossible to say anything before Mrs Fidler, Tom thought, for if he was to be in any way blamed, he determined that it should be when alone. In addition, he felt that he should not like to speak of David's delinquency before the housekeeper.

It was a delicious dinner, but poor Mrs Fidler soon began to look troubled, for her master got on very badly; and Tom, who had felt as if his plate had been filled with bitter sand, so hard was the task of eating, refused a second help!

This was too much for Mrs Fidler, who looked piteously from one to the other, and exclaimed—

"Is there anything the matter with the veal pie, sir?"

"Eh? Matter, Mrs Fidler?" said Uncle Richard. "I hope not. I really don't know. Oh, I see. I have hardly tasted it. The fact is, Mrs Fidler, I am in trouble."

Tom jumped in his chair.

"David has told him," he said to himself, and he felt hot and cold.

"I have heard something this morning which has disturbed me a good deal."

Uncle Richard turned his eyes upon his nephew, who tried to speak, but no words would come.

"Dear, dear me, sir," said the housekeeper. "I am so sorry."

"I know you are," said Uncle Richard. "The fact is, my brother met with an accident some little time ago, and it was thought to be of no consequence, but it seems that it is, and the doctors have ordered that he should at once have change of air. He has written to me this morning to that effect."

"Then he don't know anything about it," said Tom, with a sigh of relief, which gave place to a feeling of annoyance, for he wished now that his uncle did know.

"He asks me to have him here for a few days or weeks, and of course I have written to beg that he will come. I hope our air will set him right again, and that it is not so serious as he thinks."

"Then you'd like me to get a room ready for him at once, sir?" said Mrs Fidler, with alacrity.

"If you please, Mrs F."

"It shall be done, sir. I am so glad—I mean so sorry. I was afraid something was wrong here."

"No, Mrs Fidler, there is nothing wrong here; but I'm afraid, Tom, that the visitor will put a stop to our telescopic work."

Tom seized his opportunity, and blurted out—

“It is stopped, uncle: the speculum is broken in three pieces.”

“What!” cried Uncle Richard, turning pale.

“Completely spoiled, uncle.”

“How, in the name of all that’s unfortunate, did you do that, sir?”

It was Tom’s turn to start now, for his uncle had immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was his doing, and his words in answer sounded lame and inconclusive.

“I didn’t break it, uncle; I found it on the floor.”

“Found it on the floor!” cried Uncle Richard, sarcastically. “It was the cat, I suppose. Was the window left open?”

“I found—”

“There, hold your tongue now,” said Uncle Richard. “I have something else to think about. You will have everything ready, Mrs Fidler. I have been so separated from my brother nearly all my life, that I feel I owe him every attention.”

“I will attend to it all most carefully.”

“He may come down to-morrow, for I have written saying he is most welcome.”

“Make yourself quite easy, sir. His room shall be ready. I beg pardon, sir; is his good lady coming with him?”

“No, he is coming down alone. I have told him to telegraph by what train, so that I may go and meet him.”

The miserable dinner soon came to an end, and Uncle Richard, instead of chatting pleasantly, never so much as looked at his nephew. But Mrs Fidler did, with her head on one side; and every time Tom caught her eye, which seemed to be nearly every minute, she shook her head at him gently, and gave him such appealing looks, that he felt exasperated at last, and as if he would like to throw something at her.

“She thinks I did it now,” he said to himself; and when his uncle left the table and went into his study he had full proof, for Mrs Fidler seized the opportunity, and shaking her head at him again, said in a whisper—

“Oh, Master Tom, my dear, the truth may be blamed, but can never be shamed.”

“Well, I know that,” cried the boy angrily.

“Hush, my dear! I know it’s very hard, but do—do go and tell your uncle the truth, and he’ll forgive you.”

“I have told him the truth,” cried Tom hotly.

“Oh, my dear, my dear, I’m afraid not, or else your face wouldn’t be so dreadfully red and guilty-like, and I’m sure as your uncle thinks you broke it.”

“Yes,” cried Tom; “everybody seems to think so.”

“Then pray, pray, my dear, be open.”

“Don’t, Mrs Fidler, don’t,” cried Tom pettishly. “I feel as if I can’t bear it.”

“Now, sir, I’m waiting,” said Uncle Richard, suddenly appearing at the open window. “Come over to the observatory at once.”

“Yes, uncle; coming,” cried Tom.

“And do, pray, pray tell him all the truth, my dear,” whispered Mrs Fidler.

“Ugh! you stupid old woman,” exclaimed Tom to himself, as he ran out into the hall, got his cap, and followed his uncle, who was walking sharply on toward the mill-yard, with the keys hanging from his hand.

“And he’s thinking all the time that I did it,” muttered Tom. “He might have waited.”

“Pst! pst!” came from among the bushes, and the boy turned sharply, to see David working his arms about like an old-fashioned telegraph.

“Can’t stop. What is it?” said Tom roughly.

“I ain’t going to stop you, Master Tom; but you go and tell the truth.”

“Bah!” cried Tom.

“The truth may be shamed, sir, but can never be blamed,” said the gardener oracularly.

“Get out, you topsy-turvy old humbug,” cried Tom wrathfully. “Think I don’t know you?” and he ran on, and caught up to his uncle as he was passing through the yard gate.

He did not speak, but went on toward the observatory door.

“Shall I open it, uncle?” said Tom eagerly.

“No,” was the abrupt reply; and Tom shrank within himself like a snail touched with the end of a walking-stick on a damp night. Then the key was rattled into the lock, the door was thrown open, and Uncle Richard, looking very grave and stern, stalked into the workshop straight to the table, glanced at the speculum, and pushed the pieces apart, frowning angrily.

“I’d sooner have given a hundred pounds than that should have happened,” he said.

“Yes, uncle; it’s horrid,” said Tom.

“How did you do it?” said Uncle Richard, turning sharply, and fixing him with his keen eyes, as he had often fixed some deceitful, shivering coolie, who had looked up to him in the past as master and judge in one.

“I didn’t do it,” cried Tom passionately. “Everybody misjudges me, and thinks it was I.”

“Then how did it happen?”

Tom told him briefly.

“Was that window left open last night?”

“I don’t think so, uncle; I’m almost sure I fastened it.”

“Almost!” said Uncle Richard, in the same cold, hard way in which he had spoken before. “Then, sir, you accuse David of having meddled and broken it?”

“No, I don’t, uncle,” said Tom, speaking quite firmly now. “I told you everything.”

“Fetch David.”

Tom hurried out, and had no difficulty in finding the gardener, who had hardly stirred from where he had left him.

“I knowed the master’d want me. Did you own up, sir, like a man?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Tom angrily. “Come to uncle directly.”

“Then—”

David said no more, but gave his old straw hat a smart rap on the crown, and walked sharply on before Tom, unrolling and shaking out his blue apron, prior to rolling it up again very tightly about his waist. He strode along so rapidly that Tom had hard work to keep up with him; and in spite of his efforts, David strode into the workshop first, pulled off his hat, dashed it down on the floor, and struck one hand loudly with his fist.

“What I say is this here, sir. I’ve sarved you faithful ever since you come back from the burning Ingies—”

“Silence!”

“And made the garden what it is—”

“Silence!” said Uncle Richard, more sternly.

“And if Master Tom’s been telling you a pack o’ lies about me—”

“Silence, man!” cried Uncle Richard angrily.

“Why, all I’ve got to say is—”

“Will you hold your tongue, sir? My nephew has not even accused you. He has merely told me his own version of the accident.”

“Oh!” said David, looking from one to the other, thoroughly taken aback.

“Now give me your account, sir,” continued Uncle Richard.

David threw in a few pieces of ornamentation about his narrative, but its essence was precisely the same as Tom’s.

“Humph!” said Uncle Richard. “It looks as of one of you must be in fault.”

“I take my solemn—”

“Silence, sir! you have spoken enough. Tell me this, as the man I have always been a good master to, and have always trusted. I know it is a serious thing, but I want the simple truth. Did you have an accident, and break that glass?”

“I wish I may die this minute if I did, sir,” cried David; “and that’s an awful thing to say.”

“Thank you, David; I believe you,” said Uncle Richard quietly, and the gardener’s face glowed as he turned his eyes on Tom, and then frowned, and jerked his head, and seemed to say—

"Now out with the truth, my lad, like a man."

Tom was darting back an angry look, when his uncle turned to him, with eyes that seemed to read him through and through.

"I thought it was your doing at first, Tom, in my vexation," he said. "Then I suspected poor David here, very unwillingly. But you see we are at fault."

"Yes, uncle," cried Tom eagerly, for there was something in his uncle's tone, stern as it sounded, that was like a friendly grasp of the hand, and turning towards him, in quite an excited burst, he cried, "Then you don't think I did it?"

"Of course not, my boy. What have you ever done that I should doubt your word?"

Tom could not speak, but he made a snatch at his uncle's hand, to feel it close warmly upon his own.

David looked from one to the other, and then stooped and picked up his hat, put it on, recollected himself, and snatched it off again.

"Well," he said softly, "it's a rum 'un. If I didn't feel quite cock-sure as it was you, Master Tom, that I did. Then it warn't you, arter all! Then who was it? that's what I want to know."

"That's what we all want to know, David," said Uncle Richard, as he laid his hand now upon his nephew's shoulder, the firm pressure seeming to send a thrill of strength and determination through the boy's heart. "One thing is very plain—it could not have broken itself."

"But don't you think, Master Tom, as it might have gone down when you leaned over the wrapper?"

"Impossible," said Uncle Richard quickly. "The glass was far too heavy, as we well know, eh, Tom? Here, let's look out outside."

He led the way through the open door, and round to the window beneath which the speculum had lain upon the bench, and examined the lately made flower-bed, in which various creepers had been planted to run up the wall.

"There's no need to be in doubt," said Uncle Richard, pointing; and Tom uttered an excited cry, for there, deeply-marked beneath the window were the prints of heavy-nailed boots, doubled—by the toes pointing toward the mill, and by the appearance as of some one stepping partly into them again.

"Are those your footmarks, David?" said his master.

"Mine, sir? No. Mine's got tips on the toes. Look."

He lifted one leg across the other, as if he were going to be shod by a blacksmith, showing that his soles would have made a very different impression upon the soft earth.

"Why, sir," continued David with a smile, "I never leaves no footmarks. Natur' meant a man's hands to be used as rakes, or they would not 'a been this shape. I always gives the place a touch over where I've been."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard, nodding. "I have seen you."

"You ayve, sir, many times," said David, bending down; "and these here couldn't have been made by Master Tom, anyhow."

"Lend me your knife, David," said Uncle Richard.

"Knife, sir? Oh, I'll soon smooth them marks out."

"Stop!" cried Uncle Richard, and only just in time, for David's finger-rake was within an inch. "We may want to compare those with somebody's boots."

"Why o' course, sir," said the gardener, handing his knife already opened; when, placing one foot close against the bricks, Uncle Richard leaned across the bed, inserted the blade of the knife beside the iron casement frame, and with it lifted the fastening with the greatest ease.

David gave his leg a heavy slap.

"That was some 'un artful, sir, and he got in."

"Slipped in descending inside, and dragged the speculum on the floor," said Uncle Richard, frowning. "Now the question is, who was it?"

"Ah, who was it, sir?" said David. "Arn't such a great many folk in Furzebrough, and I should say as it lies between Parson Maxted and Pete Warboys, and it warn't parson, 'cause of the boots."

"I don't like to suspect unjustly," said Uncle Richard, "so don't say anything, David. I'll go down to the lad's home with my nephew here, and we'll see if we can find out whether he has been about here since yesterday."

"And you'll have your work cut out, sir," said David; "for that chap goes hawking about more like a ferret than aught else; but if it warn't him, Master Tom, I'll heat my head."

Chapter Nineteen.

David went back to his gardening, giving Tom a smile and a nod, and whispering to him as he followed his uncle after locking up the workshop and the yard gate—

"You and me's good friends again, arn't we, Master Tom?"

"Yes, of course, David; and I beg your pardon for ever suspecting you."

"Oh, that's all right, sir. It was six o' one and half-a-dozen o' the other. I thought it was you, and you thought it was me, and—"

"Come, Tom," said Uncle Richard; and the boy hurried forward, and did not hear the end of David's speech.

"Mind we put a secure fastening on those lower windows to-morrow morning," said Uncle Richard thoughtfully. "We ought to be able to live down in a place like this without nocturnal visitors; but there, one never knows."

They walked on pretty sharply till the cottages were reached; and as soon as the visitors came up to the gate the curious-looking old woman appeared at the open door, shading her eyes with her hand, and peering at them as they walked down the path.

"It's of no use to come here," she cried loudly. "Don't want any. No money to buy anything. Go to the rich gentlefolk and sech."

"You old impostor!" said Uncle Richard softly. "You can see who we are plainly enough."

"D'yer hear? Don't want any to-day."

"Now, Mrs Warboys, I want to see your grandson."

"Hey?"

"I say I want to see your grandson."

"What?"

"I want to see your grandson."

"Who are you? Haven't you got anything to sell?"

"You know I have not. You can see well enough when you come for help."

"Hey? Who are you?"

"You know me. I am from Heatherleigh."

"Oh, it's you. I thought you wanted to sell calicoes and flannels. What did you bring your pack for? What's in it? Oh, I see, it arn't a pack at all; it's a boy. What d'yer want?"

"I told you I want to see your grandson."

"What for?"

"I want to ask him a few questions."

"Ah, that's no good. He says he had so many asked him at school that he'll never answer no more."

"Where is he? Call him," said Uncle Richard.

"He arn't at home, and you can't see him."

"How long will he be?"

"I d'know. P'raps he won't come back no more, so you needn't come poking about here."

"When did he go out last?" said Uncle Richard.

"Last week I think, but my mind arn't good now at figgers. Tell me what you want, and if ever I see him again I'll tell him."

"We are wasting time, Tom," said Uncle Richard in a whisper.

"Yes," said the old woman viciously; "you're wasting time. It's no use for you to come here to try and get things to say again my poor boy. I know you and your ways. You want to get him sent away, I know; and you're not going to do it. I know you all—parson and doctor, and you, Brandon, you're all against my poor innocent boy; but you're not going to hurt him, for you've got me to reckon with first."

"Your sight and hearing seem to have come back pretty readily, Mrs Warboys."

"You never mind that," cried the old woman. "I know what I'm saying, and I'm not afraid of any of you."

Just then one of the women from the next cottages came out and curtseyed to them.

"Don't take any notice of what she says, sir. She's a bit put out to-day."

"So it seems," said Uncle Richard. "Let me see, Mrs Deane, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said the woman, smiling.

"You can tell me then where is Pete Warboys?"

The old woman literally shrieked out—

"Let her say a word if she dares. She'd better. She hasn't forgotten what I did to—Ah! look at that."

She uttered the last words triumphantly, for the woman turned and ran hurriedly into her cottage.

"Come along, Tom," said Uncle Richard; "we are doing no good here;" and he turned and led the way down toward the gate, with the old woman shrieking out a torrent of words after them, and playing an accompaniment formed of slaps upon the door till they were out of hearing.

"What a terrible old woman!" said Tom at last. "That Mrs Deane seemed quite frightened of her."

"Yes; the poor ignorant people here believe that she has the power to do them harm; and in spite of all Mr Maxted tells them, he cannot shake their faith."

"What shall you do now, uncle?"

"Nothing, my boy, upon second thoughts. I am afraid we should not be able to prove that this young scoundrel did the mischief without calling in the police, and that I am very loth to do."

"But he ought not to be allowed to go about doing such things as that, uncle," said Tom warmly. "It gets the wrong people suspected."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard dryly; "and perhaps we are suspecting the wrong person now."

"But who else could it be, uncle?"

"Some tramp perhaps, on the way to London. No, Tom, I don't think we will waste our time in trying to bring the misdoing home to Mr Pete Warboys, and then appearing before the magistrates to punish him. We had better set to work and polish a new speculum."

"Then you will make another?" said Tom eagerly.

"Of course, my boy. I shall write off for two fresh discs to-night."

"One will do, uncle."

"No, boy; we must have two, and begin as before. The lower one is useless now, unless I keep it for a polishing tool."

Chapter Twenty.

"Master Tom, I'd be the last person in the world to find fault, or pick people to pieces, and I'm sure master knows that, as it's his brother, I'd do anything; but really, my dear, I don't think he's so bad as he says."

"Do you think not, Mrs Fidler?"

"I feel sure not, my dear. Here has he been down here for three weeks now, and the nursing up he's had is wonderful. You look at the beef-tea he's had, and the calves'-foot jelly I've made, and the port wine he has drunk, let alone the soles and chickens and chops he has every day."

"But what makes you think Uncle James is not so ill?"

"Because he eats and drinks so much, my dear. I think he's all right, only got something on his mind."

"Well, I don't know," said Tom. "He says he's very bad. I must be off now; it's time he went out in his bath-chair."

"Yes, my dear, it's wonderful what your uncle does for him, what with the flys, and pony-carriages, and the invalid chair got down on purpose for him. I only wish I had such a brother as master."

For Uncle James had come down ready to groan when he was helped out of the fly, to sigh when he was helped off to bed, and call out when Tom led him to his chair at meal-times. For as soon as he came down he had attached himself to his nephew, and was never satisfied without the boy was at his side.

"Your noo uncle seems to like you, Master Tom," said David one day.

"Yes; I wish he wouldn't be quite so fond of me," replied Tom. "He used not to be in London."

But Tom's wishes were of no avail, for his uncle would hardly let him quit his side; and when they were indoors he would sit and gaze wistfully at the boy, and now and then whisper—

"Tom, my boy, I think I ought to tell you, that—"

Then he would stop, and, growing impatient at last, Tom broke out with—

“What is it, uncle, that you want to tell me?”

“Not now, my boy, another time, another time,” and then he would utter a low groan.

This sort of thing took place in the dining-room, study, garden, or away out on the common, or in sandy lanes; and at last, after having his curiosity excited a great many times, Tom began to get tired of it, and had hard work to keep from some pettish remark.

“But I mustn’t be unkind to him, poor fellow, now he’s so ill,” thought Tom; “he was very unkind to me, but I forgive him, and he’s very affectionate to me now.”

This was the case, for Uncle James seemed happier when he could get Tom alone, and hold his hand for some time; and he always ended by saying in a whimpering voice—

“Bless you, my boy, bless you!”

“Which is very nice,” said Tom to himself more than once, “but it will sound sickly, and as if he was very weak. I can’t make it out. It seems as if the worse he is, the kinder he gets to me, and as soon as he feels better he turns disagreeable. Oh, I am so tired of it; I wish he’d get well.”

But all the same Tom never showed his weariness, but tugged and butted the invalid chair through the deep sand of the lanes, and sat on banks close by it reading the newspaper to his uncle in the most patient way, till the invalid was tired, and then dragged him back to Heatherleigh to dinner or tea.

One evening, after a week thoroughly devoted to the visitor, who had been more than usually exacting in the length of his rides, declining to hold the handle and guide himself, making Tom tug him up hills and through heavy bits of lane, along which the boy toiled away as stubbornly as a donkey, Uncle Richard came upon him in the garden, when he was free, for the invalid had gone to lie down.

“Well, Tom,” he said.

“Well, uncle,” cried the boy, looking up at him rather disconsolately.

“All our telescope-making seems to have come to an end.”

“Yes, uncle.”

“I suppose you mean to go back with Uncle James to town?”

“Is he going back to London?” cried the boy eagerly.

“Yes, before long; but you need not be so eager to go.”

Tom stared at him.

“You are tired of Heatherleigh then?”

“Tired, uncle?”

“Yes; you’ve made me feel quite jealous. It’s all Uncle James now. But there, it’s boy-like to want plenty of change.”

“But I don’t want change.”

“Not want change? Why, you show it every day.”

Tom stared again, and then burst out in his abrupt way—

“Oh, uncle! you don’t think I want to go back?”

“You were asking eagerly enough about it just now.”

“Yes—because—I—that is—oh, uncle, don’t be cross with me; I can’t help it.”

“No, I suppose not, Tom.”

“But you don’t understand me. I don’t want to leave here; I wouldn’t go back to London on any consideration. I—there, I must say it, I—I—there, I hate Uncle James.”

“What!” said Uncle Richard, looking at the boy curiously. “You are never happy without you are along with him.”

“But that’s because he is ill, and I thought you wanted me to be attentive to him.”

“Oh!”

“Yes, that’s it, uncle. He never liked me, and always used to be cross with me, and now when he’s very bad he’s always so fond of me, and keeps me with him, so that I can’t get away, and—and I don’t like it at all.”

“That’s curious, isn’t it, Tom?”

“Yes, uncle, I suppose it is, and I can’t make it out. I don’t understand it a bit. It’s because he is ill, I suppose, and is sorry he used to be so rough with me. I wish he would get quite well and go back to London.”

“Humph! And you would rather not go up to attend to him?”

“I’d go if you ordered me to, but I should be very miserable if I had to—worse than I am now. But, uncle, I am doing my best.”

“Of course, Tom. There, I did not mean it, my boy. You are doing your duty admirably to your invalid relative. I hope we both are; and sick people’s fancies are to be studied. I don’t think though you need be quite so blunt, Master Blount, though,” added Uncle Richard, smiling.

“I’ll try not to be, uncle.”

“And talk about hating people. Rather rough kind of Christianity that, Tom.”

“I beg your pardon, it slipped out. I hope I don’t hate him.”

“So do I, my lad. There, go and do everything you can for him while he stays. He is certainly much better, and fancies now that he is worse than he is.”

“I’ll do everything I can, uncle,” said Tom eagerly.

“I know you will, my boy; and as soon as we have set him on his legs again, you and I will grind the new speculum. The case with the two discs came down this afternoon while you were out with the chair.”

“Oh!” cried Tom eagerly. “You haven’t unpacked them without me, uncle?”

“No, and I do not mean to. We’ll leave them where they are till our visitor has gone, and then we shall have to work like black-fellows to make up for lost time.”

“Yes, uncle,” cried Tom, rubbing his hands.

“No; like white-fellows,” said Uncle Richard, smiling, “and I think we shall get on faster.”

The next morning there was a surprise. It was Saturday, and about eleven, just when Tom had dragged round the invalid chair ready for the invalid, he saw a sprucely-dressed figure, with a “button-hole” in his coat, get down from the station fly, pay the man, and push open the gate with a cane, whose ivory crutch handle was held by a carefully-gloved hand.

"All right; quite well, thanks," said Sam, tapping the extended hand with the cane.—p. 211.

For a few moments Tom was astounded; then he came to the conclusion that it was not very wonderful for a son to come down to see his sick father, and he left the chair, and went to meet his cousin.

"Hallo, bumpkin," said Sam contemptuously, "how are you?"

"Quite well," said Tom hesitatingly, and then frankly holding out his hand.

"All right; quite well, thanks," said Sam, tapping the extended hand with the cane. "Don't want to dirt my glove. What have you been doing—digging potatoes?"

"Only tidying up the chair for Uncle James."

"Hands look grubby. You should wash 'em. I say, what a beastly out-of-the-way place this is. Where's Uncle Dick? I only had a coffee and roll before I left London. Can I have some breakfast?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"How's dad?"

"Uncle James is better," said Tom quietly; and just then there was a loud groaning sound from within the porch.

"Oh—oh—oh!" at regular intervals.

"Hullo!" said Sam; "what's the matter? been killing somebody?"

"No. That's Uncle James being brought down from his room."

"Why, he wrote up and said he was better."

"It's because his breath is so short first thing in the morning."

"Oh, that's it," said Sam coolly, and he gave a sharp look round. "Is that the old windmill Uncle Dick bought?"

"Yes," said Tom, who felt rather disgusted with his cousin's indifference and cavalier airs.

At that moment they had nearly reached the porch from which the low groaning sounds issued, and the brothers appeared, with James leaning-heavily upon Richard's arm.

Uncle James started on seeing his son, and left off groaning.

“Morning, gov’nor,” said Sam. “Better? Morning, Uncle Richard.”

“Is—is anything wrong at the office?” cried Uncle James excitedly.

“Wrong? No. We get on all right.”

“Then why have you come?”

“Oh, it was Saturday. Mother was going down to Brighton, and I thought I’d run down here from Saturday to Monday, and see how you were.”

“Oh,” said Uncle James in a tone of relief; and then he began to moan softly again, and moved toward the chair.

“Won’t you stop for a bit, and chat with Sam?” said Uncle Richard.

“Eh? Yes, if you like,” said his brother, hanging upon him feebly. “But it doesn’t much matter now.”

“Oh yes, it does, Jem, a good deal. Here, Sam, my lad, try and cheer your father up with what news you have of his business.”

“All right, uncle; but I say, you’ve got a pretty place here.”

“Glad you like it, my lad.”

“But I say, uncle, I haven’t had my breakfast. Started off so early.”

“I dare say something is being got ready for you,” replied his uncle, smiling. “My housekeeper is very thoughtful.”

Click! came from through the dining-room window.

“That sounds very much like the coffee-pot lid,” continued Uncle Richard. “Take your cousin in, Tom. I’ll lead your uncle round the garden while Sam has his breakfast, and then they can have their chat.”

“I couldn’t do it, Dick—I couldn’t do it,” groaned his brother piteously. “I’m as feeble as a babe.”

“Then the fresh air will strengthen you,” said Uncle Richard; and moaning softly as he drew his breath, James Brandon went slowly down the gravel walk.

“Only does that moaning noise when he thinks about it,” said Sam, as he entered the house.

“No, I’ve noticed that,” replied Tom; but all the same he felt annoyed by his cousin’s brutal indifference. “Let me take your hat.”

“No, thanks. Hang it up myself. Don’t want it spoiled.”

Tom drew back while the hat and cane were deposited in their places; and then the pair entered the little dining-room, where a luncheon tray was already placed at one end of the table, but with coffee-pot and bread-and-butter just being arranged by Mrs Fidler.

“Ah, that’s your sort,” said Sam; “but I say, old lady, I’m peckish; haven’t you got anything beside this?”

“Some ham is being fried, sir, and some eggs boiled,” said Mrs Fidler rather stiffly.

“Hah! that’s better,” said Sam; and Mrs Fidler left the room. “Well, young fellow, how are you getting on?” he continued, as he seated himself and began upon the breakfast. “What do you do here—clean the knives and boots?”

“No,” said Tom.

“I thought you did. Hands look grubby enough.”

Tom glanced at his hands, and saw that they were as rough and red as his cousin’s were white and delicate.

“I help uncle do all sorts of things,” he said quietly, “and sometimes I garden.”

“And wish yourself back at Mornington Crescent, I’ll bet tuppence.”

“I haven’t yet,” said Tom bluntly.

“No; you always were an ungrateful beggar,” said Sam in a contemptuous tone. “But that’s about all you were fit for—sort of gardener’s boy.”

Tom felt a curious sensation tingling in his veins, and his head was hot, for times had altered now, and he was not quite the same lad as the one who had submitted to be tyrannised over in town. He was about to utter some angry retort, but he checked himself.

“I won’t quarrel with him,” he said to himself; and just then Mrs Fidler appeared with a covered dish, which she placed before the visitor.

“Thankye,” he said shortly. “Take the cover away with you.”

There was always a line or two—anxious-looking lines—upon Mrs Fidler's forehead; now five or six appeared, and her eyebrows suddenly grew closer together, and her lips tightened into a thin line, as she took off the cover, and then went in a very dignified way from the room.

Sam attacked the ham and eggs directly, and made a very hearty meal, throwing a word or two now and then at his cousin, and asking a few questions, but in an offhand, assumed, man-about-town style, and without so much as glancing at Tom, who sat watching him till he had finished his breakfast, when he rose, cleared his voice, rang the bell, brushed a few crumbs from his clothes, and took out a cigarette case.

"There!" he said; "I'll join them down the garden now. Which is the way?"

"I'll take you," said Tom; and just as Mrs Fidler entered, followed by the maid to clear away, Sam struck a wax-match, lit his cigarette, and walked out into the little hall and out into the porch, followed by Tom.

"Not a bad part of the country," said Sam condescendingly; "but who does uncle find to talk to? Precious few decent houses."

"There are plenty," said Tom; "but they are a good way off. There's uncle at the bottom of the field."

"So I see," said Sam. "I have eyes in my head. Humph! flowers. Halloo! raspberries!"

He stepped off the green path they were on to where several rows of neatly-tied-up raspberry canes crossed the garden, and began to pull the ruddy thimbles off the tiny white cones upon which they grew; while David, who was on the other side busy removing young pear-tree shoots from the wall, stared at him aghast.

"Who's that fellow?" said Sam, as he took a whiff, then a raspberry, alternately.

"Our gardener."

"*Our*, eh? Well, tell him to go on with his work. What's he staring at?"

"You," said Tom bluntly.

Sam gave him a sharp look and returned to the path, bore off to his right, and began to examine the trained fruit trees on the wall.

"Pears, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums," said Sam coolly. "Why, they're all green and unripe. No, they're not; here's an apricot looks ready."

David uttered a gasp, for the young visitor stepped on to the neat border and took hold of the yellow apricot, whose progress the gardener had been watching for days, gave it a tug, and broke off the twig which bore it.

"Bah!" he ejaculated, as he dragged away the twig and a wall-nail and shred. "Why, the wretched thing isn't ripe."

He spat out the mouthful he had taken between his lips, and jerked the bitten fruit out over the hedge into the lane.

"Well," muttered David, as the two lads went on, "I do call that imperdence. Wonder what master would ha' said if he'd seen."

"Master" had seen his nephew's act as he came from the other side of the field with his brother leaning upon his arm, but he made no remark respecting it.

"You would like to have a chat now with your boy about business, eh, James?"

"Oh, there's nothing to talk about," said Sam carelessly. "Everything is all right. I have seen to that. I kept Pringle pretty well up to his work."

"Poor old Pringle!" thought Tom. "I ought to write to him."

"Sam is right," said the lad's father; "and—and—oh, dear me, how weak I feel! I don't want to be troubled about business. Take me in now, Dick."

"Come along, then," said his brother good-humouredly. "Tom, my lad, you'd better show your cousin about the place, and try and interest him."

"All right, uncle," was the reply; and the two boys stood watching the brothers going towards the house.

"I don't know that I want to be shown about," said Sam haughtily. "I'm not a child. You country people seem to think that we want to see your cabbages and things. Here, let's go and look at the windmill. I say, did they have a row about it?"

"What—Uncle James and Uncle Richard?"

"Of course, stupid; who did you think I meant?"

"How could they have a row about the observatory?"

"I said windmill, stupid."

"It's an observatory now," said Tom coldly.

"Observatory! Yes; it looks it. The gov'nor was awfully wild about it. Nice brother, he said, to go and take the legal business to some one else instead of to our office. There, come along."

"I must get the keys first."

"Keys? Why, I thought you were all so beautifully innocent, that you never locked up anything in the country."

"But we do," said Tom. "Wait a minute. I'll soon be back."

"Don't hurry yourself, bumpkin. I'll have some more raspberries."

"I should like to bumpkin him," thought Tom, as he ran in, got the keys, and hurried back to where Sam was "worrying the rarsps," as David afterwards indignantly said; and then the boys walked together out into the lane, and from thence through the gate into the mill-yard.

"Do you ever come here with him moon-shooting?" said Sam contemptuously.

"Uncle has not been doing any astronomy lately," replied Tom; and feeling that he could not chat about their private life, he refrained from saying anything about the work upon which they had been engaged, but contented himself with showing the workshop, and then leading the way into the laboratory.

"What do you do here?" said Sam, looking contemptuously round.

"This is the laboratory."

"Dear me, how fine we are! What's in these bottles on the shelves?"

"Chemicals."

"That your desk where you do your lessons?"

"No; that's uncle's bureau where he keeps his papers. We're going to have another table, and some chemistry and astronomical books up soon. Uncle says that he shall make this an extra study."

"Keeps his papers, eh? His will too, I suppose?"

"I don't know," said Tom.

"Yes, you do. None of your sham with me, I know you, Master Tom. That the way up-stairs?"

"Yes," said Tom quietly; and they went on up the steps.

"Just as if you wouldn't be artful enough to know all about that. Bound to say you've read it half-a-dozen times over."

"I haven't looked in uncle's drawers, and if I had I shouldn't have read any of his papers."

"Not you, of course. Too jolly good; you are such a nice innocent sort of boy. Halloo! that the telescope? what a tuppenny-ha'penny thing."

"Uncle is going to have a big one soon."

"Oh, is he! What's that door for?"

"To open and look out at the stars."

"And that wheel?"

"To turn the whole of the roof round."

"Turn it then."

Tom obeyed good-humouredly enough, though at heart he resented the hectoring, bullying way adopted by his cousin, and thought how glad he would be when Monday came.

Then the shutter was opened, and the lads got out into the little gallery, where Tom began to point out the beauty of the landscape, and the distant houses and villages to be seen from the commanding height.

"Isn't there a splendid view?" he said.

"Bosh! I've been at the top of Saint Paul's. Not a bad place to smoke a cigarette."

He lit one with a great deal of nourish, leaned over the rail, and began puffing little clouds of smoke into the air; but all the same he did not seem to enjoy it, and at the end of a few minutes allowed the little roll of tobacco to go out.

"What time do you dine here?" he said; "seven?"

Tom laughed.

"Two o'clock," he said.

"I said dinner, not lunch, stupid."

“I know what you said,” replied Tom, rather sharply, but he changed his tone directly afterward. “We don’t have lunch, but early dinner, and tea at six.”

“How horrible!” said Sam. “Here, let’s go down.”

He stepped back into the observatory, looking sharply at everything while Tom secured the shutter, and then they went down into the laboratory, which evidently took the visitor’s attention.

“Wouldn’t be a bad place with a good Turkey carpet and some easy-chairs. I should make it my smoking-room if I lived down here. I mean if I was transported down here.”

“You don’t think much of the place,” said Tom good-humouredly; “but you’d like it if you lived here. There’s capital fishing in the river, and the fir-woods swarm with rabbits. Walnut-wood,” he added, as his cousin examined the bureau. “Uncle says the brass-work is very old and curious, nearly two hundred years, he thinks.”

“Got a gun?” said Sam, turning sharply away.

“No.”

“Can’t you get one? We might go and shoot a few rabbits.”

“I don’t know whether we could even if there was a gun. They are preserved about here like the hares and pheasants.”

“There are no hares about here?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve seen several and made them run.”

“But no pheasants?”

“Plenty, and as tame as can be. I saw one the other day in our field.”

“Here, let’s go for a walk,” said Sam, the real boyish nature coming out at last. “I rather like sport, and shall buy a double gun shortly.”

They went down; the place was duly locked up, Tom having refrained from making any allusions to the speculum, and the work on hand, feeling as he did that his cousin would look upon it with a contemptuous sneer. Then the keys were returned to the house, and as the two lads stood in the hall they could hear the invalid talking very loudly to Uncle Richard, evidently upon some subject in which he took interest, and Sam laughed.

“What is it?” said Tom, staring.

“The gov’nor. Hear him? He has forgotten how bad he is. No groans now. Come on.”

Tom felt disgusted. He had often noticed the same thing, and formed his own conclusion; but it annoyed him to hear his cousin holding his father’s weakness up to ridicule; and he followed Sam out into the garden, and from thence along the sandy lane, thinking what a long time it would be till Monday, when the visitor would return to town.

They had not gone far along the edge of the pine-wood, when all at once a dog leaped out, to begin hunting amongst the furze and brambles, and dart in again.

“What’s he after?” cried Sam.

“Rabbits.”

As Tom spoke, his cousin struck a match to light a fresh cigarette; and as he lit up, he became aware of the fact that the long slouching figure of Pete Warboys was there by a tree, watching his act with profound interest.

Sam uttered a low laugh full of contempt, as he noticed the lad’s eager gaze, and after sending a curl of smoke floating upon the air, he jerked the wax-match from him for a few yards, to fall beneath some old dead furze.

“Have one, joskin?” he said.

Pete Warboys seemed to forget the presence of Tom, and slouched forward, holding out his hand as he uttered a low hoarse “Ah!”

Sam re-opened his cigarette case and held it out.

“Take two,” he said; and Pete did so without hesitation, while Tom stood frowning. “Know how to smoke them?” said Sam.

“Ah!” growled Pete; and with a sly grin he took a little dirty black clay pipe from his pocket, and held it up before pulling one of the cigarettes to pieces and thrusting it in paper and all, without noticing that he had drawn something out with the pipe, to fall to the ground.

“Want a light?” said Sam; but Pete made no answer, merely pulling a box of matches out of his pocket and putting it back.

“Come along now,” said Tom, hesitating though as he spoke.

“Wait a minute. Like sixpence, joskin?”

“Ah!” replied Pete, showing a set of dirty teeth in a grin.

“Catch then,” said Sam, contemptuously tossing the coin through the air; but Pete was not active enough to seize it, and it fell amongst the herbage, and had to be searched for. “Got it?”

“Ah!” said Pete, with a grin. “Chuck us another.”

“Not this time,” replied Sam, with a forced laugh, as he looked at the fellow. “Like pears?”

“Ah!”

“Here then.”

Sam took a well-grown hard Marie Louise pear from his pocket, and Tom stared. “Catch.”

The pear was thrown, caught deftly, and transferred to a pocket in Pete’s ragged trousers where a forgotten hole existed, and the fruit was seen to run down the leg and re-appear by the lad’s boot. Pete grinned, picked it up, and put the fruit in a safer place.

“Catch again!” cried Sam, bringing out another pear, and throwing it this time with all his might, evidently with the intention of hitting the lad a sharp blow.

But the pear was caught as it struck in Pete’s palms with a smart *spang*, and was duly transferred to the lad’s pocket.

“What a shame!” thought Tom. “Uncle’s choice pears, and they were not fit to pick.”

“Got any more?” cried Pete.

“Yes, one. Have it?” said Sam, drawing out the finest yet, but disfigured by the marks of teeth, a piece having been bitten out, and proving too hard and green to be palatable. “Now then, catch.”

This one was thrown viciously as a cricket-ball by long-field-off. But Pete’s eyes were keen; he had seen the white patch on the side of the fruit, and instead of trying to catch it, he ducked his head, and let it go far away among the fir-trees, the branch of one of which it struck, and split in pieces.

“No, yer didn’t,” said Pete, grinning. “I say, chuck us another sixpence.”

“Not this time,” said Sam, puffing again at his cigarette and then staring at Tom, who suddenly threw off the feeling of hesitation which had kept him back, and made a rush forward in the direction taken by the pear.

“Where are you going?” cried Sam. “You’ve got plenty at home.”

But Tom paid no heed; his eyes were fixed on the spot where Pete had stood when he took out his pipe, and made for it.

Pete’s eyes had grown sharp from the life he led in the woods, and amongst the furze of the great heath-like commons, and he saw now the object which had fallen from his pocket. His sluggish manner was cast aside, and, as if suddenly galvanised into action, he sprang forward to secure the little object lying half hidden upon a tuft of ling.

The consequence was a smart collision, the two lads’ heads coming violently in contact, and, according to the conclusions of mathematicians, flying off at a tangent. The next instant Tom and Pete, half-stunned, were seated amongst the furze gazing stupidly at each other.

Tom was the first to recover, and, bending forward, caught up a bit of twisted brass wire, secured to a short length of string, before rising to his feet.

Then Pete was up, while Sam smoked and laughed heartily.

“Here, that’s mine,” cried Pete; “give it to me.”

“No,” cried Tom, thrusting the wire into his pocket; “you’ve no business with a thing like that.”

“Give it to me,” growled Pete, “or I’ll half smash yer.”

“*You* touch me if you dare!” cried Tom fiercely.

“Bravo! ciss! Have it out!” cried Sam, clapping his hands and hissing, with the effect of bringing the dog trotting up, after doing a little hunting on its own account.

“You give me that bit of string back, or I’ll set the dog at yer,” cried Pete.

“I shall give it to Captain Ranson’s keeper,” cried Tom; and Pete took a step forward.

“Fetch him then, boy!” cried Pete, clapping his hands, and a fray seemed imminent, when Tom unclasped the hands he had clenched, rushed away a few yards, and Sam stood staring, ready to cheer Pete on to give his cousin a good hiding as he mentally termed it, for his cousin seemed to him to have shown the white feather and run.

Then he grasped the reason. Tom had not gone many yards, and was dancing and stamping about in the middle of some smoke rising from among the dead furze, and where for a few moments a dull flame rose amidst a faint crackling, as the fire began to get hold.

"Here, Sam! Pete!" he shouted, "come and help."

But Sam glanced at his bright Oxford shoes and well-cut trousers, and stood fast, while a malignant grin began to spread over Pete Warboys' face, as the dog cowered shivering behind him, with its thin tail tucked between its legs.

Pete thrust both hands down into his pockets, but did not stir to help, and Tom, after stamping out the fire in one place, had to dash to another; this being repeated again and again in the exciting moments. Then he mastered it, and a faint smoke and some blackened furze was all that was left of what, if left to itself, would have been a great common fire.

"All out?" said Sam, as his cousin came up hot and panting. "Why, what a fuss about nothing."

"Fuss!" cried Tom excitedly; "why, if it had been left five minutes the fir-wood must have caught."

"Bah! green wood won't burn."

"Oh, won't it?" cried Pete. "It just will. Here, you give me my bit o' string, or I shall go and say I see yer set the furze alight o' purpose."

"Go and say so then," cried Tom. "No one will believe you. Come along, Sam."

Tom gave one more look at the blackened furze, and then turned to his cousin.

"Look here," he said; "you bear witness that this fire is quite out."

"Oh, yes; it's out," said Sam.

"And that Pete Warboys showed us a box of matches."

"Yes, but what of that?"

"Why this," said Tom; "if the fire breaks out again, it will be because this fellow has set it alight."

Pete's features contracted, and without another word he slouched away into the wood and disappeared, followed by his dog.

"I say, you hit him there, Tom," said Sam, with a laugh. "Think he would have done it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, a bit of a bonfire wouldn't have done much harm."

"What!" cried Tom, looking at his cousin aghast. "Why, hundreds of acres of fir-trees might have been burnt. Uncle said there was a small patch burned one year, and there is so much turpentine in the trees, that they roared away like a furnace, and if they had not stood alone, the mischief would have been terrible."

"Then you think that chap had set the furze alight before we came."

"No, I don't," cried Tom sharply, "for I saw you throw a burning wax-match amongst them, only I was so stupid I never thought of going to tread upon it."

"Yes, you always were precious chuckle-headed," cried Sam, with a laugh. "But I don't believe it was my match. If it had gone on burning, and there had been a row, I should have laid the blame on him."

Tom gave him a quick look and said nothing, but thought a good deal.

Sam noticed the look, and naturally divined his cousin's thoughts.

"Oh," he said, "if you want to get on in the world, it's of no use to give yourself away. I say, who is that joskin?"

"Pete Warboys, half gipsy sort of fellow. I've seen him poaching. Look here, this is a wire to catch hares or rabbits with."

Tom took out the wire noose, and held it out to his cousin.

"How do you know? that wouldn't catch a hare."

"It would. The gardener showed me once with a bit of string. Look here; they drive a peg into the ground if there isn't a furze stump handy, tie the string to it, and open the wire, so as to make a ring, and set it in a hare's run."

"What do you mean—its hole in the ground?"

"Hares don't make holes in ground, but run through the same openings in hedges or amongst the furze and heath. You can see where they have beaten the grass and stuff down. Then the poachers put the wire ring upright, the hares run through, and drag the noose tight, and the more they struggle, the faster they are."

"Oh, that's it, is it? I never lived in the country. Here, catch hold. No, Stop; let's set it, and try and catch one."

Tom stared.

"I say," he cried; "why I read all about that in *The Justice of the Peace*,—don't you know that it's punishable?"

"Of course for the joskins, but they wouldn't say anything to a gentleman who did it for experiment."

Tom laughed.

"I shouldn't like a keeper to catch me doing it."

"I said a gentleman," said Sam coolly. "So that's a young poacher, is it?"

"Yes, and I thought it was a pity for you to give him money."

"Oh, I always like to behave well to the lower orders and servants when I'm out on a visit," said Sam. "Here, let's get back."

"Back! why, I thought we were going for a long walk," cried Tom.

"Well, we've had one. Suppose we went further, you cannot get a cab home, I suppose?"

"No," said Tom quietly, and with a faint smile. "You couldn't get any cabs here."

Sam turned back, and Tom followed his example, thinking the while about their adventure, and of what a terrible fire there might have been.

"What are you going to do with that wire?"

"Show it to uncle," said Tom quietly, "and then burn it."

"Bah! brass wire won't burn."

"Oh yes, it will," said Tom confidently. "Burn all away."

"How do you know?"

"Chemistry," said Tom. "I've read so. You can burn iron and steel all away."

"No wonder you couldn't get on with the law," said Sam, with a sneer. "Here, come on; I'm tired."

Chapter Twenty One.

"How long's he going to stop, Master Tom?" said David the next morning about breakfast-time, for he had come, according to custom, to see if cook wanted anything else on account of the company.

He had stumbled upon Tom, who was strolling about the grounds, waiting for his cousin to come down to the meal waiting ready, his uncle sitting reading by the window.

"He's going back to-morrow, David."

"And a jolly good job too, sir, I says," cried David, "whether you like it or whether you don't."

Tom looked at him wonderingly.

"Yes, sir, you may stare, but I speaks out. I like you, Master Tom, and allus have, since I see you was a young gent as had a respect for our fruit. Of course I grows it for you to heat, but it ain't Christian-like for people to come in my garden and ravage the things away, destroying and spoiling what ain't ripe. I know, and your uncle knows, when things ought to be eaten, and then it's a pleasure to see an apricot picked gentle like, so as it falls in your hand ready to be laid in a basket o' leaves proper to go into the house. You can take 'em then; it makes you smile and feel a kind o' pleasure in 'em, because they're ripe. But I'd sooner grow none than see 'em tore off when they're good for nowt. I didn't see 'em go, Master Tom, but four o' my chyce Maria Louisas has been picked, and I wouldn't insult you, sir, by even thinking it was you. It wasn't Pete Warboys, because he ain't left his trail. Who was it, then, if it wasn't your fine noo cousin?"

Tom said nothing, but thought of the hard green pears Sam had thrown at Pete Warboys.

"Just you look here, Master Tom," continued the gardener, leading the way to the wall. "There's where one was tore off, and a big bit o' shoot as took two year to grow, fine fruit-bearing wood, but he off with it. Yes, there it is," he cried, pouncing upon a newly-broken-off twig, "just as I expected. There's where the pear was broke off arterward, leaving all the stalk on. Why, when that pear had been fit to pick, sir, it would have come off at that little jynt as soon as you put your hand under it and lifted it up. Why, I've know'd them pears, sir, as good as say thankye as soon as they felt your hand under 'em, for they'd growed too ripe and heavy to hang any longer. Dear, dear, dear, who'd be a gardener?"

"You would, David," said Tom, smiling. "Never mind; it's very tiresome, and he ought to have known better, if it was my cousin."

"Knowed better, sir? Why, you'd ha' thought a fine chap like he, dressed up to the nines with his shiny boots and hat, and smoking his 'bacco wrapped up in paper, instead of a dirty pipe, would ha' been eddicated up to everything. There, sir, it's Sunday mornin', and I'm goin' to church by-and-by, so I won't let my angry passions rise; but if that young gent's coming here much, I shall tell master as it's all over with the garden, for I sha'n't take no pride in it no more."

"And that isn't the worst of it," thought Tom; "throwing those pears at Pete was telling him that we had plenty here on the walls, and tempting him to come."

That day passed in a wearisome way to Tom. At church Sam swaggered in, and took his place after a haughty glance

round, as if he were favouring the congregation by his condescension in coming. Then on leaving, when Mr Maxted bustled up to ask after Uncle Richard, fearing that he was absent from illness, till he heard that it was on account of his invalid brother, Sam began to show plenty of assumption and contempt for the little rustic church.

“Why don’t you have an organ?” he said.

“For two reasons, my dear young friend,” said Mr Maxted. “One is that we could not afford to buy one; the other that we have no one here who could play it if we had. We get on very well without.”

“But it sounds so comic for the clerk to go *toot* on that whistling thing, and then for people with such bad voices to do the singing, instead of a regular choir, the same as we have in town.”

“Dear me!” said Mr Maxted dryly, “it never sounds comic to my ears, for there is so much sincerity in the simple act of praise. But we are homely country people down here, and very rustic no doubt to you.”

“Confounded young prig!” said Mr Maxted, as he walked back to the Vicarage. “I felt as if I could kick him. Nice sentiments these for a clergyman on a Sunday,” he added. “But he did make me feel so cross.”

“What does he mean by calling me my dear young friend?” cried Sam, as soon as the Vicar was out of sight. “Nice time you must have of it down here, young fellow. But it serves you right for being so cocky and obstinate when you had such chances along with us.”

Tom was silent, but felt as if he could have said a great deal, and had the satisfaction of feeling that the gap between him and his cousin was growing wider and wider.

“I suppose he is a far superior fellow to what I am,” the boy said to himself; “and perhaps it’s my vanity, but I don’t want to change.”

It was the dreariest Sunday he had ever passed, but he rose the next morning in the highest spirits, for Sam’s father had told him to get off back to town directly after breakfast.

“If Uncle James would only get better and go too,” he said to himself as he dressed, “how much pleasanter it would be!”

But Uncle James came down to breakfast moaning at every step, and murmuring at having to leave his bed so soon. For he had been compelled to rise on account of two or three business matters with which he wished to charge his son; and he told every one in turn that he was very much worse, and that he was sure Furzebrough did not agree with him; but he ate, as Tom observed, a very hearty breakfast all the same.

David had had his own, and had started off at six o’clock to fetch the fly, which arrived in good time, to take Sam off to meet the fast up-train, Tom thinking to himself that it would not have been much hardship to walk across the fields on such a glorious morning.

“Going to see your cousin off?” said Uncle Richard, just as breakfast was over. “You wouldn’t mind the walk back, Tom?”

“Oh no, uncle,” said the boy, who felt startled that such a remark should be made when he was thinking about the walk.

But Tom was not destined to go across to the station, for Uncle James interposed.

“No, no, don’t send him away,” he said. “I have not had an airing in my bath-chair for two days, and I fancy that is why I feel so exhausted this morning.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” said Sam; “and besides,” he added importantly, “I shall be thinking of business all the time.”

“At last,” said Tom to himself, as his cousin stepped leisurely into the fly and lit a cigarette.

“On’y just time to ketch that there train, sir,” said the driver, who, feeling no fear of his bony horse starting, was down out of his seat to hold open the fly-door.

“Then drive faster,” said Sam coolly.

“Wish he’d show me how,” muttered the driver, as he closed the door and began to mount to his seat, scowling at his slow-going horse.

“Good-bye, clodhopper,” said Sam, toying with his cigarette, as he threw himself back in the fly without offering his hand.

“Good-bye, Sam,” replied Tom. “All right, driver;” and the wheels began to revolve.

“He thinks Uncle Richard ’ll leave him all his money,” muttered Sam, as they passed out of the swing-gate. “All that nice place too, and the old windmill; but he don’t have it if I can do anything.”

“There’s something wrong about me, I suppose,” said Tom to himself, as he turned down the garden, and then out into the lane, where he could look right away over the wild common-land, and inhale the fresh warm breeze. “Poor old chap though, I’m sorry for him!” he muttered. “Fancy having to go back to London on a day like this.”

Then from the bubbling up of his spirits consequent upon that feeling of release as from a burden which had come over him, Tom set off running—at first gently, then as hard as he could go, till at a turn of the lane he caught sight of Pete Warboys prowling along with his dog a couple of hundred yards away.

The dog caught sight of Tom running hard, uttered a yelp, tucked its tail between its legs, and began to run. Then Pete turned to see what had startled the dog, caught sight of Tom racing along, and, a guilty conscience needing no accuser, took it for granted that he was being chased; so away he ran, big stick in hand, his long arms flying, and his loose-jointed legs shambling over the ground at a pace which kept him well ahead.

This pleased Tom; there was something exhilarating in hunting his enemy, and besides, it was pleasant to feel that he was inspiring dread.

“Wonder what he has been doing,” said the boy, laughing to himself, as Pete struck off at right angles through the wood and disappeared, leaving his pursuer breathless in the lane. “Well, I sha’n’t run after him.—Hah! that has done me good.”

Tom had another good look round where the lane curved away now, and ran downhill past the big sand-pit at the dip; and then on away down to where the little river gurgled along, sending flashes of sunshine in all directions, while the country rose on the other side in a beautiful slope of furzy common, hanging wood, and closely-cut coppice, pretty well filled with game.

“Better get back,” thought Tom; and then he uttered a low whistle, and broke into a trot, with a new burden on his back in the shape of the bath-chair, for he had suddenly recollected Uncle James’s complaint about not having been out for a ride.

Sure enough when he reached the garden David met him.

“Master’s been a-shouting for you, sir. Yes, there he goes again.”

“Coming, uncle,” cried Tom; and he ran into the house, and encountered Uncle Richard.

“Oh, here you are at last. Get out the bath-chair quickly, my boy. Your uncle has been complaining bitterly. Little things make him fret, and he had set his mind upon a ride.”

“All right, uncle—round directly,” cried Tom, running off to the coach-house. “Phew! how hot I’ve made myself.”

In two minutes he was running the chair round to the front door, and as he passed the study window a doleful moaning greeted his ear; but it ceased upon the wheels being heard.

“All right, uncle, here it is,” cried Tom; and James Brandon came out resting upon a stick, and moaning piteously, while his brother came behind bearing a great plaid shawl.

“Here, take my arm, Jem,” he said.

“I can walk by myself,” was the pettish reply. “Then you’ve come back, sir. Tired of your job, I suppose. Oh dear! oh dear!”

“I really forgot it for a bit, uncle,” said Tom humbly.

“Forgot! Yes, you boys do nothing else but forget. Ah! Oh! Oh! I’m a broken man,” he groaned, as he sank back in the chair and took hold of the handle.

“I’ll pull you, uncle,” said Tom, looking at him wonderingly.

“You pull it so awkwardly.—Oh dear me! how short my breath is!—And you get in the way so when I want to see the country. Go behind.”

“All right, uncle. Which way would you like to go? Through the village?”

“What! down there by the churchyard? Ugh! No; go along that upper lane which leads by the fir-wood and the sand-pits. The air is fit to breathe there.”

“Yes, glorious,” said Uncle Richard cheerily. “Off you go, donkey, and bring your uncle back with a good appetite for dinner.”

“All right, uncle. Now, Uncle James, hold tight.”

“Be careful, sir, be careful,” cried the invalid; and he kept up his regular moaning as Tom pushed the chair out into the lane, and then round past the mill, and on toward the woods.

“How much did your uncle spend over workpeople for that whim of his?” said the invalid, suddenly leaving off moaning and looking round.

“Oh, I don’t know, uncle; a good deal, I believe.”

“Yes, yes; oh dear me! A good deal, no doubt. Keep out of the sand; it jolts me.”

“There’s such a lot of sand along here, uncle; the carts cut the road up so, coming from the pits.”

“Yes; horrible roads. There—oh—oh—oh! Go steady.”

“All right, uncle,” said Tom; and he pushed on steadily enough right along the lane where he had chased Pete Warboys not so long before. Then the fir-wood was reached, and at last the road rose till it was no longer down between two high sand-banks crowned with furze and pine, but opened out as they reached the top of the slope which ran down past the sand-pit to the river with its shallow ford.

“Which are your uncle’s woods?” said Uncle James suddenly.

“Right away back. You can see them when you lean forward. Stop a moment; let’s get close to the edge. That’s better,” he said, as he paused just at the top of the slope. “Now lean forward, and look away to the left a little way from the church tower. That’s one of them. I’m not sure about the others, for Uncle Richard does not talk about them much.”

Whizz! Rustle.

“What’s that?” said Uncle James, ceasing his tiresome moaning.

“Don’t know, uncle. Rabbit, I think.”

Rap!

“Yes, it was a rabbit. They strike the ground with their feet when they are startled.”

“Ah! Then that’s his wood is it?” said James Brandon, leaning forward. “A nice bit of property.”

Crack!

“What’s that, boy?”

“Somebody’s throwing stones,” cried Tom excitedly, turning to look round, but there was nothing visible, though the boy felt sure that the thrower must be Pete Warboys hidden somewhere among the trees. Then he felt sure of it, for, glancing toward the clumps of furze in the more open part, another well-aimed stone came and struck the road between the wheels of the bath-chair.

“Is that some one throwing at me?” cried Uncle James angrily.

“No, uncle,” said Tom, as he leaned upon the handle at the back of the chair; “I expect they’re meant for me—I’m sure of it now,” he added, for there was a slight rap upon his elbow, making him wince as he turned sharply.

“The scoundrel! Whoever it is I’ll have a policeman to him.”

“Yes; there: it is Pete Warboys,” cried Tom excitedly. “I saw him dodge out from behind one of the trees to throw. Oh, I say, did that hit you, uncle?”

“No, boy, only brushed the cushion. The dog! The scoundrel! He—Stop, don’t go and leave me here.”

Tom did not, for, acting on the impulse of the moment, as he saw Pete run out to hurl another stone, he wrenched himself round, unconsciously giving the chair a start, and ran off into the wood in chase of the insolent young poacher, who turned and fled.

No: Tom Blount did not leave his uncle there, for the chair began to run gently on upon its light wire wheels, then faster and faster, down the long hill slope, always gathering speed, till at last it was in full career, with the invalid sitting bolt upright, thoroughly unnerved, and trying with trembling hands to guide its front wheel so as to keep it in the centre of the road. Farther back the land had been soft, and to Tom’s cost as motive power; but more on the hill slope the soft sand had been washed away by many rains, and left the road hard, so that the three-wheeled chair ran with increasing speed, jolting, bounding, and at times seeming as if it must turn over. There, straight before the rider, was the spot below where the road forked, the main going on to the ford, that to the left, deep in sand, diving down into the large sand-pit, which had been dug at from time beyond the oldest traditions of the village. A kind of ridge had here been kept up, to form the roadway right down into the bottom—a cruel place for horses dragging cartloads of the heavy material—and from this ridge on either side there was a stiff slope down to where the level of the huge pit spread, quite a couple of hundred feet below the roadway straight onward to the ford.

And moment by moment Uncle James Brandon sped onward toward the fork, holding the cross handle of the bath-chair with both hands, and steering it first in one direction then in the other, as he hesitated as to which would be the safer. If he went to the right, there, crossing the road at right angles, was the little river, which might be shallow but looked deep; and at any rate meant, if not drowning, wetting. If he went to the left from where he raced on, it looked as if he would have to plunge down at headlong speed into what seemed to be an awful chasm.

But the time for consideration was very short, though thoughts fly like flashes. One way or the other, and he must decide instantly, for there was just before him the point where the road divided—a hundred yards away—fifty yards—twenty yards, and the wind rushing by his ears as the bath-chair bounded on.

Which was it to be?

Chapter Twenty Two.

“I don’t want to fight,” thought Tom Blount, as he rushed off in pursuit of Pete Warboys, this time with full intention, and not led into it by accident. “Fighting means knocking the skin off one’s knuckles, black eyes, nose bleeding, and perhaps getting thrashed. And I may be, for he’s a big, strong, heavy fellow, and I don’t think I could hit him half hard enough to make him care. But it seems to me as if I must have a go at him. Can’t stand there and be pelted by such a fellow, it looks so cowardly. Besides, he’s a bit afraid, or he wouldn’t run away.”

All this and much more thought Tom, as he ran on as fast as he could on diving into the wood when he left the road. An hour or so ago, when Pete rushed in among the trees, Tom had soon given up the chase; but he felt that it would not do to let the young scoundrel feel that he was a kind of modern bold outlaw, with a sanctuary of his own in the woods; so clenching his fists hard, Tom sped on, making up his mind to run his quarry down.

“Uncle James won’t mind my leaving him, if I can go back and say I have punched Pete’s head for throwing stones at

him.—Bother!”

Tom gathered himself up, and stood flinching during a few moments, for he had caught his foot against a closely-sawn-off stump, and though the earth was covered with pine-needles it was hard.

But the accident did not detain him many moments. There in front was Pete showing from time to time, as he dodged in and out among the tall columnar tree-trunks, now in shadow, now passing across some patch of sunshine; and Tom ran on faster than before, the pain having made him feel angry, and as if he must, to use his own words, “take it out of Pete,” he being the active cause.

From time to time the great hulking lad glanced back, expecting to see that he had shaken off his pursuer, but looked in vain, for Tom was now doggedly determined. His brow was knit, his teeth set, and his clenched fists held close to his sides, and after keeping up the high rate of speed for some minutes, he now, feeling that it was going to be a long chase, settled down to a steady football or hare-and-hound trot, which combined fair pace with a likelihood of being able to stay.

Pete Warboys too had been compelled to slacken somewhat in his clumsy bovine rush, and Tom observed with satisfaction, as the minutes went on, and they must have been—pursuer and pursued—toiling over the slippery fir-needles for quite a quarter of an hour, that Pete glanced over his shoulder more often than before.

“He’s getting pumped out,” muttered Tom. “He’s so big that he can’t keep his wind, and he’ll stop short soon. Oh, I say, why don’t I look where I’m going!”

For this time the sandy earth had suddenly given way beneath him, just in the darkest part of the wood, and he plumped right down to the bottom of a rough pit, and went on before he could stop himself right under the roots of a great fir-tree, half of which stood out bare and strange, over what looked like an enormous rabbit-hole.

Tom looked wonderingly at the hole, and backed out into the pit, climbed out, and continued his chase, rather breathlessly now, for the fall had not been good for his breathing apparatus. He had lost ground too, but he soon made that up, for Pete was getting exhausted; and, what seemed strange, since Tom’s last fall he had turned off, and appeared to be running in a circle, till all at once he stopped short with his back up against a tree, panting heavily, and with the perspiration dripping from his forehead.

There was a vicious look in the fellow’s countenance, for he was showing his teeth, and as Tom drew near, he spat on one hand, and took a fresh grip of the thick stick he carried. Then, taking a step forward, he raised the weapon, and aimed a savage blow at his adversary, that would in all probability have laid Tom *hors de combat*, at all events for a few minutes.

But to give good effect to a blow struck with a stick, the object aimed at must be at a certain distance. If the blow fall when the object is beyond or within that distance, its efficacy is very much diminished.

Now as Pete struck at Tom, the latter was for a time at exactly the right distance, but as the boy rushed at him, or rather leaped at him at last, he was not in the aforesaid position long enough, and the blow did not fall till he was right upon Pete, getting a smart rap, but having the satisfaction of seeing the young scoundrel go down as if shot, and roll over and over at the foot of the tree.

Tom went down too, for he could not check himself; but he was up first, and ready enough to avoid another vicious blow from the cudgel, and catch Pete right in the mouth a most unscientific blow delivered with his right fist. All the same though it did its work, and Pete went down again.

Once more he sprang up, and tried to strike with the stick, but Tom’s blood was up, and he closed with him, getting right in beyond his guard, and for the next few minutes there was a fierce struggle, ending in both going down together, Tom unfortunately undermost, and by the time he gained his feet his adversary was off again, running as hard as he could go.

“A coward!” muttered Tom, after running a few yards and then giving up, to stand panting and exhausted. “Ugh! how my side hurts!” he said, as he clapped his hand upon his ribs where the blow from the stick had fallen. “I don’t care though; I won, and he has gone.”

He stood trying to catch sight of Pete again, but could not see him, for the simple reason that the lad had dropped down behind a clump of bracken growing silver-leaved in the sunshine in an opening in the wood, and here he crept on, watching as, after hesitating, Tom began to retire hastily, so as to return to his uncle in the chair.

Tom did not go far though without stopping, for he had aimed to reach the pit into which he had fallen, and here he stood gazing down, evidently puzzled, for there was something particular about the place which attracted him; while, to increase his interest, all at once there was a rustling noise, and Pete Warboys’ long lean dog thrust out its head from the side hole beneath the fir-tree roots, which hung out quite bare, looked up, saw who was gazing down, turned, and thrust out its long bony tail instead. This, however, was only seen for a moment and then gone.

“That’s strange,” thought Tom, as he walked on back pretty fast now, for it suddenly occurred to him that his uncle must be out of patience, and that he had been longer than he thought for.

He found too that he had run farther than he thought, and he was getting pretty hot and breathless by the time he trotted out of the wood, and into the sandy lane, where, instead of his uncle’s face as he sat looking back impatiently in the chair, there was the bare road and nothing more, save a red admiral butterfly flitting here and there and settling in the dust.

“He must have asked somebody passing to wheel him back,” thought Tom, who immediately began to play Red Indian or Australian black, and look for the trail—to wit, the thin wheel-marks left by the chair. But though he found those which had been made in coming plainly lining the soft sandy road, and ran in different directions toward home, there were no returning tracks.

“Then he must have gone on,” thought Tom; and he ran back to where he had left his uncle, to see now faintly in the hard road a continuation of the three wheel-marks, so very distinct from any that would have been left by cart or carriage, being very narrow, and three instead of two or four.

He went on slowly trying to trace the wheel-marks, but the road soon became so hard that he missed them; a few yards farther on he saw the faint mark made by one, then again two showed, and then they ceased, but he was on the right track, he knew; and walking rapidly on down the hill, with his eyes now on the road, now right ahead toward the river and the ford, he began wondering who could have come along there, and where his uncle had made whoever it was take him.

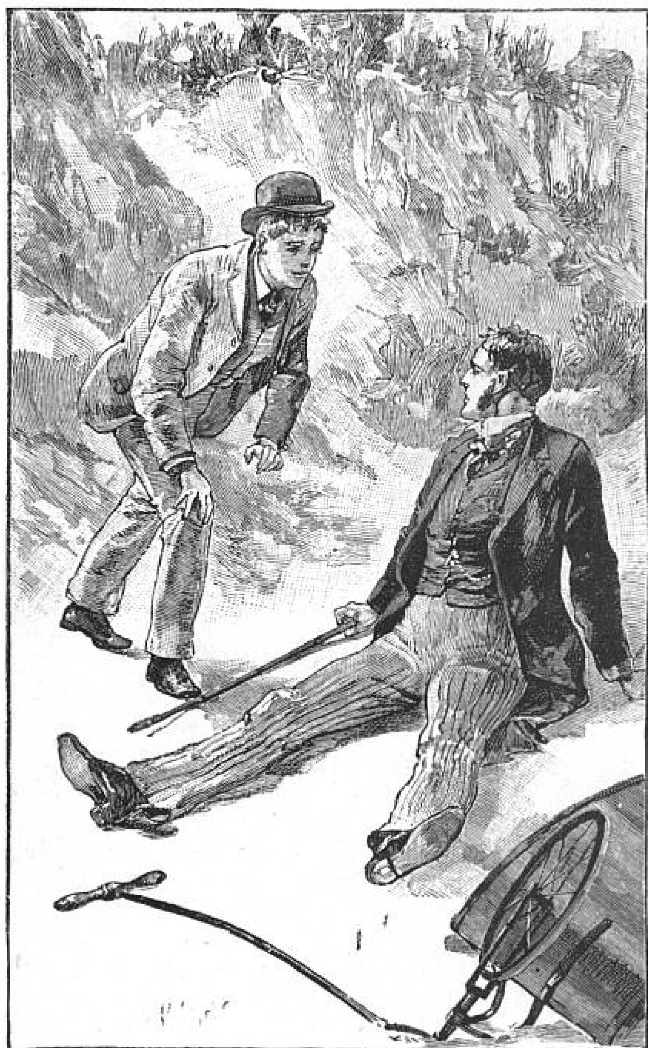
“Why it would be miles round to get home this way,” thought Tom. “Perhaps he was thirsty, and asked some one to take him down to the river, and is waiting.”

It was not a good solution of the problem, and he was not satisfied, for there was no sign of the chair near the ford. But there were traces again in the sand which had been washed to the side, and here the chair had made a curve and run close to the bank for a few yards; then out into the hard road, and he saw no more for a couple of hundred yards, and then they were on the left-hand side, and Tom’s blood began to turn cold, as they say, for the tracks bore off to the side road leading down into the sand-pit.

“Why the chair ran away with him, and perhaps he’s killed.”

At this thought Tom’s legs ran away with him down into the thick sandy road, where the wheel-marks were deeply imprinted, showing that the chair had been that way.

Now he had never been down into the pit, and only once as far as the edge, into which he had peered from the road above, whence he had looked down upon a colony of martins darting in and out of their holes in the sand-cliff. He had determined to examine the place, but that morning he was compelled to hurry back to breakfast. Now he had to explore the depths of the pit in a very different mood; and he was not half-way down the slope when he found that the wheels had suddenly curved off, and then, from the marks on the smooth sand, it had evidently turned over. And there, sixty or seventy yards away, and fully a hundred feet below him, it lay bottom upwards, while away to its right sat its late occupant, making signs with his stick.



“I don’t think I’ve a whole bone left in my body.”—p. 252.

Frontispiece.

Tom did not attempt to go on down the roadway, which meant quite a journey, but began to descend at once, slipping, scrambling, falling and rolling over in the loose sand, which gave way at every step, and took him with it, till at last, hot and breathless, he reached the invalid’s side.

“Hurt, uncle?” he panted.

“Hurt, sir?” cried Uncle James angrily. “I’m nearly killed. I don’t think I’ve a whole bone left in my body. You dog! You scoundrel! You did it on purpose. You knew it was not safe to leave that miserable, wretched wreck of a thing. It was all out of revenge, and you wanted to kill me.”

“Oh no, uncle,” cried Tom, staring in astonishment at the vigour his uncle had displayed. For there was no moaning, no holding the hand to the breast, and complaining of shortness of breath, but an undue display of excitement and anger, which had made cheeks burn and eyes glisten.

“I’m very sorry, uncle; it was that young scoundrel’s fault.”

“I don’t believe it, sir. It was a trick. Disgraceful!”

“Wait a minute, uncle, and I’ll fetch the chair. I’ll get it here, and then help you up to the top before I take it up.”

“Fetch the chair!” stormed James Brandon. “It’s a wreck, sir; one wheel’s off, and the front one’s all bent sidewise. Here, give me your hand.”

He caught hold of the extended wrist, and with that and the stick, toiled up the steep slope, to the boy’s astonishment; and when they had reached the road, jerked the wrist from him, and walked on without a word till they came in sight of the house, when Tom plucked up the courage to speak.

“Really, uncle, I did not think of anything but running after that lad.”

“I want no excuses, sir,” cried Uncle James fiercely. “I know what it means. You are too idle—you are sick of wheeling the chair. It was all a planned thing. But mind, I shall take a note of it, and you will find out that you’ve made the great mistake of your life. Here, you sir!”

This was to David, who was in the garden; and he hurried up.

“Go and order me a fly to come here directly.”

“From the station, sir? It’s over there all day now.”

“From anywhere, only make haste.”

“Yes, sir,” said David; and he gave Tom a sharp look as much as to say, “Rather too much of a good thing to go over there twice.” Then he fetched his coat and went off.

“Hallo! Walking?” cried Uncle Richard, coming out of the observatory. “Where’s the chair?”

“Broken, smashed, thanks to this young scoundrel; and it’s a mercy I’m alive. But I’ll have no more of this.”

Uncle James strode into the house, and his brother turned to Tom for an explanation, and had it.

“But he did not walk back all the way?”

“Every step, uncle, and didn’t seem to mind it.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Uncle Richard, frowning, as he locked up the yard gate and followed his brother into the house.

Half-an-hour later Mrs Fidler announced dinner, when Uncle James came down looking black as thunder, and answered his brother in monosyllables, refusing to speak once to Tom, at whom he scowled heavily.

“I’m sorry you had such an upset, James,” said Uncle Richard at last.

“Thank you,” was the cold reply.

“But I don’t think you are any the worse for it.”

“Thank you!” said Uncle James again, but more shortly.

“Tom, my lad, tell David as soon as dinner is over to borrow the Vicar’s cart, and go to the sand-pit and fetch the broken chair.”

“David has gone to the station, uncle,” said Tom.

“Station? What for?”

“Uncle sent him for the fly.”

“Fly?”

“Yes, sir,” said Uncle James. “I sent your gardener for the fly, and if there’s any charge for his services I will pay him. I see I have outstayed my welcome, and the sooner I am off the better.”

“My dear James, don’t be absurd,” said Uncle Richard. “What you say is childish.”

“Of course, sir; sick and helpless men are always childish.”

“There, don’t take it like that. Tom assures me it was an accident. If you are upset by it, let me send for the doctor to see you.”

“Thank you; I’ll send for my own doctor as soon as I get back to town.”

“You’re not going back to town to-day,” said Uncle Richard, smiling.

“We shall see about that,” said Uncle James, rising from his place, for the dinner was at an end, and walking firmly enough out of the room.

Uncle Richard frowned and looked troubled. Mrs Fidler looked at Tom, and as soon as they were alone she began to question him, and heard all.

“Well,” she said, “I’m not going to make any remarks, my dear, it isn’t my duty; but I will say this, I don’t like to see your dear uncle imposed upon even by his brother, and I hope to goodness Mr James will keep his word, for I don’t believe you upset him on purpose.”

Uncle James did keep his word, for an hour later he was in the fly with his portmanteau on his way to the station.

“And never give me so much as a shilling, Master Tom, and me been twice to fetch that fly. If he wasn’t your uncle, sir, I’d call him mean. But what did you say? I’m to fetch the chair, as is lying broken at the big sand-pit?”

“Yes, in Mr Maxted’s cart.”

“Did it fall over?”

“Yes, right over, down the slope from top to bottom.”

“And him in it, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll forgive him, and young Mr Sam Brandon too. My word, sir, I’d ha’ give something to ha’ been there to see.”

“But he must have hurt himself, David.”

“What there, sir? Tchah! that sand’s as soft as silk. Wouldn’t like to come and help fetch the chair, sir?”

“Yes, I should, David; I should like the ride.”

“Then come on, sir, and we’ll go round the other way from the Vicarage gates. Right from top to bottom, eh, sir? Well, I would have give something to ha’ been there to see.”

Chapter Twenty Three.

“Humph!” ejaculated Uncle Richard, as he finished his inspection of the bath-chair just taken out of the Vicar’s cart. “See that the carrier calls for it, David, to take it back to Guildford; and you, Tom, write for me to the man it was hired from, pointing out that we have had an accident, and tell him to send in his bill.”

“And it’ll be a big ’un, Master Tom,” said David, chuckling and rubbing his hands as soon as his master was out of hearing. “My word, it’s got it, and no mistake. One wheel right off, the front all twissen, and the axle-tree bent. It’ll be like making a new ’un. Tck!”

“You wouldn’t laugh like that, David, if you’d got it to pay for,” said Tom.

“True for you, Master Tom; but I wasn’t laughing at the ravage, but at the idee of your uncle, who creeps about thinking he’s very bad when he arn’t thinking o’ nothing else, going spinning down the hill, and steering hisself right into the old sand-pit.”

“And I don’t see that you have anything to laugh at in that,” said Tom stiffly.

“More don’t I, Master Tom, but I keep on laughing all the more, and can’t help it. Now if he had been very badly, I don’t think I could ha’ done it.”

“My uncle is very ill, and came down here for the benefit of his health,” said Tom sternly.

“Then your nursing, Master Tom, and my vegetables and fruit’s done him a lot o’ good, for the way he walked home after being spilt did us a lot o’ credit. I couldn’t ha’ walked better.”

Tom thought the same, though he would not say so, but helped the gardener place the wrecked chair in the coach-house, and then found his uncle coming that way.

“Get the wheelbarrow, Tom,” he said, “and we’ll take the new discs of glass into the workshop.”

“And begin again, uncle?” cried Tom excitedly.

“What, are you ready to go through all that labour again?”

“Ready, uncle?” cried the boy reproachfully. “Why, all the while Uncle James has been down here it has seemed to be like so much waste of time.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Uncle Richard; “then we must work over hours to win back the loss. Help him on with the case carefully, David, and I’ll go first to open the door.”

“Say, Master Tom,” said the gardener, “ain’t it more waste o’ time to go glass-grinding and making contrapshums like this? Hey, but it’s precious heavy,” he continued, as he helped to lift one end of the case on to the long barrow.

“Waste of time to make scientific instruments?” cried Tom.

“Ay. What’s the good on it when it’s done?”

“To look at the sun, moon, and stars, to be sure.”

“Well, you can do that without tallow-scoops, sir; and you take my advice, don’t you get looking at the sun through none o’ them things, sir. Hey, but it be a weight!” he continued, raising the handles of the barrow.

“Never mind; I can manage it,” cried Tom.

“Then I arn’t going to let you, sir.”

“Why not?”

“’Cause my muskles is hard and yours is soft, and may get stretched and strained. Hold that there door back. It’s all up-hill, you know; master never thought o’ that.”

David wheeled the heavy case up to the door of the old mill, helped to carry the case in, and then in a whisper said—

“Let’s have a look at him when you’ve done, Master Tom.”

“Look at whom?” said the boy wonderingly.

“Man in the moon,” replied David, with a chuckle, as he trotted back with the barrow, and Uncle Richard came down from the observatory to take out the screws and unpack the two discs.

Within an hour they were at work again, and day after day passed—wasted days, David said.

“Master and you had a deal better set to work and build me a vinery to grow some more grapes,” he grumbled; but Tom laughed, and the speculum gradually began to assume its proper form.

There had only been one brief letter in answer to two sent making inquiries, and this letter said that Uncle James was much better, and regularly attending the office.

“My vegetables,” said David, when he was told. “Nothing like ’em, and plenty o’ fresh air, Master Tom, to set a man right. But just you come and look here.”

He led the way down the garden to where, the Marie Louise pear-tree spread its long branches upon the wall, each laden with the soft green fruit hanging to the long thin stalks, which looked too fragile to bear so great a weight.

“Pears?” said Tom. “Yes, I was looking at them yesterday, and thinking how good they must be.”

“Nay, but they am’t, Master Tom; that’s just it. If you was to pick one o’ they—which would be a sin, sir—and stick your teeth into it, you’d find it hard and tasting sappy like chewed leaves.”

“Why I thought they were ripe.”

“Nay, not them, sir. You want to take a pear, sir, just at the right moment.”

“And when is the right moment for a pear?”

David laughed, and shook his head.

“Tends on what sort it is, sir. Some’s at their best in September, and some in October. Then you goes on to December and January, and right on to April. Why the round pears on that little tree yonder don’t get ripe till April and May. Like green bullets now, but by that time, or even June, if you take care on ’em, they’re like brown skins’ full o’ rich sugary juice.”

“But these must be ripe, David.”

“Nay, sir, they’re not. As I told you afore, if you pick ’em too soon they srivels. When they’re quite ripe they’re just beginning to turn creamy colour like.”

“Well, they’re a very nice lot, David.”

“Yes, sir; and what am I to do?”

“Let ’em hang.”

“I wish I could, sir, but I feel as if I dursn’t.”

“Dare not! Why?”

“Fear they might walk over the wall.”

“What, be stolen?”

“Ay, my lad. I come in at that gate at six this morning, and was going gently down the centre walk, when it was like having a sort o’ stroke, for there was a head just peeping over the wall.”

“A stranger?”

“I couldn’t quite see, sir; but I’m ’most ready to swear as it was Pete Warboys, looking to see if they was ready to go into his pockets.”

“Then let’s pick them at once,” cried Tom.

“Dear lad, what is the use o’ my teaching of you,” said David reproachfully. “Don’t I keep on telling o’ you as they’d srivel up; and what’s a pear then? It ain’t as if it was a walnut, where the srivel’s a ornyment to the shell.”

“Then let’s lie wait for my gentleman with a couple o’ sticks.”

David’s wrinkled face expanded, and his eyes nearly-closed.

“Hah! Now you’re talking sense, sir,” he said, in a husky whisper, as if the idea was too good to be spoken aloud. “Hazel sticks, sir—thick ’uns?”

“Hazel! A young scoundrel!” cried Tom.

“Nay, he’s an old ’un, sir, in wickedness.”

“Hazel is no good. I’d take old broomsticks to him,” cried Tom indignantly. “Oh, I do hate a thief.”

“Ay, sir, that comes nat’ral, ’speshly a thief as comes robbin’ of a garden. House-breakers and highwaymen’s bad enough; but a thief as come a-robbin’ a garden, where you’ve been nussin’ the things up for years and years—ah! there’s nothing worse than that.”

“You’ve got some old birch brooms, David,” cried Tom, without committing himself to the gardener’s sentiments.

“Birch, sir? Tchah! Birch would only tickle him, even if we could hit him on the bare skin.”

“Nonsense! I didn’t mean the birch, I meant the broomsticks.”

“Oh, I see!” said David. “But nay, nay, sir, that wouldn’t do. You see, when a man’s monkey’s up he hits hard; and if you and me ketched Pete Warboys over in our garden, and hit as hard as we could, we might break him; and though I says to you it wouldn’t be a bit o’ consequence, that there old rampagin’ witch of a granny of his would come up here cursing every one, and making such fillilloo that there’d be no bearing it.”

“Well, that wouldn’t harm anybody.”

“I dunno, sir; I dunno,” said David thoughtfully.

“Why, David, you don’t believe in witches and ill-wishing, and all that sort of stuff, do you?”

“Me, sir?” cried the gardener; “not likely. But it’s just as well to be the safe side o’ the hedge, you know, in case there might be something in it.”

Tom laughed, and David shook his head solemnly.

“Why, I believe you do believe in it all,” said Tom.

“Nay, sir, I don’t,” cried the old fellow indignantly; “and don’t you go saying such things.”

“Ha—ha—ha!” laughed Tom.

“Ah, you may laugh, sir; but Parson Maxted’s handsome young Jarsey cow did die.”

“Well, all cows die some time,” cried Tom.

“Ay, sir, that’s true; but not after old Mother Warboys has stood cussin’ for ever so long about the milk.”

“And did she?”

“Ay, that she did, sir, right in the middle o’ the road, because the cook give her yes’day’s skim-milk instead o’ to-day’s noo.”

Tom laughed again.

“I say, what about the pears?”

“Ay, what about the pears? You wouldn’t come down in the dark and keep watch.”

“Wouldn’t I!” cried Tom excitedly.

“Besides, we might ketch him, and him fly at you.”

“I wish he would,” said Tom.

“And then it would be in the dark.”

“Of course.”

"Not till late at night, perhaps."

"Well, what of that?"

"And maybe he wouldn't come in the night at all, but steal over the wall just before it gets light, when you'd be in your bed. Yes, that's just the sort of time when he would come."

"I should have to ask uncle to let me sit up with you, David."

"Ah, I thought that would be it," said David; "ask your uncle."

"Look here, David," cried Tom, flushing. "I shouldn't say I'd like to come if I didn't mean it. I'm not going to get into trouble by slipping out on the sly."

"It's all over," said David. "I thought so. Master'd never let you sit up and watch, sir. I thought you wouldn't."

"Well, we'll soon prove that," cried Tom. "Here is uncle."

"Yes; what is it?" said Uncle Richard, coming across the garden.

"David's afraid of the pears being stolen, uncle, for he saw some one examining them this morning, and he's going to sit up to-night and watch. Do you mind my sitting up too?"

"Sitting up? No, I think not, Tom, only mind and don't get hurt. You are more likely to catch a thief at daybreak though, I should say."

"Mebbe, sir," said David; "but I think if you didn't mind I'd try to-night first."

"By all means, David. I should be sorry to lose those pears again."

"There!" cried Tom, as soon as they were alone; "do you think I want to back out now?"

David laughed, and rubbed his hands together between his knees.

"Come on, Master Tom, and I'll get the billhook. Then we'll go and cut a couple of good young hazel rods in the copse."

"Then you won't have broomsticks, David?"

"Nay, sir, they'd be too heavy and too stiff. I know the sort—good stout young hazels as won't break when you hit with 'em, but wrop well round."

The hazels were cut and carried back to the garden, burdened with their twigs and greenery.

"He might be about, and think they was meant for him, if we trimmed 'em into sticks, Master Tom. He won't think anything if he sees 'em like this."

The hazels were shortened to a convenient length as soon as they were in the garden, David chuckling loudly the while.

"I owe that chap a lot, Master Tom, and if I can get a chance I mean to pay him this time. Hit low, sir, if you get a crack at him."

"Not likely to hurt him," said Tom.

"More likely, sir. Trousers are thin, 'specially hisn, and they've got some good holes in 'em generally, where you might reach his skin; 'sides, you're not likely to cut his face or injure his eyes. Nothing like hitting low. Now, then, I'm going on with my reg'lar work, and as soon as it's dark I shall be down here in among the blackcurrants, with a couple of old sacks and a horse-cloth, for us to sit on, so as not to ketch rheumatics."

"About what time?" said Tom.

"Arpus eight, sir. There's no moon to-night so it'll be pretty dark; but we shall hear him."

"If he comes," said Tom.

"Course, sir, if he comes. But we'll chance that, and if he don't, why we shall know as my pears is safe."

Chapter Twenty Four.

Tom Blount did not make a very good tea that evening, for he was excited by thoughts of the coming watch.

He was not in the least afraid, but his face felt flushed, and there was a curious tingling in the nerves which made him picture a scene in the garden, in which he was chasing Pete Warboys round and round, getting a cut at him with the stick from time to time, and at last making him turn at bay, when a desperate fight ensued.

It seemed a long time too till half-past eight, and though he took up a book of natural history full of interest, it seemed to be as hard reading as *Tidd's Practice*, in Gray's Inn.

"Seat uncomfortable, Tom?" said his uncle at last.

“No, uncle,” said the boy, colouring. “Why?”

“Because you can’t sit still. Oh, I understand. You are thinking of going out to watch.”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Humph! More than the pears are worth, Tom.”

“Do you think so, uncle?”

“Decidedly. But there, the thief deserves to be caught—and thrashed; but don’t be too hard upon him.”

Tom brightened up at this, and looked at the clock on the mantel-piece.

“Why, it’s stopped,” he said.

“Stopped? Nonsense,” said Uncle Richard, looking at his watch.

“But it must have stopped. I don’t think it has moved lately.”

“The clock is going all right, Tom, but not so fast as your desires. There, try a little patience; and don’t stop after ten. If the plunderer is not here by that time he will not come to-night—if he comes at all.”

“Very well, uncle,” said Tom, and after another glance at the clock, which still did not seem to move, he settled down with his head resting upon his fists, to study the giraffe, of which there was a large engraving, with its hide looking like a piece of the map of the moon, the spots being remarkably similar to the craters and ring-plains upon the moon’s surface, while the giraffe itself, with its long sprawling legs, would put him in mind of Pete Warboys. Then he read how it had been designed by nature for its peculiar life in the desert, and so that it could easily reach up and crop the leaves of trees from fifteen to twenty feet above the ground; but it did not, as he pictured it in his mind, seem to be picking leaves, but Marie Louise pears, while David was creeping up behind with his elastic hazel stick, and—

Ting.

Half-past eight by the dining-room clock, and Tom sprang up.

“Going, my boy?”

“Yes, uncle, David will be waiting.”

Uncle Richard nodded, and taking his cap and the hazel stick he had brought in, the boy went out silently, to find that it was a very soft dark night—so dark, in fact, that as soon as he had stepped on to the lawn he walked into one of the great bushes of laurustinus, and backed out hurriedly to reconsider which was the way. Then he stepped gently forward over the soft damp grass of the lawn, with his eyes now growing more accustomed to the darkness.

Directly after there was a low whistle heard.

“Where are you, David?”

“Here, sir. Come down between the raspberries.”

“Where are they, David? All right, I see now,” whispered Tom, and he stepped as far as he could across the flower-bed, which ran down beside the kitchen-garden, and the next minute felt the gardener’s hand stretched out to take his.

“Got your stick, sir?”

“Yes; all right. He hasn’t come then yet.”

“Not yet, sir. Here you are; now you can kneel down alongside o’ me. Mustn’t be no more talking.”

Tom knelt on the soft horse-cloth, feeling his knees indent the soil beneath; and then with his head below the tops of the black-currant bushes, whose leaves gave out their peculiar medicinal smell, he found that though perfectly hidden he could dimly make out the top of the garden wall, where the pears hung thickly not many feet away, and the watchers were so situated that a spring would take them into the path, close to any marauder who might come.

“One moment, David,” whispered Tom, “and then I won’t speak again. Which way do you think he’ll come?”

“Over the wall from the field, and then up along the bed, so as his feet arn’t heard. If I hear anything I nips you in the leg. If you hear anything, you nips me.”

“Not too hard,” said Tom, and the watch began.

At first there was the rattle of a cart heard coming along the road, a long way off, and Tom knelt there sniffing the odour of the blackcurrants, and trying to calculate where the cart would be. But after a time that reached the village and passed on, and the tramp of the horse and the rattle of the wheels died out.

Then he listened to the various sounds in the village—voices, the closing of doors, the rattle of shutters; and all at once the church clock began to strike, the nine thumps on the bell coming very slowly, and the last leaving a quivering, booming sound in the air which lasted for some time.

After this all was very still, and it was quite a relief to hear the barking of a dog from some distance away, followed by the faintly-heard rattle of a chain drawn over the entrance of the kennel, when the barking ceased, and repeated directly after as the barking began again.

Everything then was wonderfully still and dark, till a peculiar cry arose—a weird, strange cry, as of something in pain, which thrilled Tom’s nerves.

“Rabbit?” he whispered.

“Hedgehog,” grumbled David hoarsely; “don’t talk.”

Silence again for a minute or two, and the peculiar sensation caused by the cry of the bristly animal still hung in Tom’s nerves, when there was another noise which produced a thoroughly different effect, for a donkey from somewhere out on the common suddenly gave vent to its doleful extraordinary bray, ending in a most dismal squeaking yell, suggestive of all the wind being out of its organ.

Tom smiled as he knelt there, wondering how Nature could have given an animal so strange a cry, as all was again still, till voices arose once more in the village; some one said “Good-night!” then a door banged, and, *pat pat*, he could hear faintly retiring steps, “Good-night” repeated, and then close to his elbow—

Snor-rr-re.

“David!” he whispered, as he touched the gardener on the shoulder—“David!”

“Arn’t better taters grow’d, I say, and—Eh? Is he comed?”

“No! Listen,” said Tom, thinking it as well not to allude to his companion’s lapse.

“Oh ay, I’m a-listenin’, sir, with all my might,” whispered the gardener; “but I don’t think it’s him yet. Wait a bit, and we’ll nab him if he don’t mind.”

Silence again for quite ten minutes, and then David exclaimed—

“*Wuph*!” and lurched over sidewise up against his companion, but jerked himself up again, and said in a gruff whisper full of reproach, “Don’t go to sleep, Master Tom.”

“No. All right, I’m awake,” replied the boy, laughing to himself, and the watching went on again, the time passing very slowly, and the earth which had felt so soft beneath the knees gradually turning hard.

There was not a sound to be heard now, till the heavy breathing on his left suggested that David was dozing off again, and set him thinking that one was enough to keep vigil, and that he could easily rouse his companion if the thief came.

He felt a little vexed at first that David, who had been so eager to watch, should make such a lapse; but just in his most indignant moments, when he felt disposed to give a sudden lurch sidewise to knock the gardener over like a skittle, and paused, hesitating, he had an admonition, which showed him how weak human nature is at such times, in the shape of a sudden seizure. One moment he was wakeful and thinking, the next he was fast asleep, dreaming of being back at Gray’s Inn—soundly asleep, in fact.

This did not last while a person could have counted ten. Then he was wide-awake again, ready to continue the watch, and let David rest.

“It’s rum though,” he said to himself, as he crouched there, and now softly picked a leaf to nibble, and feel suggestions of taking a powder in a spoonful of black-currant jelly, so strong was the flavour in the leaf. “Very rum,” he thought. “One’s wide-awake, and the next moment fast asleep.”

He started then, for he fancied that he heard a sound, but though he listened attentively he could distinguish nothing; and the time went on, with David’s breathing growing more deep and heavy; and upon feeling gently to his left, it was to find that the gardener was now right down with his elbows on the ground and his face upon his hands.

“Any one might come and clear all the pears away if I were not here.”

But Tom felt very good-humoured over the business, as he thought of certain remarks he would be able to make to the gardener next day; and he was running over this, and wishing that some one would come to break the monotonous vigil, when there was the sound of a door opening up at the cottage, and then steps on the gravel path. Directly after Uncle Richard’s voice was heard.

“Now, Tom, my lad, just ten o’clock; give it up for to-night. Where are you?”

Before Tom could make answer there was a quick movement on his left, an elbow was jerked into his ribs, and David exclaimed in a husky whisper—

“Now, my lad, wake up. Here’s your uncle.”

“Yes, uncle, here!” cried Tom, as he clapped his hand to his side.

“Well, have you got him?”

“Nay, sir,” said David; “nobody been here to-night, but I shall ketch him yet.”

“No, no, be off home to bed,” said Uncle Richard.

“Bime by, sir. I’ll make it twelve first,” said David.

“No,” cried Uncle Richard decisively. “It is not likely that any one will come now.”

"Then he'll be here before it's light," said David.

"Perhaps, but we can't spare time for this night work. Home with you," cried Uncle Richard.

"Tell you what then, sir, I'll go and lie down for an hour or two, and get here again before it's light."

"Very well," said Uncle Richard. "I'll fasten the gate after you. Good-night. No: you run to the gate with him, Tom."

"All right, uncle," cried the boy; and then, "Oh my! how stiff my knees are. How are yours, David?" he continued, as they walked to the gate.

"Bit of a touch o' rheumatiz in 'em, sir. Ground's rayther damp. Good-night, sir. We'll have him yet."

"Good-night," said Tom. "But I say, David, did you have a good nap?"

"Good what, sir? Nap? Me have a nap? Why, you don't think as I went to sleep?"

"No, I don't think so," cried Tom, laughing.

"Don't you say that now, sir; don't you go and say such a word. Come, I do like that: me go to sleep? Why, sir, it was you, and you got dreaming as I slep'. I do like that."

"All right, David. Good-night."

Tom closed the gate, and ten minutes later he was in bed asleep.

Chapter Twenty Five.

The church clock was striking six when Tom awoke, sprang out of bed, and looked out of the window, to find a glorious morning, with everything drenched in dew.

Hastily dressing and hurrying down, he felt full of reproach for having overslept himself, his last thought having been of getting up at daybreak to continue the watch with David.

There were the pears hanging in their places, and not a footprint visible upon the beds; and there too were the indentations made by two pairs of knees in the black-currant rows, while the earth was marked by the coarse fibre of the sacks.

But the dew lay thickly, and had not been brushed off anywhere, and it suddenly struck Tom that the black-currant bushes would not be a favourable hiding-place when the light was coming, and that David must have selected some other.

"Of course: in those laurels," thought Tom, and he went along the path; but the piece of lawn between him and the shrubs had not been crossed, and after looking about in different directions, Tom began to grin and feel triumphant, for he was, after all, the first to wake.

In fact it was not till half-past seven that the gardener arrived, walking very fast till he caught sight of Tom, when he checked his speed, and came down the garden bent of back and groaning.

"Morning, Master Tom, sir. Oh, my back! Tried so hard to drag myself here just afore daylight."

"Only you didn't wake, David," cried Tom, interrupting him. "Why, you ought to have been up after having such a snooze last night in the garden."

"I won't have you say such a word, sir," cried David angrily. "Snooze! Me snooze! Why, it was you, sir, and you're a-shoving it on to me, and—"

David stopped short, for he could not stand the clear gaze of Tom's laughing eyes. His face relaxed a little, and a few puckers began to appear, commencing a smile.

"Well, it warn't for many minutes, Master Tom."

"An hour."

"Nay, sir, nay; not a 'our."

"Quite, David; and I wouldn't wake you. I say, don't be a sham. You did oversleep yourself."

"Well, I s'pose I did, sir, just a little."

"And now what would you say if I told you that Pete has been and carried off all the pears?"

"What!" yelled David; and straightening himself he ran off as hard as he could to the Marie Louise pear-tree, but only to come back grinning.

"Nay, they're all right," he said. "But you'll come and have another try to-night?"

"Of course I will," said Tom; and soon after he hurried in to breakfast.

That morning Tom was in the workshop, where for nearly two hours, with rests between, he had been helping the

speculum grinding. Uncle Richard had been summoned into the cottage, to see one of the tradesmen about some little matter of business, and finding that the bench did not stand quite so steady as it should, the boy fetched a piece of wood from the corner, and felt in his pocket for his knife, so as to cut a wedge, but the knife was not there, and he looked about him, feeling puzzled.

"When did I have it last?" he thought. "I remember: here, the day before the speculum was broken. I had it to cut a wedge to put under that stool, and left it on the bench."

But there was no knife visible, and he was concluding that he must have had it since, and left it in his other trousers' pocket, when he heard steps, and looking out through the open door, he saw the Vicar coming up the slope from the gate.

"Good-morning, sir," said Tom cheerily.

"Good-morning, Thomas Blount," was the reply, in very grave tones, accompanied by a searching look. "Is your uncle here?"

"No, sir," said Tom wonderingly; "he has just gone indoors. Shall I call him?"

"Yes—no—not yet."

The Vicar coughed to clear his throat, and looked curiously at Tom again, with the result that the lad felt uncomfortable, and flushed a little.

"Will you sit down, sir?" said Tom, taking a pot of rough emery off a stool, and giving the top a rub.

"Thank you, no."

The Vicar coughed again to get rid of an unpleasant huskiness, and then, as if with an effort—

"The fact is, Thomas Blount, I am glad he is not here, for I wish to say a few words to you seriously. I did mean to speak to him, but this is better. It shall be a matter of privacy between us, and I ask you, my boy, to treat me not as your censor but as your friend—one who wishes you well."

"Yes, sir, of course. Thank you, sir, I will," said Tom, who felt puzzled, and grew more and more uncomfortable as he wondered what it could all mean, and finally, as the Vicar remained silent, concluded that it must be something to do with his behaviour in church. Then no, it could not be that, for he could find no cause of offence.

"I know," thought Tom suddenly. "He wants me to go and read with him, Latin and Greek, I suppose, or mathematics."

The Vicar coughed again, and looked so hard at Tom that the boy felt still more uncomfortable, and hurriedly began to pull down his rolled-up shirt-sleeves and to button his cuffs.

"Don't do that, Thomas Blount," said the Vicar, still more huskily; "there is nothing to be ashamed of in honest manual labour."

"No, sir, of course not," said the lad, still more uncomfortable, for it was very unpleasant to be addressed as "Thomas Blount," in that formal way.

"I often regret," said the Vicar, "that I have so few opportunities for genuine hard muscular work, and admire your uncle for the way in which he plunges into labour of different kinds. For such work is purifying, Thomas Blount, and ennobling."

This was all very strange, and seemed like the beginning of a lecture, but Tom felt better, and he liked the Vicar—at least at other times, but not now.

"Will you be honest with me, my lad?" said the visitor at last.

"Oh yes, sir," was the reply, for "my lad" sounded so much better than formal Thomas Blount.

"That's right. Ahem!"

Another cough. A pause, and Tom coloured a little more beneath the searching gaze that met his.

"Were you out last night?" came at last, to break a most embarrassing silence.

"Yes, sir."

"Out late?"

"Yes, sir; quite late."

"Humph!" ejaculated the Vicar, who looked now very hard and stern. "One moment—would you mind lending me your knife?"

"My knife!" faltered Tom, astounded at such a request; and then, in a quick, hurried way—"I'm so sorry, sir, I cannot. I was looking for it just now, but I've lost it."

"Lost it? Dear me! Was it a valuable knife?"

"Oh no, sir, only an old one, with the small blade broken."

"Would you mind describing it to me?"

"Describing it, sir? Of course not. It had a big pointed blade, and a black and white bone handle."

"And the small blade broken, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had it any other mark by which you would know it? Knives with small blades broken are very general."

"No, sir, no other mark. Oh yes, it had. I filed a T and a B in it one day, but it was very badly done."

"Very, Thomas Blount," said the Vicar, taking something from his breast-pocket. "Is that your knife?"

"Yes," cried Tom eagerly, "that's it! Where did you find it, sir? I know; you must have taken it off that bench by mistake when uncle showed you round."

"No, Thomas Blount," said the Vicar, shaking his head, and keeping his eyes fixed upon the lad; "I found it this morning in my garden."

"You couldn't, sir," cried Tom bluntly. "How could it get there?"

The Vicar gazed at him without replying, and Tom added hastily—

"I beg your pardon, sir. I meant that it is impossible."

"The knife asserts that it is possible, sir. Take it. A few pence would have bought those plums."

The hand Tom had extended dropped to his side.

"What plums, sir?" he said, feeling more and more puzzled.

"Bah! I detest pitiful prevarication, sir," cried the Vicar warmly. "The knife was dropped by whoever it was stripped the wall of my golden drops last night. There, take your knife, sir, I have altered my intentions. I did mean to speak to your uncle."

"What about?" said Uncle Richard, who had come up unheard in the excitement. "Good-morning, Maxted. Any one's cow dead? Subscription wanted?"

"Oh no," said the Vicar. "It must out now. I suppose some one's honour has gone a little astray."

"Then we must fetch it back. Whose? Not yours, Tom?"

"I don't know, uncle," said the boy, with his forehead all wrinkled up. "Yes, I do. Mr Maxted thinks I went to his garden last night to steal plums. Tell him I didn't, uncle, please."

"Tell him yourself, Tom."

"I can't," said Tom bluntly, and a curiously stubborn look came over his countenance. Then angrily—"Mr Maxted oughtn't to think I'd do such a thing."

The Vicar compressed his lips and wrinkled up his forehead.

"Well, I can," said Uncle Richard. "No, Maxted, he couldn't have stolen your plums, because he was out quite late stealing pears—the other way on."

"Uncle!" cried Tom, as the Vicar now looked puzzled.

"We apprehended a visit from a fruit burglar, and Tom here and my gardener were watching, but he did not come. Then he visited you instead?"

"Yes, and dropped this knife on the bed beneath the wall."

"Let me look," said Uncle Richard. "Why, that's your knife, Tom."

"Yes, uncle."

"How do you account for that? Policemen don't turn burglars."

"It seems I lost it, uncle. I haven't seen it, I think, since I had it to put a wedge under that leg of the stool."

"And when was that?"

"As far as I can remember, uncle, it was the day or the day before the speculum was broken. I fancy I left it on the window-sill or bench."

"Plain as a pike-staff, my dear Maxted," said Uncle Richard, clapping the Vicar on the shoulder. "You have had a visit from the gentleman who broke my new speculum."

"You suspected your nephew of breaking the speculum," said the Vicar.

"Oh!" cried Tom excitedly:

"Yes, but I know better now. You're wrong, my dear sir, quite wrong. We can prove such an alibi as would satisfy the most exacting jury. Tom was with me in my room until half-past eight, and from that hour to ten I can answer for his being in the garden with my man David."

"Then I humbly beg your nephew's pardon for my unjust suspicions," cried the Vicar warmly. "Will you forgive me—Tom?"

"Of course, sir," cried the boy, seizing the extended hand. "But you are convinced now, sir?"

"Perfectly; but I want to know who is the culprit. Can you help me?"

"We're trying to catch him, sir," said Tom.

"I'm afraid I know," said Uncle Richard.

"Yes, and I'm afraid that I know," said the Vicar, rather angrily. "I'll name no names, but I fancy you suspect the same body that I did till I found our young friend's knife."

"And if we or you catch him," said Uncle Richard, "what would you do—police?"

"No," said the Vicar firmly, "not for every scrap of fruit I have in the garden. I don't hold with imprisoning a boy, except as the very last resort."

"Give him a severe talking to then?" said Uncle Richard dryly.

"First; and then I'm afraid that I should behave in a very illegal way. But he is not caught yet."

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Vicar stopped and chatted, taking his seat upon the stool Tom had I before offered, and watched the process of making the speculum for some time before leaving, and then, shaking hands with Tom, he said, smiling—

"Shows how careful one ought to be in suspecting people, Tom Blount. We are none of us perfect. Good-bye."

"That's a hint for us, Tom," said Uncle Richard, as soon as they were alone. "Perhaps you are wrong about Master Pete Warboys too."

Tom thought about the pears thrown at Pete by his cousin, and shook his head.

"Pete wouldn't have been peeping over the wall, uncle, if he had not meant mischief."

"Perhaps not, Tom; but he may have meant mischief to you, and not to my pears."

Tom laughed, and they soon after went in to dinner.

That afternoon, and for an hour and a half in the evening, they worked again at the speculum by lamp-light, so that Tom was pretty tired when they gave up and returned to the cottage.

"Going to watch for the fruit burglar to-night, Tom?" asked Uncle Richard.

"Oh yes, uncle. I feel ten times as eager now Mr Maxted's plums have been stolen;" and, punctual to the moment, he stole down the garden, walking upon the velvety lawn, and advancing so silently upon David, that the gardener uttered a cry of alarm.

"Quite made me jump, Master Tom, coming on me so quiet like."

"I thought he might be hanging about," whispered back Tom. "Going to watch from the same place?"

"Ay, sir. Couldn't be better. Once we hear him at the pears we can drop upon him like two cats on a mouse."

"Yes," said Tom; "but we must mind and not scratch ourselves, David."

"Ay, we'll take care o' that, sir. But mind, no talking. Got your stick?"

"I stuck it upright in the second black-currant tree. Yes, here it is."

"That's right then, sir. There's your place, and I've got something better for you this time. I stuffed two sacks full o' hay, and you can sit down now like on a cushion, and pull the horse-cloth you'll find folded up over you."

"But what about you?"

"Oh, I've got one too, sir. I'm all right. Now then—mum!"

The hay made a faint sound as they both sat down after a glance round and listening intently. Then Tom pulled the horse-cloth up over his knees, for the night was chilly, and found it very warm and comfortable.

Then the various sounds from the village reached him—the barking of dogs, voices, the striking of the clock, the

noise of wheels, the donkey's braying, with a regularity wonderfully like that of the previous night, and then all silence and darkness, and ears strained to hear the rustling sound which must be made by any one climbing over the wall.

The time glided on; and as it grew colder, Tom softly drew the rug cloak-fashion over his shoulders, listened to note whether David made any remark about the rustling sound he made, but all the gardener said was something which resembled the word *ghark*, which was followed by very heavy breathing.

"Gone to sleep again," said Tom to himself. "What's the good of his pretending to sit and watch?"

He secured his hazel, aimed for where his companion sat in the next alley between the blackcurrants, and gave him a poke with the point.

But this had not the slightest effect, and another and another were administered, but without the least result; and thinking that he would have to administer a smart cut to wake up his companion, Tom set himself to watch alone.

"Don't matter," he muttered. "I can manage just as well without him." And then he sat in the thick darkness, with his ears strained to catch the slightest noise, thinking over the Vicar's visit that day, and about how he would like to catch Master Pete.

It was very warm and comfortable inside the horse-cloth, and must have been close upon nine o'clock, but he had not heard it strike. David was breathing regularly, so loudly sometimes that Tom felt disposed to rouse him up; but each time the breathing became easier, and he refrained.

"I don't mind," thought Tom. "I dare say he is very tired, and I don't want to talk to him. He's company all the same, even if he is asleep. Wonder whether this speculum will turn out all right."

David was breathing very hard now, but if Pete came he would make too much noise in moving to notice the sound. Besides, he would not suspect that any one was watching out there in the darkness.

But the breathing was very loud now, and how warm and cosy and comfortable it was inside the rug! The hay, too, was very soft, and the stick all ready for Master Pete when he came. It would be so easy to hear him too, for David's heavy breathing, that was first cousin to a snore, now ceased, and the slightest sound made by any one coming—and then it was all blank.

How long?

Tom suddenly started up with but one thought that seemed to crush him.

"Why, I've been asleep!"

A feeling of rage against himself came over him, and then like a flash his thoughts were off in another direction, for, just in front, he could hear a rustling sound, as if some one was stirring leaves, and, stealing forward, he could just faintly see what appeared like a shadow busy at the Marie Louise pear-tree.

"Then he has come," thought Tom, as his hand closed upon the stick he still held. Softly letting the horse-cloth glide from his shoulders, he raised himself gently, feeling horribly stiff, but getting upon his legs without a sound.

And all the time there was the rustling, plucking sound going on at the tree upon the wall, as the shadow moved along it slowly.

All this was only a matter of moments, and included a thought which came to Tom's busy brain—should he try to awaken David?

"If I do," he felt, "there will be noise enough to scare the thief, and he'll escape."

There was no time to argue further with himself. He knew that he had been asleep, for how long he could not tell; but his heart throbbed as he felt that he had awakened just in the nick of time, and he was about to act.

Keeping in a stooping position, he crept forward foot by foot without making a sound, till he was on the edge of the walk which extended to right and left; beyond it there was about six feet of border, and then the wall with the tree, and almost within reach the figure, more plain to see now, as it bent down evidently searching upon the ground for fallen pears.

One stride—a stride taken quick as thought, with the stout hazel stick well raised in the air, just as the figure was stooping lowest. Then—

Whoosh! Thwack!

A stinging blow, given with all the boy's nervous force, as with a bound he threw all his strength into the cut.

"Yah!"

A tremendous yell, a rush, and before Tom could get more than one other stroke to tell, the pear-seeker was running along the soft border, evidently making for the far corner of the garden, where the fence took the place of the wall.

The chord is shorter than the arc; and this applies to walks in gardens as well as geometry, only people generally call that which amounts to the chord the short cut.

Tom took the short cut, so as to meet Pete, but in the darkness he did not pause to think. For a moment all was silent, and the enemy had evidently stopped to hide.

"But he must be close here," thought Tom, as he reached the end of the cross walk, past which he felt that the boy

must come; and to startle him into showing where he was Tom made a sudden rush.

That rush was made too quickly; for he felt himself seized, and before he could do anything, whack! whack! came two cuts on one leg.

“Got yer then, have I?” was growled in his ear; and then came loudly, “Master Tom! here! sharp!”

“I am here,” roared Tom. “What are you doing? Don’t.”

“Master Tom!”

“David! But never mind; look sharp! He’s close to us somewhere. I saw him under the pear-tree, and got one cut at him.”

“Got two cuts at him,” growled David savagely. “I know yer did. That was me!”

“Halloo there! Tom! David! Got him?”

“Got him!” growled David. “Got it, you mean. Hi! Yes, sir. Here we are.”

Uncle Richard was on the way down the path.

“What was the meaning of that yell I heard?” he said, as he drew near.

Neither replied.

“Do you hear, Tom? What was that noise?”

“It was a mistake, uncle,” cried Tom, rubbing his leg.

“Mistake? I said that yell. Oh, here you are.”

“Yes, uncle; it was a mistake. I hit David in the dark, and he holloaed out.”

“And enough to make any one, warn’t it, sir? Scythes and scithers, it was a sharp ’un!”

“I don’t think it was any sharper than the two you hit me, David,” said Tom, who was writhing a little as he rubbed.

“Why, you two have never been so stupid as to attack each other in the dark, have you?” said Uncle Richard.

“I’m afraid so, uncle. I saw something by the tree and heard a rustling, and I thought it must be Pete Warboys.”

“But you should ha’ spoke, sir,” cried David, from over the other side now. “Mussy on us, you did hit hard.”

“Yes; I thought it was Pete, and that he had come at last.”

“Come at last!” grumbled David, as Uncle Richard stood silently shaking with laughter. “Why, he’s been—”

Just then there was a scratching sound, a flash of light, and a match burned brightly beneath the wall. Then another was struck, throwing up David’s figure against the pear-tree, as, shielding the burning splint with his hands, he held it quickly up and down.

“What are you doing?” said Uncle Richard, as Tom gave a stamp caused by the pain he felt.

“Looking for my pears, sir, as I was when young Master Tom come and hit me. There arn’t a single one left.”

“What!” cried Tom, forgetting the stinging of the cuts on his leg. “Oh, David, don’t say they’re all gone!”

“What shall I say then, sir?” grumbled David; and he then drew in his breath with a hissing sound, and began to rub too.

“Do you mean to say the pears have been stolen while you two were keeping watch?”

“I dunno, sir,” grumbled David. “They’re not here now; and I’ll take half a davy as they was here at arpus eight.”

“Then be off home to bed. Pretty watchmen, upon my word,” cried Uncle Richard, as he turned off to go up to the house; “it’s my belief that you have both been asleep.”

“And I’m afraid that there’s about as near the truth as any one can get, Master Tom,” whispered David. “I must ha’ been mortal tired to-night. But you needn’t have hit a fellow quite so hard.”

“That’s what I feel, David; but being so stupid: that’s worse than the stick.”

“Well, I dunno ’bout that, sir,” said David, still rubbing himself; “them hazels is werry lahstick, and you put a deal o’ muskle into that first cut.”

“Well,” said Tom mournfully, “I did hit as hard as I could, David.”

“You did, Master Tom, and no mistake. Feels to me it must have cut right in. But I don’t like the master to talk like that. It arn’t nice.”

"Come, Tom! Fasten the gate!" shouted Uncle Richard.

"Yes, uncle; I'm coming. Now, David, off home."

"Yes, sir, I'm a-goin'; but after all this trouble to lose them pears. Oh, Master Tom, it's that there as makes me feel most sore!"

But David kept on rubbing himself gently all the same.

"Pretty pair, 'pon my word!" said Uncle Richard, as Tom came blinking into the light just as the clock was striking ten. "Then you couldn't keep awake?"

"No, uncle. I suppose I must have been very tired to-night."

"The Vicar's plums last night; my pears to-night. Humph! It's time that young fruit pirate was caught."

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Tom thought the matter over for days as he worked at the speculum now approaching completion. He had met Pete Warboys twice, but the fellow looked innocency itself, staring hard and vacantly at him, who longed to charge him with the theft, but felt that he could not without better evidence.

Then a bright thought came as he was polishing away opposite his uncle, and using the finest emery.

"I know," he said to himself, and he waited impatiently to be at liberty, which was not until after tea.

"Going for a walk, Master Tom?" said David, whom he encountered in the lane.

"Yes; rather in a hurry now."

"Can't tell him yet, because I'm not sure," thought Tom; and he walked sharply away for the corner where he had left his uncle in the bath-chair, and all the memories of that day came back as the various familiar objects came in view.

"I wonder whether he's quite well again now," said the boy to himself; "but he can't have been so ill as he thought."

But his walk on that golden orange sunset evening had nothing whatever to do with his uncle, for, as soon as he reached the bend where the road began to slope, he struck off to the left in among the trees, trying hard to follow exactly the same track as that taken by Pete Warboys when he was pursued.

It was not easy, for the great lad had dodged about among the great fir-trees in quite a zigzag fashion. Still Tom followed the direction, with the scaly, pillar-like trunks looking golden-red in the horizontal rays of the sun, which cast their long shadows in wonderful array, till it seemed to the boy at last as if he were walking through a quivering golden mist barred with great strokes of purply black.

"I shan't get there before it begins to be dark," he thought, "for this can't last. Why, it's like a fiery furnace now burning on great iron bars." Then there was another change, for the dark-green rough fir-boughs began to be lit up overhead, and the forest looked brighter than ever.

A wood of fir-trees is a puzzling place, from the fact that in a mile or two, consequent upon their regular growth, you may find hundreds, perhaps thousands, of places exactly alike—the same-looking tall, red, scaly columns, the same distance apart, the same grey carpet of fir-needles, and the same grey rough-topped, mushroom-shaped fungi growing up and pushing the fir-needles aside to make room for them. Then too the great natural temple, with its dark column-supported roof, has a way of looking different at morning, noon, and eve; and as different again according to the state of the weather, so that though you may be pretty familiar with the place, it is a difficult task to find your way for the second time.

It was so now with Tom Blount. There was a spot in the wood for which he had aimed, and it seemed to be the easiest thing possible to go straight there; but the trees prevented any such straight course, and after a little dodging in and out the mind refuses to bear all the changes of course and repeat them to the traveller, who gradually grows more and more confused, and if he does not hit upon the spot he seeks by accident, in all probability he has to give it up for what people call a bad job.

"Here it is at last," said Tom to himself, after following, as he thought, exactly the course he had taken when he chased Pete Warboys for throwing stones at the bath-chair, and coming upon a rugged portion of the fir-wood.

"Bother! I made so sure it was," he muttered, for the opening he sought beside a great fir-tree was not there, and rubbing one of his ears with vexation, he stood looking round again, and down long vistas between the straight tree-trunks.

But no, there was not a sign of the spot he wanted, and the farther he went the more confused he grew. It was still gloriously bright overhead, but the dark bars of shadow were nearly all gone, and it looked as if darkness were slowly rising like a transparent mist out of the earth; one minute it was up to his knees, and then creeping up and up till the tree-trunks looked as if they were plunged in a kind of flood, while their upper portions were glowing as if on fire.

"I'll have one more try," thought Tom, "and then give it up till to-morrow morning. That's the best time, when you've got the whole day before you, and not the night. Let's see, what did uncle say about my getting to know a lot about optics and astronomy? Of course—I remember: it was nice to be a boy, for he was in the morning of life, and all the long bright day of manhood before him in which to work; and the pleasant evening in which to think of that work well done, before the soft gentle night fell, bringing with it the great peaceful sleep. How serious he looked when he said all that!"

These thoughts in the coming gloom of the autumn evening made Tom feel serious too. Then they passed away as he

had that other try, and another, and another, pretty well a dozen before he made a rush for what he rightly assumed to be the north-east, and finally reached the road pretty well tired out.

It was before the sun was far above the horizon the next morning that Tom went out of the garden gate, and by the time he reached the spot where he had turned into the wood, and gone many yards in amongst the trees, he found the appearance of the place almost precisely the same as he had seen it on the previous evening. There was the roof of the natural temple all aglow, the dark bars across the tall boughs, and the shadows stretching far away crossing each other in bewildering confusion. But everything was reversed, and instead of the shadows creeping upwards they stole down lower and lower, till the roof of boughs grew dark and the carpet of soft fir-needles began to glow.

Then too, as he went south, the bright light came from his left instead of his right.

“How beautiful!” he thought. “How stupid it is to lie in bed so long when everything is so soft and fresh and bright in the morning. But then bed is so jolly snug and comfortable just then, and it is so hard to get one’s eyes open. It’s such a pity,” he mused; “bed isn’t much when one gets in first, but grows more and more comfortable till it’s time to get up. I wish one could turn it right round.”

These thoughts passed away, for there were squirrels about, and jays noisily resenting his visit, and shouting to each other in jay—“Here’s a boy coming.”

Then he caught sight of a magpie, after hearing its laughing call. A hawk flew out of a very tall pine in an opening, and strewn beneath there were feathers and bones suggestive of the hook-beaked creature’s last meal.

But as he followed the track of the pursuit once more, he had that to take up his attention, till he felt sure that he must be close to the place he sought, but grew more puzzled than ever as he gazed right round him.

“It must be farther on,” he muttered; and, starting once more, he stopped at the end of another fifty yards or so, to have a fresh look round down each vista of trees, which started from where he stood.

It was more open here, and in consequence a patch of bracken had run up to a goodly height, spreading its fronds toward the light, but there was nothing visible as Tom turned slowly upon his heels, till he was looking nearly straight back along the way he had come, and then, quick as thought, he dropped down amongst the bracken, and crept on hands and knees till, still sheltered by it, he could watch the object he had seen.

That object was Pete Warboys, who had suddenly risen up out of the earth, and stood yawning and stretching himself, ending by giving one of his shoulders a good rasp against a fir-tree.

“Why, he must have been sleeping there,” thought Tom, “and I must have passed close to his hole. What an old fox he is. Hullo! there’s the dog.”

For the big mongrel suddenly appeared, and sprang up so as to place its paws upon its master’s breast, apparently as a morning greeting. But this was not received in a friendly way.

“Get out!” growled Pete, kicking the dog in the leg. There was a loud yelp, and Pete shook himself and began to slouch away.

Tom watched him till he had disappeared among the trees, and then went back over his track till he stood close to the spot whence the lad had appeared. Here Tom looked round, but nothing was visible till he had gone a few yards to his right, when, to his surprise, he came to the side of the opening down in which was the side hole running beneath the roots of the great fir.

Tom had another look back, and, seeing nothing, he leaped down on to the soft sand, felt in his pocket, and brought out a tin box of wax-matches. Then, dropping upon his knees, he lit one, and holding it before him, crept under the roots and into a little cave like a low rugged tunnel scooped out of the sandy rock, and in one corner of which was a heap of little pine boughs, and an exceedingly dirty old ragged blanket.

By this time Tom’s match went out, and he lit another, after carefully placing the burnt end of the first in his pocket.

This light gave him another view of the little hole, for it was quite small, but there was not much to see. There were the leaves and blanket, both still warm; there was a stick, and a peg driven into the side, on which hung a couple of wires; and some pine-tree roots bristled from the top and sides. That was all.

“No pears, not even a plum-stone,” said Tom, in a disappointed tone, for he had pictured this hole from which he had seen Pete issue as a kind of robber’s cave, in which he would find stored up quantities of stolen fruit, and perhaps other things that would prove to be of intense interest.

“Nothing—nothing at all,” said Tom to himself, as the last match he had burned became extinct. “All this trouble for that, and perhaps it wasn’t him after all. But how comic!” he said to himself after a pause. “He comes here so as to be away from that dreadful old woman. No wonder.”

He was in the act of placing his last extinct scrap of match in his pocket, as he stood in a stooping position facing the mouth of the little cave, when he heard a faint rustling sound, and directly after something seemed to leap right in at the entrance, disturbing the pendulous fringe of exposed roots which hung down, and crouching in the dim light close to Tom’s feet.

“Rabbit!” he said to himself.

But the next moment he saw that it was not alive, for it lay there in a peculiar distorted fashion; and as his eyes grew more used to the gloom, he saw that there was a wire about the poor animal cutting it nearly in two, and a portion of a strong wooden peg protruded from beneath.

“I begin to see now,” muttered Tom. “I dare say I should find the place somewhere about where he cooks his rabbits, unless he sells them.”

Tom wanted to get out now. The poaching was nothing to him, he thought, and he seemed to have been wrong about the fruit, so he was ready to hurry away, but something within him made him resent the idea of being seen prying there; and it was evident that Pete had been out looking at his wires, and had just brought this rabbit home.

“Perhaps he has gone now,” thought Tom; but he did not stir, waiting till he thought all was clear. Then at the end of a quarter of an hour he crept out into the open hole, raised his head cautiously, and got his eyes above the edge, when, to his disgust, he saw that Pete was approaching hurriedly, swinging another rabbit by the legs.

Tom shot back quickly enough into Pete’s lurking-place, and turned to face him if the fellow came in. He did not think he was afraid of Pete, but all the same he did not feel disposed to have a tussle before breakfast. Besides, his leg was rather stiff and painful from the blows David had given to him.

But he had little time for thinking. All at once the rushing sound began again, accompanied by a shuffling and a hoarse “Get out,” followed by the sound of a blow, and directly after by a sharp yelp.

Then there was a dull thud as the light was momentarily obscured, and another rabbit caught in a wire was thrown in.

“Now for it,” thought Tom, and he involuntarily stretched out his hand to seize the stick close to the bed, but clenched his fist instead, and stood there in his confined stooping position ready to defend himself, but sorry that he had not boldly gone out at once.

Suddenly there was a fresh darkening of the light, and Tom did seize the stout stick and hold it lance fashion, for the dog had leaped down into the hole, and now stood at the little entrance to the cave growling savagely.

“Let ’em alone,” cried Pete, “d’yer hear? Let ’em alone.”

But the dog paid no heed. It stood there with its eyes glaring, showing its teeth, and threatening unheard-of worryings of the interloper.

Still Pete did not grasp the situation. The dog in his estimation was disobeying him by attempting to worry dead rabbits; and, leaping down into the hole, he kicked savagely at it, making it yelp loudly and bound out of the hole, Pete, whose legs up to the waist had now been visible to Tom, scrambling after the animal, abusing it with every epithet he could think of, and driving it before him through the wood.

“My chance,” thought Tom, and he sprang out, and making a circuit, struck out for home without seeing either Pete or his dog again.

But Tom did not feel satisfied, for it seemed to him that he was behaving in a cowardly way; and as he tramped along the lane, he wished that he had walked out boldly and confronted his enemy instead of remaining in hiding. Taken altogether, he felt thoroughly grumpy as he approached the cottage, and it did not occur to him that his sensation of depression had a very simple origin. In fact it was this. He had risen before the sun, and had a very long walk, going through a good deal of exertion without having broken his fast. When breakfast was half over he felt in the highest spirits, for his uncle had made no allusion to the adventure in the garden over-night.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Tom saw very little of Pete Warboys during the next fortnight or so. The fruit kept on ripening, and twice over raids were made upon the garden, but whoever stole the fruit left no clue but a few footmarks behind, and these were always made by bare feet.

“It’s that there Pete,” said David; “but foots is foots, and I don’t see how we can swear as they marks is hisn.”

Meanwhile the telescope progressed, and busy work was in progress in the mill, where a large tube was being constructed by securing thin narrow boards planed very accurately to half-a-dozen iron hoops by means of screws and nuts.

Then came a day when Uncle Richard found that he must go to town again to get sundry fittings from an optician, and Tom was left the task of grinding three small pieces of plate-glass together, so as to produce one that was an accurate plane or flat.

It was understood that Uncle Richard would not be back for three days, and after seeing him off, Tom felt important in being left in full charge, as he was in the lower part of the mill polishing away when the door was darkened.

“How are you getting on, sir?” said David, as he stood there smiling.

“Pretty well; but this is a long job.”

“What are you doing, sir?”

“Polishing these glasses together so as to get one of them perfectly flat.”

“Tchah! that’s easy enough. What d’yer want ’em so flat for?”

“So as to make a reflector that will send back a ray of light quite exact—a perfect mirror.”

“That’s a looking-glass, arn’t it, sir?”

“Yes.”

“I wish you’d make one, sir, as would work o’ nights, and show us when Pete Warboys comes arter my pippins. That’d bang all yer tallow-scoops.”

“Impossible, David.”

“Yes, sir, s’posed so when I said it. But I say, Master Tom.”

“Yes.”

“That chap’s sure to know as your uncle’s gone to London for two or three days.”

“Yes; you can’t move here without its being known, David,” said Tom, polishing away, and making his fingers dirty.

“Then, don’t you see, sir?”

“No; what?”

“Pete’ll be coming to-night, as sure as there’s meat in eggs.”

“Think so?” said Tom, who felt a peculiar thrill run through him.

“I’m sure on it, sir. There is a deal o’ fruit left to pick yet, and you and me can do that little job better than Pete Warboys.”

“Let’s go down and watch then.”

“Will you, sir?”

“Yes, David, I’ll come. But don’t go to sleep this time.”

“Nay, I won’t trust you,” said the gardener, laughing softly. “You’ll get hitting at me again instead of at Pete. I arn’t forgetted that swipe you give me that night.”

“Well, you gave it back to me with interest,” said Tom.

“Ay, that’s so, sir; I did. But it wouldn’t do for master to come and find all our late apples gone.”

“What time shall we begin then?”

“Not a minute later than six, sir.”

And punctually to that hour Tom stole down the garden and found David, who began to chuckle softly—

“Got yer stick, Master Tom?”

“Yes; got yours?”

“No, sir, I’ve got something better. Feel this.”

“A rope?”

“Yes, sir, and a noose in it, as runs easy.”

“To tie him?”

“To lash-show him, sir. We’ll go down to the bottom where he’s most likely to come over, and then I’ll catch him and hold him, and you shall let him have it.”

The ambush was made—a gooseberry ambush, Tom called it—and for quite an hour Tom knelt on a sack waiting patiently, but there was not a sound, and he was beginning to think it a miserably tiresome task, when all at once, as they crouched there securely hidden, watching the wall, some eight feet away, it seemed to Tom that he could see a peculiar rounded black fungus growing out of the top.

It was very indistinct, and the growth was very slow, but it certainly increased, and the boy stretched out his hand to reach over an intervening gooseberry-bush so as to touch David, but he touched an exceedingly sharp thorn instead and winced, but fortunately made no noise.

Hoping that David had seen what was before him, Tom waited for a few moments, with the dark excrescence still gradually growing, till he could contain himself no longer, and reaching this time with his stick, he gave the gardener a pretty good poke, when the return pressure told him that this time his companion was well upon the alert.

All at once, when the dark object had grown up plainly into a head and shoulders, it ceased increasing, and remained perfectly motionless, as if a careful observation was being made by some one watchful in the extreme.

“Why don’t David throw?” thought Tom, who held himself ready to spring forward at a moment’s notice, “He could not help catching him now.”

But David made no signal, and Tom crouched there with his nerves tingling, waiting in the darkness for the time when he must begin.

At the end of about ten minutes there was a quick rustling sound, the dark shadow altered its shape, and Tom saw that whoever it was lay straight along upon the wall perfectly motionless for a few minutes longer as if listening intently. Then very quickly there was another motion, a sharp rustling, and the intruder dropped upon the ground.

It was too dark to see what followed, but Tom knew that David had risen slowly upright, and uttered a grunt as he threw something, evidently the lasso; for there was a dull sound, then a rush and a scrambling and crashing, as of some one climbing up the wall, and lastly David shouted—

"Got him, sir. Let him have it."

Tom darted forward and came in contact with the rope, which was strained tightly from where David hung back to the top of the wall, the lassoed thief having rushed back as soon as touched by the rope, reached the top of the wall, and threw himself over, to hang there just below quite fast, but struggling violently, and making a hoarse noise like some wild beast.

"At him, Master Tom! Give it him!"

Tom wanted no urging; he seized the rope and tried to draw the captive back into the garden, but the effort was vain, so leaving it he drew back, took a run and a jump, scrambled on to the top of the wall, so as to lean over, and then began thrashing away with his stout hazel as if he were beating a carpet.

Thud, thud—whack, whack, he delivered his blows at the struggling object below, and at every whish of the stick there was a violent kick and effort to get free. Once the stick was seized, but only held for a moment before it was dragged away, and then, *thud, thud, thud*, the blows fell heavily, while, in an intense state of excitement, the gardener kept on shouting—

"Harder, harder, Master Tom! Sakes, I wish I was there! Harder, sir, harder! Let him have it! Stop him! Ah!"

There was a rustling, scrambling sound on Tom's side of the wall, and the cracking of the stick, which had come in contact with the bricks, for the prisoner had escaped, and his footsteps could be faintly heard, as he dashed over the grassy field into the darkness, where Tom felt it would be useless to pursue.

But just then he did not possess the power, for he could only lean there over the wall, and laugh in a way that was quite exhausting, and it was not until David had been growling and muttering for some minute or two that he was able to speak.

"What made you let him go, David?" he panted at last.

"Let him go, sir? I didn't let him go. He just jerked the rope out of my hands, after dragging me down and over the gravel path. There's no end o' bark off my knuckles and nose."

"Oh, don't say you're hurt, David," said Tom, sitting up astride of the wall.

"Why not, sir? Yes, I shall. I'm hurt horrid. Arms feel 'most jerked out o' the sockets, and skin's off the palms of my hands, leastwise it feels like it. Going to run arter him?"

"Oh no, it's of no use. I gave him an awful thrashing though."

"I wish you'd give him ten times as much, my lad—a wagabone. It was Pete Warboys, wasn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know; I couldn't tell. It was like something in a long sack kicking about there. I hit him nearly every time."

"Well, that's something, sir. Do him more good than a peck out o' our apples. Better for his morials. He ought to have had twice as much."

"But he had enough to keep him from coming again."

"Mebbe, sir; but there's a deal o' wickedness in boys, when they are wicked, and they soon forgets. Here, chuck me the rope, and I'll coil it up."

"Rope! I have no rope."

"Why, you don't mean to say as you've let him cut off with it, sir?"

"I!" cried Tom. "Why you had it."

"Ay, till he snatchered it away, when I was down. Hff! My elbows."

"Then he has run away with it, David."

"Ay, and he'll go and sell it; you see if he don't. Nice nooish bit o' soft rope as it were too."

"Never mind the rope, David," said Tom, jumping down, after listening intently for a few minutes.

"Ah, that's werry well for you, sir; but what am I to say when master arkses me what's become on it?"

"I'll tell him, David. There, it's nearly ten again. I say, you didn't go to sleep to-night."

"No, nor you nayther, sir," said David, with a chuckle. "I'm sorry 'bout that rope, but my word, you did let him have it, sir. Can't be much dust left in his jacket."

David burst into a hoarse fit of laughter, and Tom joined in, laughing till the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Say, Master Tom," cried David. "Pippins!"

There was another burst of laughter, and then David suggested Wellingtons, and followed up with Winter Greenings, each time roaring with laughter.

"He's got apples this time, and no mistake, sir," he said.

"Yes, David; striped ones."

"Ay, sir, he have—red streaks. But think he'll come again to-night?"

"No, David; so let's get back and think of bed."

"Yes, and of my bed here, sir. There's a nice lot o' footprints I know, and I come down first over a young gooseberry-bush, and feels as if here and there I'd got a few thorns in my skin."

Tom listened again, but all was still, and the garden was as quiet ten minutes later, the ripening apples still hanging in their places.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

"And now, Tom," said Uncle Richard one day, "here we have a perfect speculum or concave reflector, but it does not reflect enough. What would you do now?"

"Silver it," said Tom promptly; "make it like a looking-glass."

"Exactly; but how would you do that?"

"Oh, it's easy enough, I believe," said Tom. "You get a sheet of tinfoil, lay it on a table, cover it with quicksilver, and then put the glass on it, and press it with weights till the tinfoil and quicksilver stick to the glass, and then you have a regular mirror."

"You seem to know all about it, Tom," said the Vicar, who had dropped in for a chat, and to hear how the telescope was going on.

"I read it somewhere," said Tom.

"And he can always recollect this sort of thing," said his uncle; "but never could remember anything to do with the law."

Tom looked at him reproachfully.

"Well," continued Uncle Richard, "your process would do for ordinary looking-glasses, Tom, but not for an optical reflector."

"Why, uncle?"

"Because the rays of light would have to pass through the thickness of the glass before they reached the reflecting surface,—the quicksilver,—and in so doing they would be refracted—broken-up and discoloured—so that the reflection would most likely be doubled when it came away; that is, you would see one reflection from the silver at the back, and another from the surface of the glass."

"Therefore," said the Vicar, "we must decline friend Tom's ingenious proposal, and take yours, Brandon, for as usual you have a plan ready."

"Well, yes," said Uncle Richard, smiling; "but it is due to the inventor. We must silver the glass, but on the surface, so as to get a reflection at once. Are you going to stay, Maxted?"

"If I may," was the reply.

"Very well; but for experiment, as it is all new to me, I think we will try first to silver one of these pieces of the broken speculum. Yes; that largest piece."

The conversation took place in the workshop, and the triangular piece of glass having been brought out, it was first thoroughly washed, and rinsed with rain-water, and then further cleaned by rubbing it well with a strong acid, so as to burn off any impurity, and after another rinsing in clear rain-water it was declared by Uncle Richard to be chemically clean.

"A good thing to be chemically as well as morally clean, Tom," said the Vicar, smiling; "but I'm not going to stand here without asking questions if you don't, Master Tom. First then, why must the glass be chemically clean?"

"So that the silver may adhere to it," said Uncle Richard, who was now carefully arranging the freshly-cleaned glass, so that it lay on two pieces of wood in a shallow tray half full of water.

"My turn to question," said Tom merrily.

"Yes, go on," said the Vicar.

"Why is the face of the glass put in water, uncle?"

"To keep it wet and thoroughly clean. Dust or floating spores might settle upon it, and then we should have specks. I want to get a surface perfectly clear; and now, Tom, I want the four bottles I prepared yesterday—fetch them down."

Tom ran up into the laboratory, and brought down four great stoppered bottles, each of which bore a label duly lettered.

These he placed on the broad, table-like bench, and on being requested hurried up-stairs again to fetch a large glass jar-shaped vessel, and a graduated measuring-glass.

“Now,” said Uncle Richard, “this process is a chemical experiment, but upon reading it I felt that it was as good as a conjuring trick, and a very grand one too. In fact it is good enough for a magician, for it is a wonderful example of the way in which our chemists have mastered some of the secrets of Nature.”

“Bravo, lecturer!” said the Vicar. “Come, Tom, my boy, give him some applause. Clap your hands and stamp your feet;” and the visitor led off by thumping his umbrella upon the floor.

“Oh, very well,” said Uncle Richard, laughing; “it shall be a lecture on silver if you like—a very brief one, with a remarkable experiment to follow.”

“More applause, Tom,” said the Vicar; and it was given laughingly.

“I have here,” continued Uncle Richard, “immersed in distilled water—”

“Rain-water, uncle.”

“Well, boy, rain-water is distilled by Nature, and then condensed from the vapoury clouds to fall back upon the earth.”

“Good,” said the Vicar. “I am learning.”

“Next,” said Uncle Richard, “I have here a bottle marked A, containing so many grains of pure potash, dissolved in so many ounces of water—a strong alkaline solution in fact.”

More applause.

“In this next bottle,” continued Uncle Richard, “marked B, I have a strong solution of ammonia.”

“Another alkali?” said the Vicar.

“Exactly,” said Uncle Richard. “In this bottle, marked C, a solution of sugar-candy prepared with pure spirit. Can I have the pleasure of offering you a glass, Vicar?”

“Oh no, thanks,” was the reply. “I will not spoil the experiment by satisfying my desire for good things.”

“Will any other member of the audience?” said Uncle Richard merrily, looking round at Tom.

“I won’t, uncle, thankye,” said the lad. “You might have labelled the bottles wrongly.”

“Wise boy,” said the Vicar; “but, by the way, where’s the lump of beaten-out silver to be affixed to the glass?”

“Here it is,” said Uncle Richard, laying his hand upon the stopper of the fourth bottle, which held the same quantity of liquid as the others.

“But that’s clear water,” said Tom.

“Yes, clear distilled water, but not alone. It contains a great deal of silver.”

“Whereabouts, lecturer?” said the Vicar.

“In solution,” said Uncle Richard gravely. “Here we have one of the wonders of science laboriously worked out by experiment, and when discovered simplicity itself. Tom, suppose I take a piece of bright clear iron and leave it out exposed to all weathers, what happens?”

“Gets rusty,” said Tom.

“Exactly; and what is rust?”

“Red,” said Tom.

“So is your face, Tom, for giving so absurd an answer.”

“Yes, uncle,” said Tom frankly. “I don’t quite know.”

“Oxide of iron,” said the Vicar.

“Oh yes,” cried Tom eagerly; “I’d forgotten.”

“Well,” said Uncle Richard, “the oxide of iron is Nature’s action upon the iron. Man produces iron by heat from the ore, but unless great care is used to protect it from the action of the atmosphere, it is always going back to a state of nature—oxidises, or goes back into a salt of iron. That by the way; I am not dealing with a salt of iron but with a salt of silver. There it is, so many grains of a salt of silver, which looked like sugar-candy when I wetted it in the water, and, as you see now, here it is a perfectly colourless fluid. There, I have nearly done talking.”

“More applause, Tom,” said the Vicar merrily.

“Come, that’s hardly fair,” retorted Uncle Richard. “What would you say to us if we applauded when you said one of your sermons was nearly at an end?”

“But we did not applaud the announcement that you had nearly done,” said the Vicar, “but the fact that the experiment was nearly at hand.”

“Yes; that’s it, uncle. Go on, please,” cried Tom.

“Very well then: my experimental magic trick is this,” continued Uncle Richard. “I am about not to change a metal into a salt, but a salt—that salt in solution in the water—back into a metal—the invisible into the visible—the colourless water into brilliant, flashing, metallic silver.”

“The cannon-ball changed from one hat to the other is nothing to that, Tom Blount,” said the Vicar; “but we are the audience; let’s be sceptical. I’ll say it isn’t to be done.”

“Oh yes,” said Tom seriously. “If uncle says he’ll do it, he will.”

“Well done, boy,” said the Vicar, clapping the lad on the back. “I wish my parishioners would all have as much faith in my words as you have in your uncle’s. But silence in the audience. The lecturer will now proceed with the experiment.”

“Yes,” said Uncle Richard, taking the great glass jar. “Now watch the magical action of Nature, and see what is a great wonder. See, I pour eight ounces—fluid ounces, Tom, not weighed ounces—into the glass measure from this bottle. There: and pour them into this glass jar, which will hold eight times as much. From the next bottle I take an equal quantity and pour it into the jar; and from this bottle I take another equal quantity and pour it into the others. Shake them all up together, and I have so much liquid which looks like water, but, as you may have observed, one of them was the limpid silver solution.”

“Yes, I saw that,” said Tom.

“I didn’t,” said the Vicar; “but boys always do see the critical thing in the conjuring trick. But go on, Professor Brandon.”

“I must come to a halt here,” said Uncle Richard.

“No, no, don’t say that, uncle,” cried Tom. “You’ve raised us up to such a pitch of expectation.”

“Only for a few moments,” said Uncle Richard, “while I prepare my glass. Now then, when I lift out the piece, Tom, you take up the tray, and empty the water into the sink, and bring the empty tray back, place it where it was before, and then come and hold the glass here upon this blotting-paper to drain.”

All this was done as requested, and then the lecturer was set free by Tom holding the three-cornered piece of glass, from which nearly all the water had run.

“Now observe,” said Uncle Richard, “this is the critical point of the experiment. You see, I take this fourth bottle, and pour the same quantity of this clear liquid into my measure. There—done; and as long as I keep them separate no action takes place, but the moment I pour this clear liquid into that clear liquid, you will see that a change takes place. Look—I ought to say behold!”

The contents of the measure were poured into the glass jar.

“Gets cloudy and thick,” cried Tom.

“And thicker and thicker,” said the Vicar, as the contents of the jar were well shaken up, and then quickly poured into the tray.

“Now, Tom, the glass,” said Uncle Richard sharply; and, taking a couple of little pieces of wood, he placed them in the tray at the sides, and then seizing the piece of broken glass speculum with the tips of the fingers of each hand, he quickly immersed the polished face in the fourfold solution, letting one side go in first, and then the rest of the face, till the glass rested about half an inch deep in the tray, its face being perfectly covered all over.

“Now watch,” continued the lecturer; “the magic change has commenced, the metallic silver is forming,” and as he spoke he kept on rocking the glass to and fro upon the two bits of wood.

“Why, it has turned all of a dirty black,” said Tom, “and as thick as thick,” as the rocking went on. “Why are you doing that, uncle?”

“So as to make a regular film come all over, and cause all the solution to be in motion, and give up its silver,” was the reply.

“Is it a failure, Brandon?” said the Vicar quietly.

“I hope not,” said Uncle Richard; “but of course I am a perfect novice at this sort of thing. It does look though as if I had made a mess instead of a grand experiment.”

“Yes, the water has turned pretty inky and thick.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Tom enthusiastically; and he caught up a duster and began to wave it in the air.

“What is it, Tom?”

“Hurrah!” yelled the lad. “Silver! Look, look!”

"I do not see any," said the Vicar, taking out his eye-glasses to put on, "only a greasy look on the top of the dirty water."

"No, sir, silver—silver," cried Tom excitedly. "I can see no end of tiny specks floating. Look, uncle. Don't you see?"

"Yes, Tom, you are right," said Uncle Richard, working away at rocking the glass to and fro.

"Oh yes, I can see it now, glittering on the surface," cried the Vicar, as excitedly as the boy. "Wonderful! quite large filmy patches floating. My dear Brandon, it really is very grand."

"Let me rock it now, uncle, to rest you," cried Tom.

"No; only a few minutes more, Tom, and then it may rest and finish."

"How long does it take?" said the Vicar.

"Oh, from ten to twenty minutes," said Uncle Richard; and at the end of a quarter of an hour, which had passed very quickly, so interested were they all, he ceased rocking the glass and left the face immersed in the murky solution, which had resembled very dirty blackish water, with faint traces of silvery film on the surface.

At the end of another five minutes the film was in larger patches, and at the end of another similar lapse of time Uncle Richard declared his experiment so far at an end, and lifted the piece of glass out dripping and dirty, leaving the water fairly clear, but with a thick sediment at the bottom, while the dripping face of the glass, instead of being brilliant polished glass, was seen to be coated over with a drabby-white or greyish film.

"Double up that piece of blotting-paper, and place it in the window, Tom," said Uncle Richard; and while this was being done, the darkened glass was critically examined by the Vicar.

"I'm afraid you won't see many stars in that, friend Brandon," he said.

"It does not look like it," replied Uncle Richard. "But let's get it dry in this current of air, and see what it is like then. Besides, there is something else to follow. That is only the rough surface of metallic silver. It has to be burnished before it is fit for use. That's right, Tom. There!"

The glass had been placed in the sunny window opening, and this being done, Uncle Richard washed his discoloured hands at the sink.

"Now," he said, "dinner must be nearly ready. Stop and have a bit with us, Maxted, and see what the experiment says afterwards. It will be dry enough to polish by then."

"Oh, thank you very much, but no, really I ought to—er—I did not mean to stay."

"Never mind, stop," cried Uncle Richard warmly.

"Yes, do stay, Mr Maxted," cried Tom.

"It's very good of you, but I think I ought to—"

"Stop," said Uncle Richard.

"Really, I should like to see the end of the experiment."

"And hear the end of the lecture directly after dinner," said Uncle Richard. "Tom, run in and tell Mrs Fidler to put another chair to the table. Mr Maxted will stay. Now let's have a walk down the garden till the dinner-bell rings."

Chapter Thirty.

"Now to prove the success of the magical trick," said the Vicar, as they all rose from the table, and walked across to the old mill. "Really, Brandon, honestly I never felt so much interest in chemistry before, and I feel quite disposed to take it up where one left off at college. But oh, dear, how little time one has!"

"True," said Uncle Richard, "the days always seem too short to a busy man. Now, Tom, let's look and see whether we have succeeded or failed."

"Succeeded," cried Tom excitedly, when the heavy fragment of the speculum was lifted out of the hot sunshine perfectly dry, and laid flat upon the bench. "Look, Mr Maxted, you can see that it is silvered all over."

"Yes; a dull, dingy coating of silver," said the Vicar, who had put on his glasses and was now leaning over the glass. "Wonderful indeed. And now, I suppose, you polish this metal face, and make it like a looking-glass?"

"Yes, with leather and rouge," said Uncle Richard, as he too put on his glasses and examined the surface carefully. "But there is something wrong about it."

"Wrong? Oh no, uncle; that stuff has all turned to silver plainly enough," cried Tom.

"True, boy, but my instructions tell me that the result ought to be a bright metallic surface of a golden rosy hue, and that a very little polishing should make it brilliant."

"Perhaps this will be," said the Vicar, "when it is polished."

“I’m afraid not,” said Uncle Richard. “There is a hitch somewhere. Either I have made some error in the quantities of my chemicals, or I have left the glass in the solution too long, with the result that the silver has become coated with the dirty-looking precipitation left when the metallic silver is thrown down. However, we are very near success, and we’ll polish and see what result we get. Now, Tom, up into the laboratory, and bring down from the second shelf that small bottle of rouge, the packet of cotton-wool, and the roll of fine chamois leather. One moment—the scissors too, and the ball of twine.”

Tom ran up-stairs, found the articles required, and was about to descend, when, glancing from the window, he caught sight of Pete Warboys, who had raised himself by getting his toes in some inequality of the wall, and was now resting his folded arms upon the top and his chin upon them, staring hard at the mill.

“Oh, how I should like to be behind him with a stick!” thought Tom; and he laughed to himself as he turned away and went down, to find that his uncle had just uncovered the great speculum they had ground and polished, where it stood upon a stout shelf at the far side of the workshop, and was pointing out its perfections to the Vicar.

“Yes, Brandon,” said the latter, “I suppose it is very beautiful in its shaping, but to me it is only a disc of glass. So you are going to silver that?”

“When I am sure of what I am doing,” replied Uncle Richard. “I must experimentalise once or twice more first. Here, Tom, set those things down and come here. I don’t like this glass to lie upon the shelf. We’ll lay a board down here, and turn the speculum face downwards upon the floor.”

Tom hurried to his uncle’s side, and after the board had been laid upon the floor, and covered with a soft cloth and several sheets of paper, the speculum was carefully lifted, turned over face downwards, covered with another cloth, and left close to the wall.

“No fear of that falling any farther,” said Uncle Richard, smiling, as he crossed the workshop deliberately. “Now for the polishing.”

He cut off a piece of the soft, delicate leather, about three inches square, made a ball-like pad of cotton-wool, and covered it with the leather, and then tied the ends tightly with some of the twine, making what resembled a soft leather ball with a handle, and patted it in his hand so as to flatten it a little.

“Now then,” he said, “this is to be another magic touch. If I succeed, you will see your faces brilliantly reflected in the glass; if I fail—”

“If you fail,” said the Vicar, laughing, “I can’t apply Lord Lytton’s words to you. If it were Tom, I should say, ‘In the bright lexicon of youth, there is no such word as fail.’”

“Very well then, though no longer youthful, I’ll take the words to myself. Now then for the magic touch that shall change this dull opaque silver to glistening, dazzling light.”

He held the leather polisher over the glass for a few moments, and then, as the others looked on, he let it fall smartly upon the silvered face, covered with greyish powder, and began to rub it smartly, when—

Crash!

One cutting, tearing, deafening, sharp, metallic-sounding explosion, that seemed to shake the old mill to its foundations; the windows were blown out; bottles, vessels, and tray were shivered, and the glass flew tinkling in all directions; and then an awful silence, succeeded by a strange singing noise in the ears, through which, as Tom struggled half-stunned and helpless to his feet, he could hear a loud shrieking and yelling for help.

“What has happened? what, has happened?” he muttered, as he clapped his hands to his ears, and tried to look about him; but his eyes had been temporarily blinded by the brilliant flash of light which had blazed through the workshop, and some moments elapsed before he could make out whence came a moaning—“Oh dear me, oh dear me!”

Then he dimly saw the Vicar seated on the floor against the wall, holding his hands to his ears, and rocking himself gently to and fro.

Hardly had Tom realised this when he caught sight of Richard Brandon upon his side in the middle of the place, perfectly motionless; and, with his ears singing horribly, the boy ran to his uncle’s side, and tried to raise his head.

And all the while the shrieking and cries for help came from the outside, mingled now with the trampling of feet.

Then, sounding muffled and strange, and as if from a great distance, Tom heard David’s voice.

“What is it? where are you hurt?”

“Oh, all over,” came in Pete’s voice; “I was a-lookin’ over the wall and they shot me with a big gun.”

“Yah!” cried David, as if still at a great distance, but his words sounded with peculiar distinctness through the metallic ringing. “Shootin’! It was a thunderbolt struck the mill.”

“Oh, what is the matter?” came now in Mrs Fidler’s voice.

“Thunderbolt, mum; I saw the flash,” cried David; and as Tom still held up his uncle’s head, and knelt there confused, half-stunned and helpless, Mrs Fidler’s voice rose again.

“Quick! help them before the place falls. Master! poor master! Mr Maxted—Master Tom!”

Then came the sound of hurrying feet, and as Tom looked up, to see the ceiling above him come crumbling down, more questioning voices were heard outside, and Pete’s voice rose again.

"They shot me with a big gun—they shot me with a big gun."

"Master! master!" shrieked Mrs Fidler. "Oh, there you are! Oh, Master Tom, don't say he's dead."

Tom shook his head feebly; he could not say anything. Then, as he felt himself lifted up, he heard the Vicar say—

"Oh dear me; I don't know—I'm afraid I'm a good deal hurt."

Then quite a cloud gathered about them, and with his ears still singing, Tom felt himself lifted out, water was sprinkled over his face, and he began to see things more clearly; but every word spoken sounded small and distant, while the faces of David, Mrs Fidler, and the people who gathered about them in a scared way looked misty and strange. Then he heard the Vicar's voice.

"Thank you—yes, thank you," he said; "I'm getting better."

"Bones broke, sir?" said David.

"No, I think not; see to poor Mr Brandon. I was thrown against the wall, right across; I can't quite get my breath yet, and I'm as if I was deaf. Ah, Tom, my boy, how are you?"

"I don't know, sir, I don't think I'm hurt; but ask the people not to shout so, it goes through my head." Then, as if he had suddenly recollected something, "Where's uncle?"

"He's coming to, my dear," said Mrs Fidler. "I think he's coming to."

And now Tom saw that they were lying on the newly-made grass-plot outside the mill, and that his uncle was being attended by Mrs Fidler and another woman.

He tried to get to him, but the slightest effort made his head swim, and he was fain to lie still and listen, while David went on talking excitedly.

"I was down the garden digging up the first crop o' taters, when I see a flash o' lightning, and then came a clap o' thunder as sharp as the crack of a whip. It made my ears sing. Then as I run to see, I hears Pete Warboys yelling out —'They shot me with a big gun—they shot me with a big gun.'"

"Hadn't some one better fetch the doctor?" said a fresh voice.

"He's gone out," cried another.

"Shot me with a big gun," yelled Pete again.

"Thank you, yes, thank you," came now in a voice which made Tom Blount's heart leap. "I don't think I am much hurt. Where is my boy Tom?"

"I'm all right, uncle," cried the boy eagerly, though he felt very far from being so; and he heard a few murmured words of thankfulness.

"Where is Mr Maxted?"

"I am here," said the Vicar, "not much hurt. But tell me, how are your eyes?"

"Rather dim and misty. But what was it?" said Uncle Richard, rather feebly; "an explosion?"

"Shot me with a big gun—shot me with a big gun."

"Will some one put a tater in that boy's ugly mouth," cried David indignantly. "I tell yer all it was thunder and lightning. I saw one and heard t'other, both sharp together."

"Yes, yes, yes. Didn't I always tell you so?" cried a shrill voice; and Tom looked round, to dimly make out Mother Warboys bending over her grandson, who was now sitting on the grass close under the wall, where he had been placed. "I always said it. His punishment's come at last for all his wicked tricks and evil dealings."

"And one in hers too," cried David. "A wicked old sinner! Hold your tongue, will you!"

"Nay, nay, I'll hold no tongue," cried Mother Warboys. "He's a wicked man-witch, and allays doing evil and making charms."

"Shot me with a big gun, granny."

"Hold thy tongue, boy. It's come to him at last—it's come to him at last. I always telled ye that he was a bad, wicked one. Now he's punished."

"Oh dear me! I cannot put up with this," muttered the Vicar. "David, my good fellow, give me your hand. Thank you—that's better. I think I can stand now. Oh, yes. That's right; but I've lost my glasses."

"Here they are, sir," said a voice, "but they're all crushed to bits."

"Then I must do without them, I suppose."

"An old wicked one, who buys up mills and starves the poor, so that he may go on in his evil ways. I told you all so, but it's come to him at last."

“Oh dear me!” ejaculated the Vicar. “Keep my arm, David. Here, you sir, get up.”

“Shot me with a gun—shot me with a gun,” yelled Pete, who had got hold of one form of complaint, and kept to it.

“Silence, sir! It’s all nonsense; no one fired a gun.”

“Yes; shot me, and knocked me off the wall.”

“Is he hurt?” asked the Vicar, as Uncle Richard now sat up.

“Don’t think so, sir,” said one of the village people. “We can’t find nothing the matter with him.”

“I told you so—I told you all so,” continued Mother Warboys, waving her stick.

“And I tell you so,” cried the Vicar angrily. “Go along home, you wicked old she Shimei. How dare you come cursing here when your poor neighbours are in trouble!”

“I—I—I don’t care—I will say it,” cried Mother Warboys.

“You dare to say another word, and you shall have no dole next Sunday,” cried the Vicar angrily.

“I—I don’t care; I say it’s come home to him at last. I always said it would.”

“Yes, you wicked old creature; and in spite of your vanity you are not a prophetess. Take that old woman home,” cried the Vicar fiercely; but no one stirred.

“What, are you all afraid of her?”

“She’ll get cursing and ill-wishing us if we do, sir,” said one of the men present.

“I’ll take her home, sir,” cried David. “Don’t s’pose she’ll hurt me much if she do. Come along, old lady, and you, Pete, take hold of her other arm.”

Pete obeyed, and seemed to forget his injuries, taking Mother Warboys’ other arm, and helping her out of the yard, she saying no more, but shaking her head, and muttering that she “always knowed how it would be.”

By this time Uncle Richard was sufficiently recovered to walk about; and, beckoning Tom to him, he took his arm and went into the workshop, where the silvered piece of speculum lay shattered; and in addition to the windows being broken, the bench was split from end to end, and a table and stools knocked over.

“Look at the speculum, Tom. Is it hurt?”

Tom’s ears were still ringing as he crossed to where they had laid the disc of glass face downwards; and on uncovering it, he found it uninjured, and said so, making his uncle draw a deep breath as if much relieved.

“Now lock up the place, Tom,” he said, “and let’s go indoors. I am too much shaken to say much, so ask Mr Maxted to request the people to go away now, and then you can fasten the gate.”

“Think she’ll tumble down, sir?” said a voice at the door; and they turned to find David back panting and breathless. “Took her home, sir. She kep’ on chuntering all the way, but parson frightened her about the dole, and she never said a cross word. But think the mill ’ll come down?”

“Oh no, David,” said Uncle Richard quietly; “there is no fear. Is that boy much hurt?”

“Him, sir? Tchah! There’s nothing the matter with him. The shock knocked him off the wall, and he lay howling, expecting some one to give him a shilling to put him right. He’d forgotten all about it before he got home, and began to quarrel with his granny.”

“Help to lock up,” said Uncle Richard; and, leaving Tom free to speak to the people, and ask them to disperse, he laid his hand on David’s arm.

Ten minutes later the people were all out of the yard, and hanging about in the lane discussing the thunderbolt, as they called it, that had fallen, some declaring that the worst always came out of a clear sky, while others declared that they’d “never seed thunder and lightning without clouds.”

On the whole, they were rather disappointed that more mischief had not been done. The burning of the mill, for instance, or its crumbling down, would have made the affair more exciting, whereas there were some broken windows to look at, and that was all.

Meanwhile the scientific people had adjourned to the cottage, where warm water and clothes-brushes did a good deal to restore them to their former state, while a cup of tea hurriedly prepared by Mrs Fidler did something toward soothing their shattered nerves.

“But really, sir, I think you ought to let me send over to Buildston for Doctor Ranson.”

“Not for me, Mrs Fidler,” said Uncle Richard. “I’ve been a good deal shaken, and my ears are full of a sharp singing sound, but I’m rapidly coming round. Send for him to see Mr Maxted.”

“Oh dear me, no. I’m very much better,” said the Vicar. “I was very much frightened, and I have a lump on the back of my head, but that is all. You had better send for him, I think, to see Master Tom here.”

“I don’t want any doctor,” exclaimed Tom. “Mrs Fidler could put me right.”

“Yes, my dear,” cried the housekeeper; “but you never will let me.”

“Well, who’s going to take prune tea or brimstone and treacle because he has been knocked down?”

“There, Mrs Fidler, you hear,” said Uncle Richard; “we have had a narrow escape, but I don’t think any of us are much the worse. We only want rest. Take the couch, Maxted, and lie down.”

“Well—er—really,” said the Vicar; “if you will not think it selfish of me, I believe it would do my head good if I lay down for an hour. I am a good deal shaken.”

Mrs Fidler sighed and left the room as the Vicar took the couch, Uncle Richard one easy-chair, and Tom the other, to lie back and listen to the murmur of voices out in the lane, where the village people were still discussing the startling affair. Every now and then some excited personage raised his voice, and a word or two floated through the window about “lightning,” and “heared it,” and “mussy no one was killed.”

Uncle Richard was the first to break the silence by saying dryly—

“I’m afraid Mrs Fidler does not believe in the thunder and lightning theory.”

“No?” said the Vicar, turning his head.

“No,” said Uncle Richard, smiling, but wincing at the same time; “she has had experience of me before in my dabblings in other things. What do you say was the cause of the trouble, Tom?”

“Well, I should say, uncle, that the silver was too strong for the glass, and made it split all to pieces.”

“Not a bad theory,” said Uncle Richard. “What do you say, Maxted?”

“Well,” said the Vicar, “do you know, I’m puzzled. Of course it was not an electric shock, and my knowledge of chemistry is so very shallow; but really and truly, I feel convinced, that you must have got hold of wrong chemicals, and formed some new and dangerous explosive compound.”

“Quite right, only it was not new,” said Uncle Richard. “As soon as I could collect my shattered thinking powers, I began to consider about what I had done, and I think I see correctly now. The fact is, I forgot one very important part of the instructions I have for silvering mirrors.”

“Indeed!” said the Vicar, in an inquiring tone, while Tom pricked up his singing ears.

“Yes,” said Uncle Richard. “You remember how the silvery surface was covered with a greyish powder?”

“Yes, thickly,” said Tom.

“That had no business there, and it would not have been if I had been more careful to remember everything. When I took the speculum glass out of the silvering bath, I ought to have deluged it with pure water till all that greyish powder was washed away, then it would have been fairly bright.”

“Yes, uncle; but what has that to do with the explosion?”

“Everything, my boy. If there had been no powder there we should have had no explosion.”

“But it wasn’t gunpowder, uncle,” cried Tom, “it couldn’t be. I know what gunpowder’s made of—nitre, brimstone, and charcoal; and besides, we had no light.”

“No, Tom, but it was a mixture far stronger than gunpowder, and one which will explode with a very slight friction.”

“I know,” cried the Vicar eagerly, “fulminate of silver.”

“Quite right,” said Uncle Richard; “and I feel quite ashamed of my ignorance. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing; and I ought to have known that in this process I was preparing so dangerous a compound.”

“I know,” cried Tom now; “fulminate of silver is what they put in percussion caps, isn’t it, uncle?”

“No; that is a very similar compound, but it is fulminate of mercury.—Well, Maxted, what am I to say to you for trying to kill you?”

“I think you had better say nothing,” said the Vicar quietly. “It seems to me that the less we talk about it the better, and content ourselves with being thankful for our escape.”

“It’s lucky, uncle, that it missed the big speculum, and a lot more stuff being used.”

“Fortunate indeed, Tom. We must be more careful next time.”

“But surely you will not try so dangerous an experiment again?” said the Vicar anxiously.

“Certainly I shall,” said Uncle Richard. “The experiment is not in the least dangerous if properly carried out. The accident was from my ignorance. I know better now.”

“You’ve paid very dearly for your experience,” said the Vicar, smiling. “It’s rather hard upon your friends, though, to try such risky experiments in their presence.”

“Next time all will go well. Will you come and see it?”

"Really, my dear Brandon, I respect you very much, as my principal parishioner, and a man after my own heart, but I'm afraid I shall be too busy to come next time. I'll wait till the big telescope is ready for use, when I shall want to peep through; but even then I shall approach it with fear and trembling. It will look like a great gun, and I shall always feel afraid of its going off."

"And you, Tom," said his uncle, "what do you say?"

"What about, uncle?"

"Shall you be afraid to come and help silver another time?"

"Oh no, uncle, I think not," replied the boy. "But I say, will my ears leave off?"

"What, listening?"

"No, uncle; it's just as if I'd got a little tiny muffin-man ringing his bell in each ear as hard as he can go."

"Try a night's rest," said Uncle Richard. "Yes, I'm very sorry we had such a mishap."

"Never mind," said the Vicar; "it will give our little glazier a job. And now I feel rested and better, so good-evening, I'm going home."

Chapter Thirty One.

Tom gave proof of his readiness a few days later, when the broken windows had been replaced, fresh solutions made, and the village had again calmed down to its regular natural state of repose; for, upon his uncle proposing that they should proceed at once to silver the big speculum, he eagerly went off to the workshop to get all ready for his uncle's coming.

Short as the distance was though, he did not get away without encountering Pete, who hurried up to the wall to shout over at him—

"I know. Yer did shoot at me, but I shan't forget it, so look out."

Then hearing some one coming from the cottage, he ducked down like a wild animal seeking concealment, and hurried away.

Then the whole process was gone through to the smallest minutiae, and only an hour after the silvered face of the mirror was deluged with rain-water, and uncle and nephew gazed in triumph at their work, for there was no sign of greyish-drab powder about the mirror, and it was so bright that polishing seemed unnecessary.

The next day it was polished, till by a side light it looked black, while in face it was a brilliant looking-glass ready to reflect the faintest stars; and after being put away securely, the great tube was set about, and in due time this was lightly and strongly made of long laths hooped together. A shallow tray was contrived deep enough to hold the speculum, and fitted with screws, so that it could be secured to one end. Next followed the fitting of a properly-constructed eye-piece from a London optician, contrived so that it looked at right angles into a small reflector, which also had to be carefully fixed in the axis of the great speculum.

Chapter Thirty Two.

"What's the matter, Tom?" said Uncle Richard one day, as they were busy at work over the telescope, and Tom was scratching his head.

"There's nothing the matter, uncle, only I'm a bit puzzled."

"What about?"

"Over this great glass. It's going to be so different to the old one."

"Of course; that is a refractor, and this is going to be a reflector."

"Yes, uncle, but it seems so queer. The refractor is a tube made so that you can look through it, but the reflector will be, if you are right, so that you can't look through it, because instead of being at the end, the hole will be in the side. Is that correct?"

"Quite right, and you are quite wrong, Tom, for you do not understand the first simple truth in connection with a telescope."

"I suppose not, uncle," replied the lad, with a sigh. "I am very stupid."

"No, you are not, sir, only about as ignorant as most people are about glasses. I have explained the matter to you, but you have not taken it in."

"I suppose not, uncle," said Tom, wrinkling his brow.

"Then understand it now, once for all. It is very simple if you will try and grasp it. Now look here: what do you do with an ordinary telescope or opera-glass, single or double? Hold it up to your eyes, do you not?"

"Yes, uncle."

"And then?"

"Look through it at something distant, and it seems to draw it near."

"You do what?"

"Look through it, uncle."

"Nothing of the kind, sir, you do not."

Tom looked puzzled. What did his uncle mean? He had, he thought, looked through a pair of field-glasses scores of times at home in the old days.

"I make you stare, my lad, but I am glad to see it, for it shows me how right I am, and that you do think as everybody else does who has not studied optics, that you look through a glass at an object."

Tom stared harder, and once more the old idea came to him, and he asked himself whether there were times when his uncle did not quite understand what he was saying.

"But you do, uncle," he cried at last. Then he qualified this declaration by saying, "Don't you?"

"No, my boy, once for all you do not; and if you take up any telescope, and remove the eye-piece before looking along the tube, you will see that your eyes will not penetrate the glass at the end. Then if you try the eye-piece alone, you will find that you cannot even look through that. How much less then will you be able to look through both at once."

"But it seems so strange, uncle. You have a big magnifying-glass in a tube, and don't look through it? Then what do you do?"

"Certainly not look through it, my boy."

"But the bigger the glasses are the more they magnify—the moon, say."

"Yes, Tom; and the more light they gather."

"Well, then, why do you say, uncle, that you don't look through the glass?"

"Because it is a fact that I want you to understand," said Uncle Richard, smiling. "The big glass, or in our case the reflecting speculum, forms a tiny image of the object at which it is pointed, close to where we look in, within an inch or so of our eye."

"A tiny image, uncle?"

"Well, picture, then."

"But you say tiny! It looks big enough when we put our eye to the little round hole."

"To be sure it does. But what do you look through?"

"The eye-piece."

"Well, what is the eye-piece?"

"A little glass or two—lenses."

"These glasses or lenses form a microscope, Tom; and through them you look at the tiny image formed in the focus of the great lens or the speculum, whichever you use."

"But I thought microscopes were only used to magnify things invisible to the eye."

"Well, Jupiter's moons, Saturn's ring, and the markings on Mars are all invisible to the naked eye. So are the craters in the moon; so we use the big speculum to gather the light, and then look at the spot where all the rays of light come to their narrowest point, with an eye-piece which really is a microscope."

"But I don't understand now," said Tom uneasily. "I wish I was not so—"

"If you say stupid again, Tom, I shall quarrel with you," said Uncle Richard sternly. "I never think any boy is stupid who tries to master a subject. One boy's brain may be slower at acquiring knowledge than another, but that does not prove him to be stupid. What is it you don't follow?"

"About our telescope. If the light from the big speculum is all reflected nearly to a point, ought we not to look down at it?"

"No; because then our heads would be in the way, and would cast a shadow upon it. To avoid that, I put the little mirror in the middle, near the top, just at the right slant, so that the rays are turned off at right angles into the eye-piece, and so we are able to look without interrupting the light."

"Oh, I see now," said Tom thoughtfully. "It's very clear."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard. "Sir Isaac Newton, who contrived that way, was a clever man. Now then, let's get on with our work."

“I suppose then now we’re ready?” said Tom.

“Far from it,” replied his uncle; “are you going to hold up a twelve-foot tube to your eye, and direct it to a star? The next thing is of course to mount it upon trunnions, and arrange that it shall turn upon an axis, so that we can sweep in any direction.”

The longest tasks come to an end. By the help of the village carpenter, a strong rough stand was connected with the beam formerly used to bear the sails of the mill, the trunnions were fitted to a strong iron ring by the smith, and one evening the great telescope was hung in its place, and in spite of its weight, moved at the slightest touch, its centre of gravity having been so carefully calculated that it swung up and down and revolved with the greatest ease.

“There, Tom,” said Uncle Richard; “now I think we can sweep the heavens in every direction, and when once we have tried, the mirrors, so as to set them and the eye-piece exact, we can get to work.”

Tom looked at his uncle in dismay.

“Why, you don’t mean to say, uncle, that there is more to do after working at it like this?”

“Yes, a great deal. We have to get the glasses to work with one another to the most perfect correctness. That task may take us for days.”

It did, and though Tom finished off every evening worn-out and discouraged, he recommenced in the morning fresh and eager as ever, helping to alter the position of the big speculum, then of the small plane mirror. Then the eye-piece had to be unscrewed and replaced again and again, till at last Uncle Richard declared that he could do no more.

“Then now we may begin?” cried Tom.

“We might,” said his uncle, “for the moon will be just right to-night in the first quarter; but judging from appearances, we shall have a cloudy wet evening.”

And so it proved, the moon not even showing where she was in hiding behind the clouds.

“I do call it too bad,” cried Tom, “now, too, that we are quite ready.”

“Patience, lad, patience. A star-gazer must have plenty of that. Do you know that a great astronomer once said that there were only about a hundred really good hours for observation in every year.”

“What?” cried Tom. “He meant in a night. I mean a week. No, I don’t: how absurd! In a month.”

“No, Tom,” said his uncle quietly, “in a year. Of course there would be plenty more fair hours, but for really good ones no doubt his calculation was pretty correct. So you will have to wait.”

The Vicar called again one day, and hearing from Mrs Fidler that her master was over at the observatory, he came to the yard gate and thumped with his stick.

“What’s that?” said Uncle Richard, who was down upon his knees carefully adjusting a lens.

“Tramp, I should think,” said Tom, who was steadying the great tube of the telescope.

“Then he must tramp,” said Uncle Richard. “I can’t be interrupted now. What numbers of these people do come here!”

“Mrs Fidler says it’s because you give so much to them, uncle, and they tell one another.”

“Mrs Fidler’s an old impostor,” said Uncle Richard—“there, I think that is exactly in the axis—she gives more away to them than I do.”

“Bread-and-cheese, uncle; but she says you always give money.”

“Well, boy, it isn’t Mrs Fidler’s money. That must be exact.”

Bang, hang, hang at the gate, and then—

“Anybody at home?” came faintly.

“Why, it’s Mr Maxted, uncle. May I go and speak to him?”

“Yes, you can let go now. Tell him to come up.”

Tom left the telescope and went to the shutter, which he threw open, and stepped out into the little gallery.

“Good-morning. Your uncle there?”

“Yes, sir. He says you are to come up.”

“Come up?” said the Vicar, laughing. “I don’t know. It was bad enough on the ground-floor. I don’t want to be shot out of the top. Is it safe?”

“There’s nothing to mind now, sir,” cried Tom. “The door is open.”

“Well, I think I’ll risk it this time,” said the Vicar, entering the yard, while Tom stepped back into the observatory.

"What, is he pretending to be frightened?" said Uncle Richard, with a grim smile.

"Yes, uncle; he wanted to know if it was safe."

By this time the Vicar's steps were heard upon the lower stairs, and Tom lifted the trap-door, holding it open for their visitor, who, after the usual greetings, sat down to admire the telescope.

"Hah! that begins to look business-like," he said. "We shall be soon having a look I suppose. Finished?"

"Very nearly," said Uncle Richard. "It has been a long job."

"I wanted your advice about one of my difficulties," said the Vicar, puckering up his face.

"Shall I go down and see to the glass for the new frames, uncle?"

"Oh, no, no, no," cried the Vicar. "I've nothing to say that you need not hear. I've just come from old Mother Warboys' cottage."

"And how is the old witch?"

"Ah, poor, prejudiced old soul, much the same as ever. I'm afraid she is beyond alteration, but her grandson was there."

"Humph! And he's beyond mending too," said Uncle Richard gravely.

"Ah, there's the rub," said the Vicar, crossing his legs, and clasping his hands about the upper knee. "They are both of human flesh, but one is young and green, the other old and dry. I can be satisfied that I am helpless over the old woman, but I'm very uneasy about that boy."

"Halloo! He was not seriously hurt over the explosion?"

"Not a bit."

"But he thinks it was my doing to spite him, uncle, and he says he will serve me out."

"A young dog!" cried the Vicar. "I'll talk to him again."

"Labour in vain," said Uncle Richard. "As you know, I tried over and over again to make something of him, but he would not stay. He hates work. Wild as one of the rabbits he poaches."

"But we tame rabbits, Brandon, and I don't like seeing that boy gradually go from bad to worse."

"It's the gipsy blood in him, I'm afraid," said Uncle Richard.

"Yes, and I don't know what to do with him."

"A good washing wouldn't be amiss."

"No," sighed the Vicar; "but he hates soap and water as much as he does work. What am I to do? The boy is on my conscience. He makes me feel as if all my teaching is vain, and I see him gradually developing into a man who, if he does what the boy has done, must certainly pass half his time in prison."

"Yes, it is a problem," said Uncle Richard. "Boys are problems. Troublesome young cubs, aren't they, Tom?"

"Horrible, uncle," said Tom dryly.

"But to begin with: a boy is a boy," said the Vicar firmly, "and he has naturally the seeds of good and evil in him."

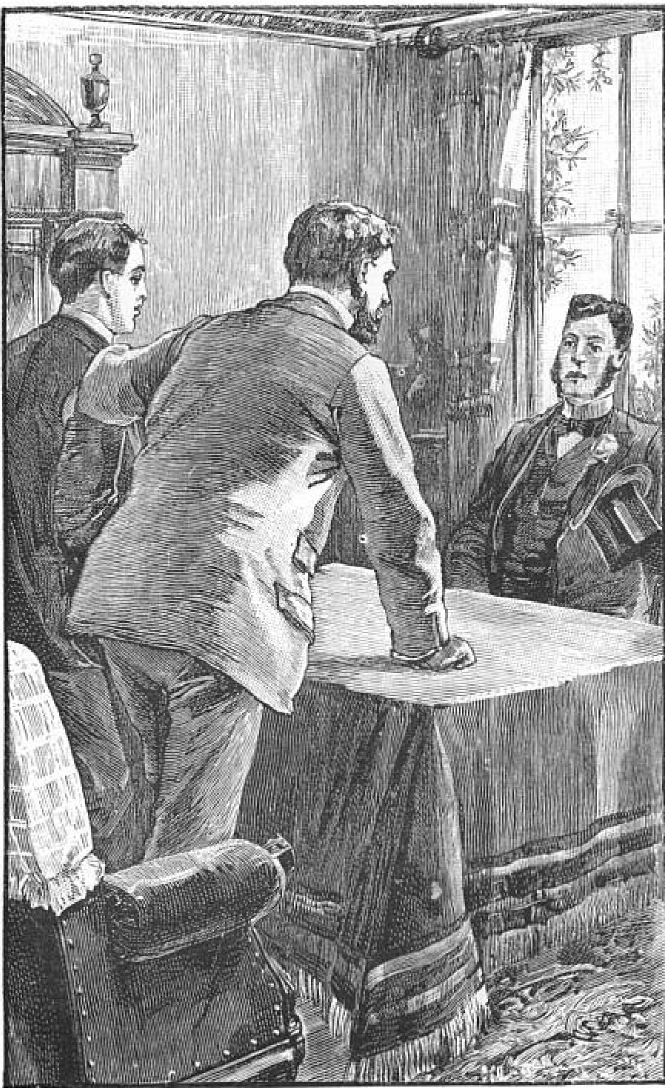
"Pete Warboys had all the good left out of him," said Uncle Richard.

"No, I deny that," said the Vicar decisively.

"Well, I've seen him about for some time now, and I've never seen any of the good, Maxted."

"Ah, but I have," said the Vicar, while Tom busied himself doing nothing to the telescope, and began to take a good deal of interest in the discussion about his enemy. "You will grant, I suppose, that Mother Warboys is about as unamiable, cantankerous an old woman as ever breathed?"

"Most willingly," said Uncle Richard, smiling. "She leads that boy quite a dog's life. I've seen her thump him quite savagely with her stick."



"Then there is some good in him," cried the Vicar.—p. 357.

"And he deserved it," said Uncle Richard.

"No doubt; but instead of showing resentment, the boy is devoted to her; and I know for a fact he is always bringing her rabbits and hares to cook for herself."

"Poached."

"Yes, I'm afraid so; but I'm firmly convinced that he would fight to the death for the poor old creature."

"Nature," said Uncle Richard; "she is his grandmother."

"Then there is some good in him," cried the Vicar; "and what I want is to make it grow. The only question is, how it is to be done."

"Don't you think I have got problems enough over my telescope, without your setting me fresh ones? Get some recruiting serjeant to carry him off for raw material to turn into a soldier."

"Hopeless," said the Vicar. "Too loose and shambling. As it is, metaphorically, every one throws stones at the lad; no one ever gives him a kind word."

"No, but who can? I'm afraid you must give him up, Maxted, as a hopeless case."

"I will not," said the Vicar firmly. "It's my duty to try and make a decent member of society of the lad if I can, and I'm sorry you cannot give me a hint."

"So am I," said Uncle Richard seriously, "but I look upon him as hopeless. I tried again and again, till I felt that the only thing was to chain him up, and beat and starve him into submission, and it seemed to me that it would be better to let him run wild than attempt to do that."

"Yes; I agree with you," said the Vicar. "Tom. Come, Tom, you're a boy. Boys understand one another better than men understand them. Can't you help me?"

"I wish I could, sir," said Tom, shaking his head, "but I'm afraid I can't."

Then the conversation turned to astronomical matters, and soon after the Vicar left.

Chapter Thirty Three.

That conversation took root in Tom's mind. He found himself thinking a good deal about Pete Warboys and his devotion to his hideous old grandmother; but it was hard work to believe that he had any of the good in him that the Vicar talked about.

"Wonder whether he really has," Tom said to himself. "He might have."

The idea began to grow, and it spread.

"What would they say if I tried to alter him, and got him to turn into a decent chap?"

He laughed at his own conceit directly after.

"He'd laugh at me too," thought Tom; and then something else took his attention. But the idea was there, and was always cropping up. He found himself talking to David about the lad one day when he was down the garden, and David left off digging potatoes, took a big kidney off one of the prongs of the potato fork, upon which it was impaled, split it in two, and began thoughtfully to polish the tool with the piece he retained.

"Do I think as you might make a decent chap out of Pete Warboys, Master Tom, by being kind to him?"

"Yes."

"Do I think as you could make a silk puss out of a sow's ear, Master Tom; and then cut this here yellow bit o' tater into sovereigns and put in it? No, sir, I don't. Pete's a bad 'un, and you can't make a good 'un out of him."

"Not if he was properly taught?"

"Tchah! you couldn't teach a thing like him. It'd all run through him like water through a sieve."

"But he has never been taught better."

"More was I, sir, but I don't go poaching, and stealing apples and eggs, and ducks and chickens. Why, he makes that wicked old woman his grandam fat with the things he steals and takes to her."

"Well, that shows there's some good in him," cried Tom, basing himself upon the Vicar's speech.

"Master Tom," cried David, digging his fork down into the earth as if to impale fierce, evil thoughts with its tines, "I'm surperrised at you. Good! What, to go stealing an' portching to feed up a wicked old woman, who spends all her time trying to curse. That's a shocking sentiment, sir, and one that arn't becoming. It arn't good, and there arn't no good in Pete Warboys, and never will be. He's a bad stock, and if you was to take him and plant him in good soil, and then work him with a scion took off a good tree, and put on some graftin' wax to keep out all the wet and cold, do you think he'd ever come to be a decent fruit tree? Because if you do, you're wrong. He never could, and never would, come to anything better than a bad old cankering crab sort o' thing. No, my lad, it would just be waste of time, and nothing else."

Still Tom did not feel at all convinced, but said no more.

David did though. It was pleasant to the back standing there, with one foot resting upon the great five-pronged fork; and as he stood with his fingers on the handle, he kept his left arm across his loins, and gave Tom a cunning leer.

"It's all right, sir; taters won't hurt. Tatering's a thing you ought to take your time over. The longer they lie out here without the sun on them, the harder the skins will be, and the better they'll keep."

Tom stopped talking to David for some time longer, but his mind was not bent upon the vegetable kingdom as represented by the tuber commonly known as a "tater," but upon that portion of the animal kingdom familiar to him as Pete Warboys.

Now it so happened that a couple of days later, Uncle Richard was going out on business in the nearest town, leaving Tom to amuse himself as he pleased.

"What shall I do, uncle?" said Tom. "Is there anything to grind?"

"No; you are not out enough in the open air. Go and get blackberries, or mushrooms, or something to take you for a long walk. I shall be home to tea."

Tom had been indoors so much, that at first he felt unwilling to go; but that feeling soon wore off, and he started for a long jaunt out through the firs, to the wild common-lands, where Nature revelled undisturbed, and he knew that between blackberries and mushrooms he was pretty sure of getting something to bring back in the basket Mrs Fidler supplied.

And so it proved. As soon as he was well through the fir-wood, where the closely-growing reddish fir-trunks brought to mind Pete's hiding-place, and consequently Pete himself, he found the broken ground rich with brambles clustering over the furze-bushes, and hanging down in the sandy hollows—hot, sunny spots, where the black fruit, rarely gathered, hung in bunches, so that the basket soon began to grow heavy, and a division had to be made with bracken fronds to keep them from being mixed up with the mushrooms he gathered from time to time—not big, flat, dark, brown-gilled fungi, such as grow in moist spots and rich old pastures, but delicate, plump little buttons, which he found here and there dotted about the soft velvety bits of sheep-cropped pasture hidden among the clumps of furze.

Then there were other objects of interest: rabbits darted here and there, skurrying into their sandy holes; he caught sight of a weasel, which peered at him for a moment, and then glided away like a short fur-clothed viper. Further on he came upon an olive-green, regularly-marked snake, which seemed in no hurry to escape; another slightly-formed reptile, nearly equal in thickness all along, and looking as if made of oxidised silver, being far more active in its movements to gain sanctuary under a furze bush. Soon after, while reaching out his hand to get at a cluster of blackberries, he saw beneath him in an open sunny patch, where all was yellow sand, a curled-up grey serpent, not three feet from his

extended hand. It was thick and short, the tail being joined on to the body without the graduation seen in the others, while the creature's neck looked thin and small behind the flat, spade-shaped head.

"Asleep or awake?" Tom asked himself, as the reptile lay perfectly motionless, with its curiously-marked eyes seeming dull, and as if formed of the same material as the scales.

The lad drew his hand back, for there was something repellent about the little object, and he knew at once that this was a dangerous little viper.

His first instinct was to strike at it, but he had no stick; and he stood perfectly still examining it, and comparing its shape and markings with what he could recall of his readings respecting the adder.

There was no doubt about it. The little reptile was an adder, sunning itself in its warm home; and that it was not asleep Tom soon saw, for the curious tongue was rapidly protruded several times, flickering, as it were, outside the horny mouth, which seemed to be provided with an opening in front expressly for the tongue to pass through, while the jaws remained closed.

"Wish I'd a stick," thought the boy, as the viper now slowly raised its head; a couple of coils were in motion, and for the moment it seemed about to glide away, but the head sank again, and once more the little creature lay perfectly still.

"They're dangerous things, and the bite is very painful," thought Tom; but he did not stir to get a stick to kill the reptile, for he was interested in its peculiar form, and the dark, velvety markings along its body, which glistened in the sun.

And there he stood, peering over into the little opening, in profound unconsciousness that he was being silently stalked, till, just as he had made up his mind to go to the nearest fir-tree and cut a stick, in the hope of finding the adder still there on his return, there was a sharp snuffling sound.

Tom started round, to find Pete's ill-looking dog close at hand, but ready to spring away over the bushes as if expecting a blow.

Tom's next glance showed him the disturbed viper, with its head raised, eyes glittering as if filled with fire, and its body all in motion. Then it was gone; but another pair of eyes were gazing into his, for Pete Warboys slowly raised himself from where he had crawled to the other side of the furze clump.

Chapter Thirty Four.

"Hulloo!" said Pete, with a sneering grin; "got you then, have I? Who gave you leave to come and pick them?"

"Hulloo, Pete!" said Tom quietly, ignoring the question, for the recollection of his thoughts during the past few days came up strongly, and all that the Vicar, his uncle, and David had said.

"Who are you a hulloo Peteing?" snarled the fellow. "Yer ain't got no guns now to go shooting at people."

"What nonsense!" said Tom; "that wasn't a gun—it was an explosion."

"Yer needn't tell me; I know," said Pete, edging round slowly to Tom's side of the bush.

"I don't believe you were half so much hurt as I was," continued Tom.

"Serve yer right. Yer'd no business to shoot at a fellow."

"I didn't," cried Tom. "Don't I tell you it wasn't a gun?"

"Oh, yer can't cheat me. Here! hi! Kerm here, will yer, or I'll scruntch yer!" he roared to his dog. "Leave that 'ere rarebut alone. Want him to go sneaking an' telling the perlice, and purtendin' it was me."

The dog gave up chasing an unfortunate rabbit through the bushes, and came trotting up, with hanging head and tail, to his master's side, where he crouched down panting and flinching as Pete raised his hand and made believe to strike.

"I'll half smash yer if yer don't mind," he snarled.

Then, turning to Tom—

"What yer got there—blackb'rys and mash-eroons?"

"Yes; there are plenty about," replied Tom.

"Know that better than you do."

"I dare say you do," said Tom good-humouredly, as he watched the unpleasant looks directed at him, the fellow's whole aspect being such as we read was assumed by the wolf who sought an excuse for eating the lamb.

All the same, though, Tom's aspect partook more of the good-humoured bulldog than that of the lamb; though Pete kept to his character well, and more and more showed that he was working himself up for a quarrel.

"Yah!" he exclaimed suddenly, after edging himself up pretty closely, and with his hands still in his pockets, thrusting out his lower jaw, and leaning forward stared over his raised shoulder at Tom. "Yah! I feel as if I could half smash yer!"

"Do you?" said Tom quietly.

"Yes, I do. Don't you get a-mocking me. Ain't yer feared?"

"No," said Tom quietly, "not a bit. Have sixpence?"

Pete stared, and leaned over out of the perpendicular, so as to get his face closer to Tom's. "Whort say?"

"Will you have sixpence?" said Tom, thrusting his right hand into his pocket, and withdrawing the above coin.

"Yerse; 'course I will," cried Pete, snatching the piece, spitting on it, and thrusting it into his pocket. "Thought your sort allus telled the truth."

"Well, so we do," said Tom, smiling.

"None o' yer lies now, 'cause it won't do with me," said the fellow menacingly. "Yer said yer warn't afeard, and yer are. All in a funk, that's what yer are: so now then."

"No, I'm not," said Tom, in the coolest way possible, for he had made up his mind to try and carry out the Vicar's plan.

"I tell yer yer are. What yer got here? Yer wouldn't ha' give me sixpence to let yer alone if yer hadn't been afeard. What yer got here, I say?"

"You can see," said Tom, without showing the slightest resentment at the handle of his basket being seized, even though Pete, in perfect assurance that he was frightening his enemy into fits, grew more and more aggressive.

"Yes, I can see," cried Pete. "I've got eyes in my head, same as you chaps as come from London, and think yerselves so precious sharp. Yer've no right to come down and pick what's meant for poor people. Give 'em here."

He wrenched the basket from Tom's arm, and scattered its contents away amongst the furze-bushes, sending the basket after them.

"There, that's what you'll get if yer comes picking and stealing here. How d'yer like that, young blunt 'un?"

"Not at all," said Tom, who looked very white, and felt a peculiar tingling about the corners of his lips and in his temples.

"Course yer don't; but yer've got to like it, and so I tell yer. Smell that."

He placed his fist within an inch of Tom's nose, and the boy could not help smelling it, for it was strong of pulling onions, or peeling them with his nails.

"Now, then, how much money have yer got with yer?"

"Only another sixpence," said Tom a little huskily.

"Hand it over, then, and look sharp about it, 'fore it's the worse for yer."

He caught hold of Tom's jacket as he spoke, and gave it a shake, making his dog sidle up and growl, "Hear that? You give me more of yer sarce, and I'll set the dorg at you, and see how yer like that. Now, then, where's that sixpence?"

"I'll give it to you if you'll leave go," said Tom quietly. "Look here, Pete, I don't want to quarrel with you."

"That yer don't. I should like to see you. Give it here."

"I want to be friends with you, and try to do something for you."

"Yes, I knows you do. You've got to bring me a shillin' every week, or else I'll give it yer, so as you'd wish yer'd never been born. I'll larn yer. Give me that sixpence."

"Leave go first."

"Give's that sixpence, d'yer hear?" cried Pete, clapping his other hand on Tom, and shaking him.

"Don't do that," cried Tom; "it makes me feel queer."

Pete yelled with laughter.

"Course it does; but that arn't nothing. Hand over that there sixpence, or—"

He gave a savage shake, which made Tom turn deadly pale, and shake himself free.

"What!" roared Pete. "Oh, yer would, would yer? Lay hold on him. Ciss! have him there!"

The dog, which had been snuffling and growling about, needed no further urging, but sprang at Tom, who received his charge with a tremendous kick, which caught the cur under the jaw, knocking it over, and sending it in amongst the furze bushes, where it lay howling and yelping dismally, till it gave a peculiar sharp cry, sprang out with something sticking to its nose, and then dashed off with its tail between its legs as hard as it could go, leaving a little viper wriggling back over the short grass to get back to the shelter of the furze.

Pete Warboys looked perfectly astounded at Tom’s act, and stood staring for a few moments. Then, attributing it to horror and desperate fear, he ran at his enemy again, and got a firm grip of his collar, to begin see-sawing him to and fro.

“That’s it, is it?” he cried; “yer’d kick my dorg, would yer? Just you give me that other sixpence, or I’ll break every bone in yer skin ’fore yer know where you are.”

“Let go!” said Tom huskily; and he struggled to get free.

“Oh no, yer don’t. Yer arn’t going to get away till yer’ve paid me that there sixpence.”

Tom’s fit of philanthropy had nearly all evaporated, like so much mist before the intense heat which Pete had set burning, and made all the blood in his face and extremities seem to run to his heart, which pumped away violently, causing his head to feel giddy, and his hands and feet to tingle and jerk.

“Will you leave go?” he cried in a low, hoarse whisper.

“No, I sharn’t, yer cowardly sneak,” cried Pete triumphantly, for the white face and trembling voice were delightful to him. He had his enemy metaphorically upon his knees, and it was pure delight to him to have Tom at his mercy. “Yer’ve bounced it over me long enough when yer’d got any one to help yer, or you was at home; but I’ve got yer now, and I’m going to pay yer, and teach yer, and let yer know what’s what. Where’s that there sixpence yer owe me?”

“Will you let go?” cried Tom, more huskily than ever, but with his eyes blazing.

“No,” cried Pete, grinning, and giving his imaginary victim a tremendous shake.

The last wreath of Tom’s philanthropic mist had evaporated.

Click—Clack!

It was the only way in which he could use his fists from the manner in which he was being held; so Tom struck sharply upwards, his blows taking effect upon Pete’s lower jaw, and jerking his head sharply, making him loose his hold and stagger back, to go down in a sitting position amongst the furze.

He did not stay there a moment, but rebounded as quickly as if he had been bumped down violently upon a spring bed.

There the comparison ends, for Pete uttered a yell of agony and rage, which made him rush again at the lad, grinning like a dog, and meaning to take a savage revenge. But to his astonishment Tom did not attempt to run away. He flew to meet him, when there was a sharp encounter, heavy blows were delivered on either side, and Pete went down, but this time on the grass.

He was up again directly, clinging still to the belief that his adversary was horribly afraid, and merely fighting in desperation; and once more he rushed at Tom, who was quite ready to rush at him.

And then for fully ten minutes there was a succession of desperate encounters. They were not in the slightest degree scientific; they were not what people call rounds, and there was no squaring, for everything was of the most singular description: arms flew about like windmill sails; fists came in contact with fists, arms, heads, faces, chests, and at times—in a curly or semi-circular kind of blow—with backs and shoulders. Now they were up, now they were down; then up again to close, hitting, wrestling, and going down to continue the hitting on the ground. Sometimes Tom was undermost, sometimes Pete occupied that position.

And so the fight went on desperately for the above-named ten minutes, at the end of which time they went down together with a heavy thud, after Pete had run in with his head down like a ram, receiving a couple of heavy cracks, but succeeding in gripping Tom about the waist, and trying to lift and throw him.

But the long, big, loose-jointed fellow had miscalculated his strength. Far stronger than Tom at the commencement, his powers had soon begun to fail, while, though panting heavily, thickset, sturdy, bulldog like Tom had plenty of force left in him still, the result being that Pete’s effort to lift and throw him proved a failure, ending in a dexterous wrench throwing him off his balance, and another sending him down with his adversary upon his chest.

The next minute Tom had extricated himself, Pete’s clutch giving way easily; a leg was dragged out from beneath him, and Tom sat panting on the grass, ready to spring up if Pete made a movement.

But there was none of an inimical nature, for Pete was completely beaten, and lay upon his back wagging his head from side to side, and drawing up and straightening his legs slowly, as if he were a frog swimming upside down.

Then he began to howl, with the tears streaming out of his eyes; but for the time being Tom was still too hot, and there was too much of the natural desire in him to injure his adversary for him to feel any compassion.

“Do you give in?” he shouted.

“Oh—oh—oh!” yelled Pete, in a hoarse, doleful mingling of cry and word. “Yer’ve killed me! yer’ve killed me!”

“Dead people can’t talk,” cried Tom tauntingly. “Serve you right if I had.”

Probably this was a bit of hectoring, and not the real feeling, consequent upon the great state of exaltation to which the fight had raised him.

“Yer’ve killed me, yer great coward; yer’ve killed me!” wailed Pete again, excitement having probably acted upon his eyes after the fashion attributed to a horse’s, which are said to magnify largely, and made Tom seem unusually big.

“Coward, am I?” cried Tom, rising. “You get up, and I’ll show you.”

“Ow—ow—ow! Help! help!”

“Get up,” said Tom, giving his adversary a thrust with his foot, and another and another, feeling a kind of fierce satisfaction in so doing, for every thrust brought forth a howl.

“Will you get up?” cried Tom.

“I carn’t; yer’ve broke my ribs and killed me—yer coward.”

It could not have been after all any magnification of Pete’s eyes that caused him to say this, for Tom now saw, that where the malicious-looking orbs had been which looked at him so triumphantly a short time before, there were two tight-looking slits, from which the great tears were squeezing themselves out, as the humbled tyrant went on blubbering like a boy of eight or nine.

Tom drew back from his adversary, for the war-fire which Pete had lit in him was nearly burned out, and his regular nature was coming back to smooth over the volcanic outburst which had transformed him for the time being.

“Hope I don’t look like that,” was his first thought, as he gazed down at Pete’s face as if it were a newly-silvered mirror, and in it saw a reflection of his own. But as he looked it was dimly, and he felt that his eyes must be all swollen up, his lips cut against his teeth, his cheeks puffy, and his nose—

“Ugh!” ejaculated Tom; “how disgusting!”

He put up his hands to his face as the above thought came into his head, and then shuddered with dismay.

There was no mistake about it, for he knew that if anything he was in a worse plight than the blubbering young ruffian before him. His hands, too: not only were they sadly smeared and stained, but the skin was off his knuckles, and now, as if all at once, he began to tingle, smart, and ache all over, while a horrible feeling of repentance came over him, and regret for what had happened.

“What a brute I must look!” he thought; and then, “How terribly I have knocked him about!”

Then with the feelings of regret and compunction, he began to wonder whether Pete was seriously hurt.

“Can’t be,” he thought the next minute; “he makes too much noise,” and he recalled the howlings when the explosion took place at the mill.

“He’s thoroughly beaten,” Tom said to himself, as he dabbed his bleeding face and knuckles, growing more sore and stiff minute by minute.

“This is a rum way of trying to make friends, and to improve him,” he thought dismally, as he went on. “Oh dear, what a mess I’m in!”

Just then so dismally prolonged a howl came from Pete, that, without looking round, Tom cried angrily in his pain—

“Don’t make that row; I’m as bad as you. Come: get up.”

He turned then to enforce his order with a little stirring up with his foot, but a sharp snarl made him start back in wonder, for there, after creeping quietly up among the furze, was Pete’s thin cur seated upon his master’s chest, and ready to defend him now against any one’s approach.

“Well done, dog!” thought Tom. “I never liked you before. Here then, old fellow,” he cried aloud, as he thought of the way in which the master used the dog, brutally as a rule. “I’m not going to hurt him. Let’s get him to sit up.”

But the dog barked fiercely as it rose on four legs, and showed its teeth, while Tom pressed a hand over one eye, tried to keep the other open, and burst out laughing at the sight before him.

“Oh dear! I mustn’t laugh, it hurts so,” he cried; and then he laughed again. For there was Pete’s distorted comically swollen face in the bright sunshine, and in front of it the dog’s, puffed up in the most extraordinary one-sided manner, making the head look like some fancy sketch of a horrible monster drawn by an artist in fun.

“It must be from the adder’s bite,” thought Tom, as a feeling of compassion was extended now to the dog, who, in spite of his menaces, looked giddy and half stupefied.

“Here, are you going to lie howling there all day?” cried Tom.

“Ow—ow—ow! I want a doctor,” groaned the lad; and he threw out his arms and legs again, nearly dislodging the dog from his chest.

“No, you don’t,” cried Tom. “Here then, old fellow, let’s look at your nose,” he said softly, as he advanced closer, and the dog snarled again, but not so fiercely.

“Get out! I don’t want to hurt you,” said Tom gently. “Let’s have a look at your nose then.”

The dog looked up at him with one eye,—the other was completely shut,—and Tom put his hand closer. Then the poor animal uttered a faint howl, not unlike his master’s; and as Tom touched the swollen side of its head, it leaned it heavily in his hand, and whined softly, looking up piteously the while.

“Poor old chap then!” said Tom, forgetting his own sufferings as the dog stepped slowly off its master’s chest, staggered, and then leaned up against the friendly legs so near, drooping head and tail the while.

“Here, Pete,” cried Tom excitedly, “your dog’s dying.”

"Eh?" cried Pete, sitting up suddenly, and looking very like the poor brute as he managed to open one eye.

"That adder bit him. Look at his swollen head."

"So it has," said Pete. "Come here, young un!"

But the dog did not stir.

"Where's there some water?" said Tom.

"Down by the ford," replied Pete, quietly enough now.

"People would see us there. Is there none nearer?"

"There's some in the frog pond," replied Pete.

"Stop a minute; I know," said Tom. "Ah, poor old chap, then!" he cried excitedly, for the dog suddenly gave a lurch and fell upon its side.

"I say," cried Pete wildly, as he rose to his knees, and caught hold of one of the forelegs; "he arn't going to croak, is he?"

"I don't know; I'm afraid so. But look here, the adder's bite was poison; wouldn't it do good to let some of the poison out?"

"Does good if you've got a thorn in your foot," said Pete, who seemed to have forgotten all about his broken ribs, and the fact that he was dying.

"Shall I open the place with my sharp penknife?"

"Couldn't do no harm."

Tom hesitated a moment, and took hold of the dog's muzzle, when the poor brute whined softly, looked at him with its half-closed eyes, and made a feeble effort to lick his hand.

Tom hesitated no longer. He opened the keen blade of his penknife, raised the dog's head upon his knee, and examined a whitish spot terribly swollen round, upon the dog's black nose.

"Mind he don't bite yer," said Pete, in a tone full of caution.

Tom looked at him sharply. "He has got some good in him after all," he thought.

"That's where the adder bit him," continued Pete. "I was bit once in the leg, and my! it was bad for days. Mind—he'll bite."

"No, he won't," said Tom firmly. "Poor old fellow, then. It's to do it good."

As he spoke he thrust the knife point right into the centre of the white patch, fully half an inch; and the dog, utterly stupefied by the poison, or else from some misty knowledge that it was being helped, hardly winced, but lay with one eye open, looking up at Tom, who laid the head down upon the grass. For a few moments there was nothing to see but the little gaping cut. Then a tiny drop of black blood appeared, then very slowly another, and soon after a little thread of discoloured blood trickled gently away.

"He's a-goin' to croak," said Pete hoarsely, and he looked in an agonised way at Tom.

"I hope not. That may do him good."

"But oughtn't you to tie it up with a handkychy?"

"No; that must be better out of him. I say, look here—can't you carry him to that hole of yours under the fir-trees?"

Pete looked at him sharply.

"Well, I know where it is," said Tom. "If you lay him down there, out of the sun, perhaps he'll get better."

Pete nodded, and passing his hands under the dog, lifted it in his arms, to begin tramping through the furze-bushes toward the distant pines, from which he had seen and stalked Tom not so long before.

"Shall I come with you?" said Tom.

"If yer like," was the reply, and Tom followed; and when after a time Pete stopped to rest, he relieved him, and carried the dog for some distance, holding it too when the pit was reached, and Pete lowered himself down to take it, and creep in with it to place it on his fir-needle bed.

Tom followed, and the two lads knelt there in the semi-darkness looking at the patient, which lay for some minutes just as it had been placed.

"He is a-going to croak," said Pete suddenly, for the door gave a feeble whine, and then stretched itself out.

"No, he isn't—he's going to sleep," said Tom, for the dog yawned, and then curled itself up tightly, apparently falling into a stupor at once, for it did not stir.

“Perhaps he’ll come round,” said Tom, backing out of the hole. “Now, show me where the nearest water is.”

“It ain’t fur now,” said Pete, following him. “It’s where I gets water to drink;” and starting off for the edge of the fir-wood, Tom followed, feeling puzzled at the change that had come over the scene.

Chapter Thirty Five.

In a few minutes Pete stopped at the edge of a hollow, where, half covered by sedge rushes and bog plantain, there lay a good-sized pool of clear water, down to which Tom made his way, followed by his companion, and after taking a hearty draught, which was wonderfully clear and refreshing, he began to bathe his cuts and bruises, and rid himself of the half-dried blood.

While Tom bathed his face and hands, Pete stood looking on, till suddenly the former raised his head.

“Hulloo! Why don’t you have a wash?” he said sharply.

Pete made no reply, but stepped down to the water’s edge, went upon his knees, and began to bathe his face.

While he was busy Tom rose, and made the best use he could of his pocket-handkerchief by way of a towel, and when he was pretty well dry he went along to where the water lay calm and still in a corner of the pool. Here, by approaching cautiously, he was able to lie down upon his chest, and gaze into what formed as good a looking-glass as was ever owned by his savage ancestors.

The sight the boy saw was startling.

“Oh dear!” he half groaned; “what will Mrs Fidler say—and uncle?”

He stood up thinking for a few minutes, watching Pete, who kept on dipping his hands into the cool water, and holding them full up to his burning face; and as Tom looked, and thought that there was no one to call the rough lad to account, he appeared to be seeing everything about him with wonderful clearness—there were the long shadows of the pines cast across the pool with streaks of golden sunshine, in which the silver water buttercups, with their two kinds of leaves, lay thick above and below the surface; along by the edge were the branched bur-reeds, with their round spiked stars of seed-vessels; close by the pinky flowering rush was growing, and in the shallows the water soldier thrust up stiffly its many heads. And all the time splash—splash—splash—there was the faint sound of the water as Pete scooped it up, and bathed his battered face.

The scene was very beautiful and attracted Tom; but there were dark shadows in his mind beckoning him away—to wit, his uncle and Mrs Fidler, ready to ask him why he was in such a plight.

“It’s like taking one of the old lady’s doses of medicine,” he said to himself at last. “I’d better toss it off and get it over, so here goes.”

He walked back round the edge of the pool, and Pete must have heard him coming, but all the sign he made was to thrust one wet hand into his pocket and go on bathing himself with the other.

Tom looked on in silence for a few moments.

“I’m going now,” he said.

Pete went on splashing, and Tom hesitated.

Then—

“Face hurt much?”

Pete gave a duck with his head which was meant for an assent, and continued splashing.

“So does mine,” said Tom suddenly, “and I ache all over.”

There was another pause.

“I say!”

Pete held his head still, but did not turn round, keeping his face within a few inches of the water.

“It was all your fault: I didn’t want to fight.”

Pete began splashing again.

“I’m going home now; I shall come and see how the dog is to-morrow.”

The only sign made by Pete was to take his left hand from his pocket, and hold it as far behind him as he could reach, with something held between his finger and thumb.

Tom stared, for it was the sixpence he had given him before the fight.

“I don’t want it,” said Tom; and he turned away, plunged in among the fir-trees, and as soon as he was in shelter looked back, to see that Pete was still bending over the water and holding the coin out behind him.

“Oh, I do wish it was dark,” thought Tom, “so that I could get in without being seen. It’ll be weeks before my face is

quite well again. And I wanted to be friendly too. All my blackberries and mushrooms gone. Oh, how my head aches; just as if I'd been knocking it against a wall."

By this time he had reached the far edge of the pine-wood, and stepped down into the lane, to begin walking fast with his head hanging, and a feeling of depression and misery making him long for the peace of his own little room.

But still his brain kept on actively at work, forming little pictures of the events of the afternoon, while his thoughts in his mental musings took the form of short, terse sentences.

"I hate fighting.—That's making friends with him.—He'll always hate me now.—Mr Maxted's all wrong.—But Pete does love his dog.—How queer about that sixpence."

"Good-afternoon, Tom."

The boy stopped short with his heart beating, to find Mr Maxted seated upon a stump in the side of the fir-wood, evidently enjoying the glorious sunset tints spreading from the horizon nearly to the zenith.

"I—I didn't see you, sir," faltered Tom.

"Of course you did not, or you wouldn't have gone by. What a lovely sunset! Why, my good lad, whatever have you been doing?"

The Vicar rose from his seat and came forward, giving the boy a startled look.

"Your face is horribly bruised, and—did you fall from some tree? My dear lad, it's terrible—just as if you had been fighting."

"I have," said Tom bluntly, as he stood with his head erect, but his nearly-closed eyes fixed upon the ground.

"But there's no one to fight with here?"

"Yes—Pete Warboys."

"Bless my heart!" exclaimed the Vicar, laying his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "But tell me, did he assault you?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"But—er—er—did you hit him back?"

"Oh yes, sir," said Tom, with more animation now; "we had a regular set-to."

The Vicar coughed, and keeping his hand upon his companion's shoulder, he walked on by his side in silence for a few minutes. Then, after another cough—

"Of, course I cannot approve of fighting, Tom; but—er—he beat you then—well?"

"Oh no, sir," said Tom, flushing a little. "I beat. He lay down at last and cried."

"Humph!" ejaculated the Vicar. "Tell me how it began."

With wonderful clearness Tom related the whole adventure, and growing more animated as he went on, he finished by saying—

"It all came out of what you said, sir. I thought if Pete had some good in him, I'd try and help bring it out by being a little friendly; but I regularly failed, and uncle will be horribly cross with me for getting in such a state."

"Nothing of the kind," said the Vicar decisively. "I know your uncle better than you do, sir, and I can answer for what he will say. But you see, Tom, I was quite right about the lad."

"No, sir, I don't," replied Tom sharply. "Look at my face and hands."

"Oh yes, they do show wounds of the warpath, Tom; but they were received in a grand cause. I knew there was good in the lad, and you have done a deal to bring it out."

"I don't see much good yet, sir," said Tom, rather sulkily, for he was in a great deal of pain.

"Perhaps not," said the Vicar, "but I do. It seems to me that by accident you have gone the right way to work to make a change in Pete Warboys. You have evidently made him respect you, by showing him that you were the better man."

By this time they were getting pretty close to Heatherleigh, and the Vicar gave Tom's arm a grip.

"I'm afraid I shall not see you at church next Sunday, Tom," he said, with a smile.

"Are you going to be away, sir?" said Tom wonderingly.

"No: but you are."

"I?" cried the boy. "Why?"

"Go up into your bedroom, have a good bathe at your face, and then look in the glass. That will tell you why."

The Vicar walked away, and Tom slipped in quietly without being seen, hurried up to his room, and reversed the advice he had received; for instead of bathing himself first he walked straight to the glass, gave one long look, and turned away in despair, for his face looked far worse than it had done in the clear water.

"What will uncle say?" groaned Tom; and he forgot Mrs Fidler, who came up to his door to see if he had returned, and receiving no answer to her knock, she walked in, and then said a good deal, but it was while working hard to alleviate the boy's pain.

In the midst of it all Uncle Richard came home.

"Now for it," said Tom bitterly. "What will he say?"

He soon heard, and when he did, there was a singular choky feeling in his throat. For Uncle Richard called up the stairs—

"Feel well enough to come down, Tom? Never mind your looks."

He went down, still expecting a severe rating, but instead of meeting an angry face there was a very merry one, for he was saluted by a roar of laughter.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Uncle Richard. "You're a nice ornament for the home of a simple country gentleman. But Mr Maxted says you gave him a thorough thrashing. Did you? Here, let's look at your knuckles."

Tom slowly held out his hands.

"Oh yes," said his uncle, nodding. "There's no mistake about that. And so you are going to make a model boy of Pete Warboys, eh?"

"I thought I'd try, uncle," said Tom bitterly.

"Oh, well, go on boy, go on. You must have beaten the clay quite soft. When are you going to put it in the new mould?"

"I don't know, uncle," said Tom. "I expect the next thing will be that Pete will half kill me."

Chapter Thirty Six.

Tom saw very little more of Pete Warboys. He had slipped away to the fir-wood, and escaping all observation, went straight to the cave; but there was neither boy nor dog, and he left disappointed.

Three days passed, and he did not go out, feeling perfectly unfit to be seen.

Then he began to grow uneasy, and wondered whether Pete was ill from the beating he had received, and the dog dead.

But the time went on, and he heard that Pete had gone away. David had told Mrs Fidler, and she bore the news to Tom.

"And it's a great blessing, my dear," she said, "for he was a very bad, wicked boy, and I don't know what he didn't deserve for beating you so dreadfully."

"Oh, but he was as bad, or worse," said Tom.

"He couldn't have been, my dear. Look at your poor face even now."

"No. Bother! I don't want to look at my face for ever so long yet," replied Tom. "Perhaps it's a good job though that he has gone."

Then the winter came, with glorious, clear, starry nights, when the cold was forgotten, and Tom had his share of feasting upon the wonders of the heavens with the small telescope. Now it would be an hour with the great Nebula in Orion, then one with the wondrous Ring Nebula. Another night would be devoted to the double, triple, and quadruple stars, those which, though single to the naked eye, when viewed by the help of the glass showed that they were two, three, or four, perfectly separate. Then the various colours were studied, and diamond-like Sirius was viewed, as well as his ruby, topaz, sapphire, and emerald companions in the great sphere. The moon was journeyed over at every opportunity, with her silvery, pumice-like craters, and greyish-bottomed ring-plains, surrounded by their mighty walls of twelve to seventeen thousand feet in height. Tycho and Copernicus, with their long silvery rays; brilliant Aristarchus; dark, deep Plato; the straight valley, the so-called seas, the smooth, round, smaller craters, isolated Pico, the ridges, and the wildly-rugged battlements upon the terminator—all were scanned in turn, with Tom's thirst increasing every time he looked.

For there was always something new to see, as well as plenty of surprises, when some meteor suddenly shot across the field of the telescope. But Uncle Richard said—

"Wait till we get the big one done!"

Saturn became a favourite object with Tom, who was never weary of gazing at the bright ring of light spread around the planet, which he could almost fancy he saw spinning as it glided across the field of the glass. Jupiter and his four moons, the former dull and scored with rings, the latter brilliant specks, had their turn; and soon books, which he had before looked upon as tedious and dry, became of intense interest; but Uncle Richard said that they must have a more perfect plane mirror.

Then came a bright wintry day, when Tom was out having a brisk run, and to his surprise he came upon Pete Warboys, who made a rush into the woods and disappeared, leaving his dog behind.

"Then he has come back," said Tom to himself; and he stared at the dog, which stood looking at him—and the whole scene of the fight, and then the surgical operation upon the dog's nose, came back.

"Then you did get well again, old chap," said Tom sharply.

That was enough: the dog rushed forward, barking loudly, danced round him, and then bounded up the bank leading into the wood, where it turned to stand wagging its long thin tail, whisked round again, after giving another bark, and then bounded after its master.

"Come, I've made friends with him," said Tom, "anyhow." And though disappointed by Pete's return after a long stay with some gipsy-like relatives of his grandmother, he could not help feeling glad that the dog displayed some gratitude for what had been done.

"Pete Warboys has come back, David," cried Tom, hurrying down the garden as soon as he had ended his walk.

"Yes, bad luck to him, sir. I was going to tell you. I heared of it 'bout an hour ago. Been a-gipsying, I expect, with some of their people, who've got a door-mat van, and goes about with a screwy old horse. We shall be having some nice games again."

"Not after the fruit, David."

"Well, no, sir, 'cause there arn't none. It'll be eggs and chickens, and the keepers round about 'll know my gentleman's here. Say, Master Tom?"

"Yes."

"Thought you was going to make a noo chap of him?"

"How could I when he wasn't here?"

"No, course not; but your time's come now, sir. What you've got to do is to sarve him as you do your specklums. You grind him down—there's plenty on him—and then polish him into a fresh sort of boy."

The gardener leaned upon his spade and chuckled.

"Ah, you may laugh, David," said Tom; "but he might have been a decent lad if he had had a chance."

"Not he, sir. Mr Maxted tried, but it was the wrong stuff. Look here, sir, when you makes a noo specklum, what do you do it of?"

"Glass, of course."

"Yes, sir, clear glass without any bubbles in it. You don't take a bit of rough burnt clay; you couldn't polish that. He's the wrong stuff, sir. Nobody couldn't make nothing o' him but a drill-serjeant, and he won't try, because Pete's too ugly and okkard even to be food for powder and shot."

"I don't know," said Tom, as he thought of the scene with the dog.

"And I do, sir. You mark my words—now Pete's back there's going to be games."

But the days glided by; and Tom had so much to think of that he saw nothing of Pete Warboys' games, and he could hardly believe it possible when summer came again.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

"From your cousin," said Uncle Richard, opening one of his letters, his face gradually growing very stern and troubled as he read; while as he finished and raised his eyes, he found that Tom was watching him intently.

"Sad news, Tom," said his uncle, in a low, grave voice. "My brother has been better, but he has during the past week had a fresh attack, and is very bad."

"I am very sorry, uncle," said Tom frankly.

"Yes, you would be, Tom, as it is serious."

Uncle Richard paused, looking very hard at his nephew. Then quietly—

"You did not get on very well with your uncle."

"No; I was too stupid, and it made him angry, uncle."

"Humph! Well, Tom, by-gones must of course be by-gones. Your cousin has written this letter at his father's dictation, and here is a postscript.

"'Father seems to be very dangerously ill, and the doctor says that he must have something upon his mind.'"

"Is it that he thinks he is more ill than he really is?" said Tom quietly; but his uncle looked up from the letter so

sharply and sternly that the boy changed countenance.

“The letter does not suggest that, Tom,” said Uncle Richard, frowning. “My poor brother—” Uncle Richard paused for a moment or two—“wishes to see me once again, he says, and—and you, my boy, on business of great importance to you and your interests. If I cannot go, he requests that you be sent up to him at once.”

“Poor uncle!” said Tom quietly. “But does he think that I ought to go back to the law, uncle?”

“Perhaps.”

“But I couldn’t, Uncle Richard, I am so stupid. I hate it. Pray, pray don’t think of letting me go. I am so happy here.”

Uncle Richard’s face relaxed a little.

“Perhaps he doesn’t mean that. He had to do with your poor father’s affairs. It may be some business connected with them.”

“What could there be, uncle?”

“Ah, that I cannot say. I was abroad at the time of his death.”

“Mother never said anything about them,” said Tom.

“Well, you must go up and see him at once.”

“Of course, uncle.”

“And I shall go with you, my boy. I hope he really is not so bad.”

“I hope he is not,” said Tom. “How soon shall you go, uncle?”

“In half-an-hour. If we sent for a fly we could only catch the one o’clock train; if we walk over to the station we can catch that at eleven. Shall we walk?”

“Yes, uncle. I’ll change my things, and be ready as soon as you.”

That afternoon they reached Mornington Crescent, to find straw laid thickly down in front of the house, and a strange feeling of depression came over Tom as they entered the silent room, to be received by his aunt, who looked white and anxious.

“I am so glad you have come, Richard,” she said eagerly. “James has been asking for you and Tom so many times.”

Just then a bell rang.

“That’s his bell to know if it is you,” said Aunt Fanny; and she hurried up-stairs, to return in a few minutes.

“Come up at once,” she said; “you first, Richard;” and she led the way up-stairs, leaving Tom seated in the drawing-room, looking about at the familiar objects, and growing more and more low-spirited, as they recalled many an unhappy hour, and his troubles at the office, and with his cousin Sam.

But he was not left there long. In a few minutes the door re-opened, and his aunt and uncle came in.

“You are to go up, Tom,” said Uncle Richard. “There is something to be communicated to you.”

“Is—is he so very ill, uncle?” said Tom, with a curious sensation of shrinking troubling him.

“He is very ill, my boy. But don’t keep him waiting.”

“Is he in his own room, aunt?” asked Tom.

“Yes, my dear. Pray go softly, he is so weak.”

Tom drew a deep breath, and went up to the next floor, tapped lightly at the bedroom door, and expecting to see a terrible object stretched upon the bed of sickness in a darkened chamber, he entered, and felt quite a shock.

For the room was bright and sunlit, the window open, and his uncle, looking very white and careworn, seated in an easy-chair, dressed, save that he wore a loose dressing-gown.

“Ah, Tom,” he said, holding out a thin hand, “at last—at last.”

Tom took the hand extended to him, and felt it clutch his tightly.

“I’m so sorry to see you so ill, uncle,” he said.

“Yes, yes, of course, boy; but don’t waste time. Let me get it over—before it is too late.”

“You wanted to see me about business, uncle?”

“Yes,” said Uncle James, with a groan; “terrible business. Ah, Tom, my boy. But stop, go to the door, and see that no one is listening.”

Tom obeyed, opening and closing the door.

"No, uncle, there is no one there."

"Turn the key, my boy, turn the key."

Tom obeyed, wondering more and more, as he returned to his uncle's side.

"Now, quick," said the sick man; "go to that cupboard, and bring out that tin box."

He did as he was told, and brought out an ordinary deed-box, which at a sign he placed upon a chair by his uncle's side.

"Can I do anything else, uncle?"

"Yes, boy," cried the sick man, "and it is my last request. Tom, I've been a wicked wretch to you, and I want you to forgive me before I die."

Tom smiled.

"Of course, uncle," he said quietly, as a feeling of pity for the wreck before him filled his breast, "I suppose I was very stupid, and made you cross."

"He does not know, he does not know," groaned James Brandon, as he clung to the boy's hand, "and I must tell him. Tom, my boy, it was a sore temptation, and I did not resist it. I robbed you, my boy, dreadfully. Here, take these, it is to make amends: deeds of some property, my boy, and the mortgage of some money I have lent—nearly five thousand pounds, my boy, and all yours by rights."

"Mine!" cried Tom, startled out of his calmness by the surprise.

"Yes, all yours, my boy. Your poor mother confided it to my care, Tom, for you, and I was tempted, and kept it all back. It was a fraud, Tom, and I am a criminal. I could not die with that on my conscience. Tell me you forgive me, Tom, before it is too late."

Tom gazed at the convulsed face before him with a look of anger which changed into pity, and then to disgust.

"Do you hear me, boy? You must, you shall forgive me. Don't you see I am almost a dying man?"

"My mother trusted that all to you, and you sto—kept it back, uncle," said Tom sternly.

"Yes, my boy; yes, my boy. You are quite right—stole it all, robbed you—an orphan. But I'm punished, Tom. I haven't had a happy hour since; and you see these—these deeds in the strong cloth-lined envelope, tied up with green silk—it is all yours, my boy. Take it and keep it till you come of age, and then it is yours to do with as you like. But tell me you forgive me."

Tom was silent, and his uncle groaned.

"Am I to go down on my knees to you?" he cried.

"No, uncle," said Tom sadly; "and I forgive you."

"Ah!" cried the wretched man, "at last—at last!" and he burst out into an hysterical fit of sobbing, which was painful in the extreme to the listener, as he stood gazing down, with the great envelope in his hand, at the broken, wretched man before him, till the invalid looked up sharply.

"Put it away—in your jacket, boy, and never let me see it again. Give it to your uncle to take care of for you till you come of age. I shall be dead and gone then, Tom; but you will have forgiven me, and I shall be at rest."

Tom said nothing, for his head was in a whirl, but he quietly buttoned up the packet in his breast.

"Have you told Uncle Richard, sir?" he said, at last.

"Told him? No, no one but you, boy."

"I must tell him, sir."

"Yes, but not here—not till you get home. Leave me now; I can bear no more. Go down and send up your aunt. I must take something—and sleep. I have had no rest for nights and nights, and I thought I should die before I had time to confess to you, Tom. But you forgive me, my boy—you forgive me?"

"Yes, uncle, once again I forgive you."

"Now go," cried the invalid, catching at and kissing the boy's cold hand. "Don't stop here; go back home, for fear, Tom."

"For fear of what, uncle? you are not so bad as that."

"For fear," panted the sick man, with a strange cough, "for fear I should try to get them back. Quick! go.—Now I can sleep and rest."

Tom went down, looking very strange, and found his aunt waiting anxiously.

“He is better, aunt,” said Tom quietly. “You are to go up to him at once.”

Aunt Fanny almost ran out of the room, and as soon as they were alone Tom turned to his uncle.

“We are to go back home directly,” he said.

“What, with him so bad! What about your business?”

“It is all done, uncle; and I am to take you back home, and tell you there.”

“Pish! why so much mystery, Tom?”

“It is Uncle James’s wish, Uncle Richard,” said Tom gravely.

“It was business then?”

“Very important.”

“And we are to go?”

“Yes, at once. I want to go too, uncle, for I feel as if I could not breathe here. Don’t speak to me; don’t ask me anything till we get back, and then I’ll tell you all.”

“This is a strange business, Tom,” said Uncle Richard, “but it is his wish then. Well, we will go.”

That night Tom sat in his uncle’s study, and told of his interview with the sick man, while his hearer slowly turned his head more and more away, till the little narrative was at an end. Once, as he spoke, Tom heard the words muttered—

“A scoundrel! My own brother too.”

Then Uncle Richard was very silent, and his face was pale and strange, as he took the packet from his nephew’s hand.

“He must have been half mad, my boy,” he said huskily, “or he would not have done this thing. This must be our secret, Tom—a family secret, never mentioned for all our sakes. We’ll put the deeds in the old bureau to-morrow, and try and forget it all till the proper time comes. There, I’m better now. Glad too, very glad, Tom. First that he repented of the wrong-doing, and glad that you are so independent, my boy. It was always a puzzle to me that your poor mother should have left you so badly off. I said nothing, for I thought she must have foolishly frittered away what should have been yours.”

“I wish I had never known this, uncle,” said Tom bitterly.

“Why, my boy? it is best you should. I am glad your poor, foolish, weak uncle has tried to make amends. The next thing we shall hear will be that, with a load off his mind, he has grown better. Why, Tom, he must have come down here to be near you, and confess the truth. Well, good-night, boy. It has been a trying day—and night. Sleep on it and forget it; but first—”

He held the boy’s hand in his for a few moments, and his voice was very husky when he spoke again.

“A family secret, Tom. Your uncle—my own brother. We must not judge the tempted. Good-night; and when alone by your bedside—‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.’ Good-night.”

Uncle Richard led the way to the door, opened it, and half thrust him without.

Tom stood for a few moments in the dark hall, and then went slowly up to his room.

The next minute he had run down again, to silently enter the study, and find Uncle Richard seated with his face buried in his hands, and his breast heaving with the terrible emotion from which he suffered.

“Uncle.”

“Tom.”

The next instant he was clasped to the old man’s breast, and held tightly there.

For some minutes not a word more was said; then both rose, as if a great weight had been lifted away.

“Good-night, Tom.”

“Good-night, uncle.”

And those two were closer together in heart than they had ever before been, since Heatherleigh had become Tom Blount’s home.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

Uncle Richard made no further reference to the past day’s business, but Tom noticed that he looked very serious and dejected. He caught him gazing too in a peculiar way, and upon their eyes meeting Tom saw his uncle draw himself up rather stiffly, as if he were saying to himself—“Well, it was not my fault—my honour is not smirched.”

Tom felt that his uncle must have some such thought as this, and exerted himself to make him see that this sad business had only drawn them closer together.

The plan of turning the laboratory into more of a study had been gradually working, and that morning, after their return from town, a couple of book-cases were moved up, with a carpet and chairs, making the circular room look cosy.

“Yes,” said Uncle Richard, as they looked round that evening; “the place looks quite snug, Tom. My old study was just right for one; but when it was invaded by a great rough boy like you there was not room to move. This will do capitally; you can take possession of some of the shelves for your specimens that you collect, and we can make it a museum as well.”

“You won’t mind, uncle, if I do bring things up here?”

“I shall mind if you do not, boy. This is our room, mind, where we can be quite independent, and make it as littery as we like without being called to account by Mrs Fidler every time there is a mess.”

As he spoke Uncle Richard unlocked the old walnut bureau, and took the large envelope from his breast—the document which Tom had handed to him over-night being within.

“Your papers, Tom,” he said, rather huskily. “They will be as safe here as in my room; I will put them with these leases and things. Of course you can have my keys if you wish to see them.”

“I don’t want to see them, uncle,” said Tom quietly.

“Not to-day perhaps, but you will, my boy. Some day we will go over the matter together; we neither of us want to talk about it now.”

“No, uncle, of course not.”

Uncle Richard placed the big envelope in the drawer and locked it up, placing the keys in his pocket; but directly after he took them out again, and opened the drawer in which lay several other legal-looking documents in cartridge envelopes.

“Get me one of those very large cartridge envelopes, Tom, out of the stationery drawer,” he said; and this being fetched from the table-drawer, the important deeds were slipped in, fastened down, and the envelope afterwards tied round in the most business-like way with red tape. After which a wax-match was lit, and the ends of the tape covered with sealing-wax, and stamped with an old signet-ring.

“There, my boy, we’ll leave it for the present. Some day I will go and see my solicitor about the matter.”

Tom uttered a sigh of relief as the documents were locked up, for the sight of them troubled him. He felt in a way that he could not have explained, as if he were in some way answerable for the shame which had come upon their family, and that it was causing something like restraint between him and his uncle, who evidently was cruelly chagrined by his brother’s conduct.

“I shan’t be in any hurry to have them brought out again,” thought Tom; and as Uncle Richard placed the keys in his pocket, Tom began hurriedly to talk about the speculum.

“How long will it be before we are able to—to what you may call it?”

“Mount it?” said Uncle Richard, smiling sadly.

“Yes, uncle,” cried Tom. “You don’t know how I long to get it right, so that we can have a look at the moon.”

“It will be some time yet, my boy,” replied Uncle Richard with a sigh; and Tom felt startled, for it seemed to him as if the stern, decisive-looking countenance before him had grown older, and the lines in it more deeply-marked.

“Some time, uncle? Why, you said it was as good as finished.”

“Yes, my boy, but duty first and pleasure after. While I have been doing this little bit of business other things have crossed my mind. I shall go up to town again to-morrow.”

“To Uncle James’s?” said Tom, after a pause.

“For one thing, yes. It is painful, my boy, but I feel that I ought to go.”

Tom was silent. He stood there feeling that his uncle was behaving differently to him. For his words were cold and measured, and he did not speak in the light, pleasant way of a couple of days back. At the same time, it was not that there was a division between them, but as if Uncle Richard treated him like one who shared with him a sad secret. He was graver, and there was a confidential tone in his voice which made the boy feel that he had grown older all at once.

“Shall you want me to go with you, uncle?” said Tom at last.

Uncle Richard looked at him intently.

“Do you feel as if you could go, Tom?” he asked.

Tom was silent; and then, as the searching eyes would take no denial, and forced him to speak, the boy cleared his throat from something which seemed to choke him, and spoke out hurriedly.

“Don’t think me queer and awkward, or ungrateful, uncle,” he cried. “I’m ready to forgive Uncle James, but I never did, and never can feel, as if I liked him. I would rather not go and see him, but if you say I ought to I will.”

“I do not say you ought to, Tom,” said his uncle gravely; “but as his brother, I feel that I must now he is so bad.”

“You’re not angry with me, uncle?”

“No, boy. I like the way in which you have spoken out. I could not have stood it, Tom, if you had assumed anything and been hypocritical. There, now, we will leave the subject. I shall go up again to-morrow morning. You can spend your time in doing any little thing to make this place more snug and home-like. I dare say I shall be back to-morrow evening.”

Tom uttered a sigh full of relief as they went back to the cottage, and that night slept soundly enough, never once giving a thought to the documents in the old mill, which had suddenly turned him from a penniless lad into one with a few thousands to start in life when he came of age.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

That next morning when Tom jumped out of bed, he felt light-hearted, and ready for anything. He threw open his window to have a look round, and knew by a low whistling that David had come to work. Then reaching out to have a look at the mill, with his head full of telescope, he stared, for the door was open; and excited by this, and fearing something was wrong, he hurriedly dressed, went down, and found that it only wanted a quarter to eight.

“And I thought it was only about half-past six,” he muttered, as he hurried out and across to the mill.

All was still there, and he looked round, but nothing appeared to have been disturbed; but upon looking up he could see the keys were in the laboratory door, and he paused with his heart beating.

“Pooh!” he muttered to himself, as he drove away the hesitation. “Nobody would be there now.”

He went up the stairs, though softly, as if in doubt, and looked through the ajar door, to see that which made him steal softly down again, for, with a black bag on the front of the old bureau, Uncle Richard was busily writing, evidently getting some business done before he went off to town.

“Morning, Tom,” he said a quarter of an hour later, as he entered the breakfast-room, black bag in hand; “you needn’t have crept down again, I was only doing a little business before breakfast.”

“Then you heard me, uncle?”

“To be sure I did, my lad.—Morning, Mrs Fidler.”

“Good-morning, sir,” said the housekeeper; “and—and I sincerely hope you will find your poor brother better when you get up to town.”

Uncle Richard bowed his head, and the housekeeper went on—

“Don’t you think, sir, if it could anyhow be managed, you ought to try and get him down here again? You know how much better he grew while he was here.”

“Yes,” said Uncle Richard quietly, as he went on with his breakfast.

“And though I’m not clever as a nurse, you know, sir, I’d do anything I could to make him well.”

“I do know it, Mrs Fidler,” said Uncle Richard warmly; “but,” he added, with his face growing more grave, “he will not come down here again.”

Mrs Fidler sighed, and Tom kept his eyes fixed upon his coffee-cup.

The breakfast passed off very silently, and as soon as it was over, Uncle Richard went into the next room, when Mrs Fidler seized upon the opportunity to speak.

“I feel as if I must say it, Master Tom,” she said, in a low tone of voice, “and I know you won’t tell your uncle, but I don’t like Mr James Brandon a bit, and I don’t like his son; but if master will bring him down there’s nothing I won’t do to try and make him well; and I do assure you, Master Tom, that there’s a deal more in good jellies and very strong beef-tea than there is in doctors’ stuff.”

“They’re much nicer,” said Tom, smiling.

“Ah, but it isn’t all that, sir; it’s the strength there is in them. Perhaps master might like me to go up and nurse his brother.”

“No, I’m sure he would not,” said Tom; and just then his uncle returned.

“Going to walk part of the way with me, Tom?” said Uncle Richard.

“I’m going to walk all the way with you, uncle, and carry your bag,” said Tom; and ten minutes later they were on the road, chatting about the telescope, and the next things to be done, so that the long walk to the station was made to seem short. Then the train came steaming in, and Uncle Richard stepped into his compartment.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like me to come, uncle, and tell him I forgive him again?” whispered Tom, as he handed in the little black bag.

“Certain. I’ll give your message. Good-bye.”

The train glided away, and Tom started back for home with his mind busy for a few minutes over the scene at Mornington Crescent; and then thoughts flew on to the mill and into the future, when perhaps some far greater telescope would be mounted, and nights occupied searching the heavens.

Then Tom's thoughts came back to earth, and Pete Warboys' hole under the great pine-tree, and he was still busy over that, and the great gipsy-like boy's habits,—poaching, probably stealing, and making himself a nuisance to everybody,—when he caught sight of the lad himself peering into a patch of coppice evidently watching something, that something proving to be the dog, which soon after leaped out into the road.

Tom's footsteps had been silenced by the soft green turf which margined the way, so that he was close up to the lad before he was noticed, and then Pete gave a bound and shot into the coppice, followed by his dog; but once more the dog turned back to give him a friendly bark.

"After no good, or he wouldn't have rushed away like that," thought Tom, as he went on, reached the cottage feeling very little the worse for his long morning's walk, and meaning to go up and busy himself in the laboratory; but to his surprise Mrs Fidler stopped him.

"Don't go away, Master Tom; it's close to one o'clock, and lunch will be ready. We will have regular dinner at seven, when your uncle comes back."

"If he does come to-night," said Tom.

"Oh, he will, my dear, if he possibly can, you may depend upon it."

The housekeeper was right, for soon after half-past six the station fly brought Uncle Richard back, tired, but looking brighter than when he started.

"How is he?" said Tom anxiously.

"Better, much better. Your aunt says a change came over him soon after we had gone, my boy, and the doctor thinks that he will come round now."

Tom looked very hard in his uncle's eyes, and Uncle Richard looked very hard in his, but neither of them spoke. They each thought the same thing though, and that was, that the doctor had said he had something upon his mind. That something was no longer there, and its removal had achieved what no medical man could have done, and so quickly that it seemed to be like a miracle.

A week passed, and two answers to letters of inquiry came down to Heatherleigh, both saying that Uncle James was improving fast.

Another week, and only one letter came, with the same report.

The next week a short acknowledgment came from Sam, to say that his father was nearly well, and had gone down to Bournemouth for a change.

"I think, Tom, we may as well finish the telescope," said Uncle Richard dryly. "Let's set to work at once."

That same day Mrs Fidler, who had heard the news, seized an opportunity to deliver her opinions to Tom.

"It's just as I thought, sir," she said, "he was never really bad. It was all nerves and fidgetting about himself. He thought he was in a very bad state, and kept on making himself worse and worse, till he believed that he was going to die. It was nothing but nerves."

"It was something else," thought Tom; and what that something was he did not confide to the housekeeper.

"I'm glad he has got well again," he said to himself; "but I hope neither he nor Cousin Sam will come down here."

Chapter Forty.

Time went on at its customary pace, and Uncle Richard had business in London again, where he was detained for some time.

At last there came a letter saying that he would not be back yet, but that he hoped Tom would complete a perfect plane mirror before his return, as he still thought they might do better, and get a truer image of the faint stars; so, forgetting all about Pete Warboys and his dog, Tom worked away as busily as if his uncle were at his elbow.

Then came another letter delaying the return; and in a postscript Uncle Richard wrote that he had called at Gray's Inn, and seen Sam, who said that his father was now nearly well.

"I shall be very, very glad when Uncle Richard gets back again," said Tom that night when he went to his bedroom, and then he began thinking about Pete. He got no further with him, but whenever he saw the dog, the animal always barked and wagged his tail.

"Dog's easier than boy," thought Tom. "Well, I can't help it; I tried to be friends, and I fancied he meant to be now; but I suppose he can't forgive me for the beating. Still, he doesn't shout after me now. How I do long to get on again with telescope work!"

The thought of this made him go to the window, pull up the blind, and throw the casement wide.

He listened for a few moments as he gazed over the dark garden, and then laughed softly, for there was no likelihood, he thought, of any one coming after the apples; then kneeling down so that he could rest his arms upon the

window-sill, and gaze out at the intensely black sky, which was now ablaze with stars shining out with wondrous clearness. Constellation after constellation glittered above his head, with many a great star which he had now learned to know. There was Vega brilliant in the extreme. There too was Altair. The bull's-eye shone out of a deep golden hue; and below it, and more to the south, he made out Sirius glittering in its diamond lustre.

"That's Jupiter too," said Tom to himself; and as his eyes swept on, he could see Venus low-down in the south-west, just passing out of sight.

Gazing on, with his eyes sweeping along the west, he passed Cygnus, with its great triangle, mighty Arcturus, and—

"What's that?"

Tom's question to himself was put not concerning a bright star or planet, but apropos of a noise which came from the direction of the mill.

He listened intently, with his heart beginning to throb, for there was a faint noise as of a step on gravel, and then a faint whispering.

Tom's heart ceased throbbing for a few moments, and then went on again in a way which felt suffocating, as he felt convinced that there was some one in the mill-yard.

He listened for a minute, and then went softly down-stairs to get the keys of the observatory, and go out. But as he took them from the nail in the little hall, he felt that if he opened the door, the shooting of the bolts would alarm Mrs Fidler and the maids, so he stole back to his room, closed the door, listened again at his window, and became sure that some one was in the mill-yard.

"It's Pete Warboys," he said to himself as he listened. "What mischief is he after now?"

It was too dark to make out anything with his eyes; but his ears maintained that something was going on, and a sudden chill of horror and dismay ran through Tom.

"He's going to smash the new speculum out of spite for the thrashing he got," muttered Tom; and nerved now by his indignant excitement, he let himself down from the window, and began to cross the garden without a sound, thinking as he went of the position.

"He couldn't get in at the door," he said, "without a strong crow-bar, and the windows are now all strongly fastened. Perhaps after all it's a mistake."

But all the same there was a feeling troubling Tom which made him determined to thoroughly make sure that no midnight marauder was about, bent upon destroying the piece of optical work which had been made with so much care.

He crept out silently, and across the lane, raised the key to open the yard gate, but replaced it in his pocket, walked a few yards, and, with the intention of not alarming the visitor, softly began to scale the wall, and did the very thing he wished to avoid, for as he passed over the wall on one side of the mill, a dark figure passed over it on the other side, with the difference that as Tom went in the figure went out, and stood peeping over.

Stooping low Tom crept up to the doorway and found it fast, tried one window, the one that had been before opened, and found it quite right. Then going round to the back, he found the other window was in the same condition.

"Nothing wrong," he said to himself, as he went on silently round the mill, looking upwards at the first storey windows, and then he came to a sudden stoppage, having struck against something in his way, and pretty well invisible in the darkness.

Then Tom's heart began to beat again heavily, for his hands, which flew up, were resting upon one side of a long, slight, fruit-gathering ladder—one of those which sprawl out widely at the foot, and run up very narrow at the top, a form which makes them safe from tilting sidewise, and so balanced that they are easy to carry about from place to place.

Tom knew the ladder by the shape: it was the one David borrowed from the next neighbour, against whose long cow-house it always hung on two great pegs, sheltered from the rain by the thick far-projecting thatch.

And now this ladder had been reared up against the mill, and though the top rounds could only be dimly-seen, there they were resting up against the rails of the little gallery, close to the shutter which opened into the roof of the observatory.

"It's Pete," Tom said to himself, as he stood listening, but only to hear the beating of his own heart. Then he took three or four steps up very softly, but stopped short, for all at once there was a gleam of light in the panes of the laboratory window, such as would be produced by any one striking a wax-match.

Tom stepped down again, stood looking up a few moments watching the feeble light, which was little more than would have been produced by the gleaming of the stars, and then an idea occurred to him.

Getting behind the ladder he gave it a push, and it rose upright directly, and he found that he had no difficulty in managing it. Working it to and fro he walked its legs close up to the brick wall, and then placing his hands upon the rounds, lowered it step by step till it lay flat in the yard.

"No running away this time," muttered Tom; and he crept back to the entrance, which he opened softly with the key, entered the workshop, and then closed the door and locked it on the inside, afterwards placing the keys in his pocket, but took them out again, for he remembered, what he had forgotten in his excitement, that since the laboratory had been furnished, it too had been kept locked, so that to get into the chamber where he had seen the gleam of light, he would have to unfasten the door at the top of the flight of steps.

For a brief moment the boy felt nervous, then he was himself again.

“Pete will be in a horrible fright,” he thought; and, creeping up, he softly inserted the key, unlocked this door, and withdrew the key without a sound. Then slowly and silently he pressed down the thumb-latch, the door yielded with a faint creak, and he passed in, to stand listening and looking round.

All was still and very dark, save that he could just make out the shape of the window, and if any one had passed the panes he might have been visible as a black shadow.

For an instant Tom wondered whether he could have been deceived, but the next he knew it was impossible. The light might have been fancy, or a reflection, but there was none about that ladder.

Then his heart seemed to jump into his mouth, for there was a sound overhead. Some one had evidently gone to the opening, stepped into the little gallery, felt for the ladder, found it gone, and concluding that the movable top had swung round, was now hurriedly spinning the wheel and causing the whole of the light wooden dome to revolve.

“Caught,” cried Tom beneath his breath; and, reckless of consequences, he crossed the laboratory, ascended the steps, and dashed across to where the iron wheel was pivoted to the wall.

“It’s no good,” he shouted. “Give up!” and he caught some one by the shoulder; but before he could get a good grip he received a tremendous buffet in the chest, which sent him staggering backward, and ere he could recover himself his adversary had made for the trap-door, and begun to descend as if quite at home in the place.

Tom made after him, but in the darkness he bore too much to his right, and as he corrected his course by touch, he only bent down to descend in time to feel the trap-door brush by him, and fall with a bang, which forced from him a cry, mingled with the shooting of the bolt.

Fortunately as well as unfortunately, the trap-door fell upon Tom’s foot, which was half over the opening, and the bolt shot into vacancy, so that the next minute the boy had dragged it up, descended two or three steps, holding on by the edge of the floor, and then swung himself forward and dropped into the chamber below.

“You stop, or it’ll be the worse for you,” he shouted fiercely, for the pain in his foot had roused him into a fit of passion which drove away everything but the desire to get a good grip of Pete.

There was no reply, no sound, and Tom felt that the scoundrel must be close at hand stooping behind one of the tables or crouching against the wall.

“It’s of no use,” cried Tom fiercely. “You’re caught like a rat in a cage. Do you hear, sir? Give in!”

Creak, *creak*! just as Tom was craning his head forward.

The sound came from below, and with a muttered ejaculation, full of vexation, the boy darted to the head of the steps, and rushed down in the darkness at a break-neck speed, which ended in a big jump on to the stone-floor, from whence he rushed toward the window which made that noise when any one tried to open it—a difficult task with the new hasps to any one who did not understand them.

There was no one by the window, but no doubt about the presence of another in the stone-floored place, for the footsteps had sounded, and as Tom stood ready to spring he could detect a low panting noise.

“Now then!” he cried; “you hear what I say—give up at once.”

There was no reply, and Tom tried to pierce the darkness, and then made a sudden rush in the direction where he thought the visitor must be.

He was not right, but his action betrayed where the fellow was, for he rushed across the place, and sent a thrill through Tom’s breast.

And now a desperate game at blind-man’s-buff commenced, in which he moved cautiously here and there, with his clenched fists extended ready to strike or ward off a blow, which was certain to be aimed at him if he tried to seize the too active enemy.

And as he moved here and there in the cold dark place, he realised how easily one trying to escape could avoid a would-be captor by keeping very still and away from the windows, or by ducking down when passing them. Twice over he touched an arm, once a head, but their owner bounded away with a faint ejaculation at each touch, and the hunt went on round and round the place, till both stopped, listening for the other’s next movements.

There was a long period of painful silence.

“He’s close to the door,” thought Tom at last, for he fancied that the breathing came from there; and moving slowly and almost imperceptibly, he glided nearer, holding himself ready to make a spring at the slightest sound. In this fashion he had half covered the workshop toward the door, and was in the act of bounding forward the rest of the way, when he heard a sound behind him, and the next moment the enemy was rushing up the steps to reach the laboratory again.

“Better than creeping about here in the dark,” thought Tom, as he too rushed for the steps and began to ascend, to have the door banged in his face, and by the time he had reached it and got through, his quarry was at the top of the next flight of steps, and had banged down the trap-door.

Tom was up directly, though, threw the trap over, and sprang panting into the observatory, to stand in the darkness here too, listening and trying to make out where his quarry was lying in wait; and heedless of danger, he did not stop to take a necessary precaution.

Then there came a loud scraping noise from outside, and Tom sprang towards the open shutter, convinced that his quarry had climbed out into the tiny gallery; but at the same moment he came heavily in contact with some one, and was taken so unexpectedly, that at the end of a brief struggle here and there upon the floor Tom uttered a cry, for he stepped suddenly down over the edge of the trap-way, completely losing his balance as his foot was checked on a stair eighteen

inches below, and he fell heavily, bumping down all of a heap to the lower floor, where he lay half-stunned, listening to the banging down of the trap once more, and feeling stupid and confused as he gathered himself up, and again ascended the steps, to thrust open the door with hands and head.

This time as he passed through he closed the trap after him, and stood dizzy and panting, knowing that he was hurt, but unable to tell how much.

A sound that he heard cleared his head the next moment, for it sent a thrill of excitement through him which told him he could not be very bad, and he stepped quickly to the open shutter and began to get through.

For the sound he heard was the rap of the top of the ladder against the little gallery rails; and as he crept out and into the little wooden construction, he felt for and touched the end of the ladder, which was quivering as if some one was going down.

There was no dizziness in Tom’s brain now. The enemy was just below and escaping.

Passing one leg over the rail, Tom planted a foot safely as he held on, then the other, and began to descend as rapidly as he could, feeling the ladder quiver more and more, and then hearing as he was half-way down a whisper. Then he felt a jerk, one side of the slight implement was wrenched over sidewise, and the top glided from the gallery. The next moment he was falling as he clung, and before he had time to think, he and the ladder came to the ground with a crash.

Chapter Forty One.

Tom was some ten feet or so from the ground when he described an arc in the darkness, so that it was not a very serious fall, but bad enough to knock the sense out of him for a moment or two, and the worse from its coming so closely upon his bumping down the upper steps. Consequently he lay quite still with the ladder upon him for a while, with a dim idea that he could hear whispering, scrambling, and then the patter of steps somewhere not far away.

Those footsteps were still to be heard when the boy thrust the ladder over, rose very slowly to a sitting position, and tried to look round him, seeing more stars than he had when he knelt at his bedroom window, these too having a peculiar circling motion of their own, which made his head ache violently.

“He’s got the best of me again,” said the boy rather piteously, “for it’s no good to go after him now.”

Tom had the organ of order sufficiently developed to make him wish to pick up and return the ladder instead of leaving it lying in the yard; but he felt shaken up, and the feeling of confusion came upon him again so strongly that he stood thinking for a few minutes, and then went and unlocked the gate, listened a while, and then locked it after him and crossed the lane into the garden.

The next minute he was under his bedroom window, feeling unwilling to climb up, for he was getting cold and stiff; but he dragged himself on to the sill, got in, and without stopping to undress, threw himself on the bed and fell into a sound sleep, in which he dreamed that two policemen came down from London with the big black prison van and carried off Pete Warboys, who was taken to the Old Bailey to be tried for stealing the round wooden dome-shaped structure which formed the top of the mill.

He was awakened next morning soon after six by the pattering at his window of some scraps of fine gravel, and jumping off the bed he found David below on the lawn.

“Here, look sharp and come down, Master Tom,” cried the gardener excitedly.

“What’s the matter?” said Tom, whose mind was rather blank as to the past night’s business.

“Some ’un’s been in the night and stole the tallowscoop.”

“Nonsense!”

“But they have, sir. It’s as fact as fack. There’s the top wooden window open, and Jellard’s long fruit-ladder lying in the yard.”

Tom hurried down at once, to find the ladder just as he had left it; and on entering the mill, closely followed by David, he looked round for traces of the burglarious work that must have been done.

But all was in its ordinary state in the workshop, and after a sharp investigation, Tom was on his way to the steps, when David looked at him in a half-injured way as if disappointed.

“What, arn’t nothing stole here, sir?”

“No; everything seems to be right,” replied Tom.

“Well, I should ha’ thought they’d ha’ took the spacklums or something while they was about it.”

But matters wore a different aspect upon the laboratory being reached. On the whole the place looked undisturbed, save that a rug or two had been kicked up, and a chair tilted over against the wall; but at the second glance Tom felt a thrill, for there facing him was the old walnut bureau, with its drawers open, and the contents tumbled over and over, the small top drawer to the right especially taking Tom’s attention, for it hung nearly out and was perfectly empty.

There had not been much in it, only a few papers, but one was the large cartridge paper envelope, which contained the documents given to him by his uncle when that strange visit was paid. These had evidently gone; what else had been taken it was impossible to say.

“They’ve been at it here, Master Tom, haven’t they?”

"I'm afraid so, David."

"Then hadn't I better go and fetch the policeman directly, sir?"

"No," said Tom decisively. "We must wait till uncle comes back, and see what he says."

"But they'll get right away, sir, 'fore he comes back."

"I'm afraid whoever it was has got right away, David," said Tom; and he told his companion as much of the events of the past night as he thought necessary.

"Oh, why didn't you come and call me up, Master Tom?" cried the gardener reproachfully. "If I'd been there we could ha' captivated 'em, for there must ha' been two. That there ladder couldn't ha' lifted itself up again, and stood ready for the one inside to get down."

"Yes, there must have been two," said Tom thoughtfully.

"You should ha' comed and called me, sir—you should indeed. I've got as much right to take care o' master's property when he's out as you have."

"I never thought of it, David."

"It's on'y three 'undered and forty-nine yards and a half to my cottage, sir. You might have thought o' me."

"I only wish I had," said Tom warmly. "I should have been so glad to have you."

"Well, sir, there's something in that," said David, but only to repeat himself in a reproachful tone—"It was on'y three 'undered and forty-nine yards, and what's that to a young gent like you."

"It can't be helped now, David. Let's go up-stairs."

Tom felt stiffer as he went up the step-ladder, and the whole business of the struggle in the dark came back as they stood in the observatory, where all seemed to be correct, save an overturned stool, and the position of the telescope in the middle changed.

"What's gone from here, sir?" asked David.

"I don't see anything."

"Oh, but they must have took something else, sir."

"Perhaps so, but I cannot see what."

"Then that's because you disturbed 'em, sir. They was ramshacking your uncle's desk thing when you come. Tend upon it that was it. Oh, I do wish I'd been there just at the bottom of the ladder ready to nab 'em as they come down. Say, Master Tom—think your uncle kep' his money in that there old chest-o'-drawers thing?"

"I think he used to keep a little bag of change there," replied Tom thoughtfully; and it seemed more probable that the thieves were after that than in search of papers, which could have been of no earthly use to them, though the drawer was nearly empty all the same.

"You did get hold o' one of 'em, sir?" said David, after a pause.

"Oh, yes, more than once."

"And he felt like that there Pete Warboys, didn't he?"

"Yes—no—I don't know," said Tom confusedly; and David scratched his head.

"That's like asking a man a riddle, sir," he said. "Can't make much o' that."

"Well, what can I say, David?" cried Tom impatiently. "It was pitch dark, and I was thinking of nothing else but catching him. I could see nothing but the dim-looking windows."

"But you felt him, sir."

"Oh yes, I had hold of him."

"Well, did he feel like Pete?"

"What nonsense! One lad would feel like another."

"Oh no, sir, he wouldn't. Pete's bones'd feel all loose and shimbly. Bound to say you heared his jyntes keep on cracking."

"No, I don't remember that.—Yes, I do," continued Tom excitedly. "I did hear him go crack twice when we were wrestling."

"There you are, you see," cried the gardener triumphantly, "that's c'roborative evidence, and c'roborative evidence is what they make detective police on. It was Pete Warboys, sure enough."

"I thought it must be, David."

"Not a doubt 'bout it, sir. We've got him this time safe enough, and he'll be sent away for the job, and a blessing to Furzebrough, I say. But I'll try you again, sir. Just lead you up like. Now, then, to make more sure—you smelt him too, didn't you?"

"Smelt him?" cried Tom.

"Ay, sir, that's what I said. You could smell him yards away."

"Oh no, I didn't smell him," said Tom, laughing.

"Do you mean to tell me, Master Tom, that, you didn't smell Pete the other night when you was letting go at him with that stick atop o' our wall?"

"I remember smelling onions very strong."

"There!" cried David triumphantly. "Of course you did. I like an onion roasted, or in stuffing, or the little 'uns pickled, but that chap lives on 'em. You ask anybody in the village, and they'll tell you they can't keep an onion in their gardens for him. He's a savage at 'em. And you mean to tell me that you didn't smell onions when you was fighting with him last night?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't."

"I don't like that," said David, polishing one of his red ears. "P'r'aps he hadn't been able to steal any yesterday. But it's a wonder you didn't smell that."

"But perhaps it wasn't Pete."

"Now don't say that, my lad. There's no getting away from them bones. Nobody never had such loose bones. It was him right enough."

"Think so, David?" said Tom dubiously.

"Course I do, Master Tom. Who else would ha' knowed where to find Jellard's ladder?"

"Plenty o' people," said Tom eagerly; "all the village."

"Don't you say a word, like that, Master Tom," said the gardener solemnly, "because it arn't right. I've knowed Furzebrough man and boy ever since I was born, and there arn't a soul in it as'd go and get that ladder and break in and steal your uncle's contrapshums. I won't say as there arn't a lot o' people who talk about 'em, and believe old Mother Warboys when she says they're bad and dangerous, and like to bring evil on the place; but, bless your 'art, sir, there arn't one as would do your uncle harm. I won't say as the boys, and maybe a school-gal, wouldn't help theirselves to a happle or a pear or two as were in reach—I won't deceive you, Master Tom, I've done it myself coming home from school; but take it altogether, there arn't a honester village nowhere in Sorrey, and I'll stick to that, even if I was up before a judge, and a jury of my fellow-countrymen swore me till I was black in the face."

Tom smiled.

"Ah, you may laugh, sir," said David, shaking his head; "that's youth, and wanting to know better. I'm a bit older than you. This here's a honest place, sir. I won't say nothing about tramps from London, and furreners coming in search o' work; but you might keep gold and silver jools down here without locking your doors—leastwise if Pete Warboys warn't about; but I told you how it would be."

"Well, let's go down, David," said Tom, who could not help thinking about the proverb concerning a dog with a bad name. "This shutter must have a proper fastening. But who would have thought of any one getting a ladder? You had better take it back."

"Yes, sir, and tell old Jellard to put a chain and padlock on it, or else there's no knowing what may happen."

So after deciding to leave the old bureau just as it was until his uncle had examined and seen what was missing, and noting that it had been opened by means of some kind of chisel inserted just above the keyhole, Tom locked up, and then held the gate open for David to carry the ladder he had shouldered home.

"Nyste sort of a job, Master Tom," he said, "clearing up the bits arter robbers and thieves; but there—you never knows what you may come to in this life."

The next moment Tom had to duck his head to avoid a blow as the ladder was swung round; and that morning Mrs Fidler, who knew nothing of what had happened, took Tom aside directly after breakfast.

"I beg your pardon, Master Tom," she began, and the boy stared; "I didn't notice it before we begun, but I do now, and as master's out it makes me feel anxious. You're not well, sir."

"Oh yes, quite well," said Tom hastily.

"No, sir, you can't deceive me. But I know it's only natural for young people to say so. Physic isn't nice, sir, but it's very necessary sometimes, and if you would be advised by me you'd let me give you something this morning. Better late than never, sir."

"What, me take some medicine?" cried Tom. "Nonsense! I'm quite right."

Mrs Fidler shook her head.

"Take which you like, sir; I've got them both in my store closet. A tablespoonful of castor oil—"

"Ugh!" ejaculated Tom, with a grimace.

"—Or a cupful of prune tea."

"That sounds better," said Tom, smiling.

Mrs Fidler shook her head.

"I shouldn't like to deceive you, Master Tom," she said, "because though prune tea sounds very nice, you don't taste the French plums I make it of, but the salts and senna in which the prunes are stewed. But it's a very, very valuable medicine, my dear, and if you will be prevailed upon—Dear me! look at that now. Oh, how obstinate young folks can be!"

For at her description of the concoction of prune tea, Tom thrust his handkerchief to his mouth, and ran out into the garden, before going across to the workshop to continue the manufacture of a perfect plane of glass, such as would satisfy Uncle Richard on his return.

Chapter Forty Two.

Uncle James Brandon sat one morning a short time before the events of the night described in the last chapters, biting his nails, and looking old, yellow, and careworn. He was supposed to be quite well again, and the doctors had given up visiting him, but, as his son said in a very contemptuous, unfilial way to his mother—

"He's better in health than temper, and if things are going on like this I shall be off somewhere, for I'm sick of it."

For there had been quarrels daily between father and son, stormings against wife and servants, and poor Pringle the clerk had vowed to himself that he would not stay at the office for another week; but he always stayed, for there were reasons at home against his throwing himself out of work.

So Uncle James sat in his private room at the Gray's Inn office, looking old, yellow, and biting his nails, like the ancient ogre, sometimes making up his mind in one direction, sometimes in another.

At last he touched his table gong, and, as quickly as he could get there, Pringle presented himself.

"You ring, sir?"

"You know I rang, sir," cried Uncle James savagely. "Send him here directly."

"Cert'ny, sir, but—er—"

"I said send him here."

"Yes, sir. Who, sir?"

"Mr Samuel, you blockhead. Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes, sir; but Mr Samuel's not in the office, sir."

"Bah!" ejaculated his employer; and Pringle made his escape.

Ten minutes later Sam entered the place, and the clerk whispered to him sharply—

"Gov'nor wants you, sir. Awful temper, sir."

"Oh, is he?" said Sam sullenly. And then to himself—"I'm not going to take any of his nonsense, so I tell him."

Pulling down his cuffs, and looking very pugnacious, he entered the private room ready to repel an attack, but to his surprise, his father, who the minute before had been seated looking very irresolute, now became very determined, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, my boy," he said in a low voice.

Sam felt relieved, and he drew forward a chair.

"Sam, my boy," continued James Brandon, "I'm in terrible trouble."

"What about, father—money?" James Brandon nodded.

"I've been too hasty, my boy. I was very ill, and I did what I should not have done in calmer moments."

There was a pause, and Sam waited, wondering what was to come next.

"You remember my sending for your cousin to come up?"

"Yes, father; you sent me away on business," said Sam, in rather a sneering tone, "so as to get me out of the way, but I heard all about it afterwards."

"All about it?" said his father, with an anxious look.

"I suppose so," replied Sam carelessly.

"No, my boy, you did not," said his father, leaning forward and taking his son by the coat as he spoke in a very low voice. "The fact is, Sam, while I was ill and low-spirited I got a number of curious fancies into my head—half-delirious, I suppose—about some deeds and documents left in my charge by your aunt, Tom Blount's mother, when she died."

"Yes?" said Sam, growing interested now.

"I fancied somehow, my boy, that it was my duty to give those deeds up to your cousin; and though I fought against it for some time, the idea grew too strong for me, and I felt that I must send for him and give them over into his charge."

"Were they his by rights, father?" said Sam sharply.

"They were given into my charge, my boy," replied his father evasively, "and I behaved very weakly and foolishly in giving them up to your cousin."

"Then you did give them up to Tom that day?"

"Yes, Sam, and it is a very troublesome matter. I tell you, I did not know what I was about then, and it will affect you very seriously by and by, if I don't get them back."

"You mean in money matters, father?" said Sam sharply.

"Yes; affect me now heavily, and you by and by."

"Get them back then at once," said Sam—the young lawyer giving the elder advice.

"Yes, Sam, my boy, that's what I want to do, but how?"

"Write and tell young Tom to bring them up."

James Brandon shook his head.

"No use—no use, my boy. I must have said a great many foolish things to the lad that day."

"But you must get the papers or whatever they are back again, father," cried Sam, who was now growing excited. "You'll have to go down there yourself."

"Impossible; but I have made up my mind to send you to try and get them."

"And suppose I did, father?"

"Suppose you did? Why then, my boy, I could—I mean we could laugh at them, treat anything that was said with contempt. Do you hear? With contempt."

"Stop a bit," said Sam quietly. "You always told me to be cautious in business matters, and that I was to keep one foot down firmly till I found a safe place for the other."

"Of course, my lad, of course."

"Well, suppose I go down to that country bumpkin's place?"

"Yes, if you went down you would find out where the papers were kept," said James Brandon eagerly.

"And if I did?"

"You could bring them away. The boy's too stupid to take very great care of them."

"But suppose he has given them to Uncle Richard?"

"Pish! what then? Your uncle would only pitch them into a drawer, and go away to forget them, and dream about the moon. You could go down on a visit, find out where they are, and bring them away."

"I say, dad," said Sam, with a sneer, "isn't that very much like stealing?"

"No, no, no, no," cried his father quickly; "only getting back some documents left in my charge—papers which I gave up during a severe illness, when I did not know what I was about. You understand?"

"Oh yes, father, I understand, but it looks ugly."

"It would look uglier for you to be left almost without a penny, Sam, and your cousin to be well off."

"Ye-es," said Sam quietly, as he stood with his brows knit; "that would be ugly, dad."

"Then you will go?"

"Perhaps. That depends. Not as you propose. They'd miss the papers, and I should get the credit of having taken them."

James Brandon stared at his son in surprise, forgetting the fact that he had been training and moulding him for years to become a self-satisfied, selfish man, with only one idea, that of taking care of himself, no matter who suffered.

"He's growing a sharp one," thought the father, half gratified, half annoyed. Then aloud—

"Oh no, Sam, I don't think that."

"You don't want to think that, father," said Sam, drawing himself up importantly.

"Oh yes, my boy," said James Brandon. "I don't want to get you into trouble."

"No, father, of course not; it would be getting you into a scrape as well. Look here, suppose I slip down and get the deeds without being seen—without any one being a bit the wiser?"

James Brandon shook his head.

"Oh, I don't want the job," said Sam coolly.

His father was silent for a few moments, and Sam took out a knife, threw himself back in his chair, and began to trim his nails.

"But look here, Sam," said James Brandon at last, and he seemed to be in a nervous, excited state. "It is of vital importance to me that I should have those papers."

"Then if I were you I should go down and get them, father," said Sam coolly.

"But that is impossible, my boy. Come, you will do that for me?"

"I don't see why I should," replied Sam; "you don't make things very pleasant for me."

"But I will, my boy, I will do anything you like; and don't you understand how important it is for you?"

"Yes, I begin to see," said Sam coolly. "You've got yourself into a scrape, father, over some of young Tom Blount's affairs, and you want to make cat's-paws of me."

"No, sir," cried his father angrily.

"Oh, but you do."

"I do want you to help me get those—those—"

"Chestnuts," said Sam, with a grin.

"Well, call them that if you like, my boy," said his father, trying to be jocose, but looking ghastly pale the while, and with the perspiration standing in tiny drops upon his forehead. "But you must help me, Sam. The money will all be yours by and by."

Sam sat back staring straight before him in silence for a few minutes, while his father watched him intently.

"Well, I don't want you to get into trouble, father," he said at last. "You don't open out to me frankly, but I can see as far into a millstone as most people. I'm not quite a fool."

"No, my boy, no," said James Brandon eagerly. "I'm delighted to find what a sharp man of business you are growing."

"But you never made yourself hoarse by telling me so, dad," said Sam, with a grin.

"Because I did not want to make you conceited, my dear boy," cried the father. "Then you will help me?"

"The money's no temptation to me, father," said Sam loftily.

"But it will be very useful to you by and by, my boy. Surely you don't want that ill-conditioned cub to inherit it."

"Of course I don't," said Sam. "There, all right, I'll go and get them for you somehow, but if there's any rumpus afterward you'll have to stand the racket, for I shan't. I shall say you sent me."

"Of course, my boy, of course. But you are too clever to make any mistake over the business, and—and you are beginning to be a great help to me, Sam. The time's getting on now towards when we must begin to think of your being a junior partner. Only about three or four years, Sam.—Then you will go down at once?"

"You leave that to me," said Sam importantly. "But I must have some money."

"Yes, my boy, of course. Half-a-sovereign will be plenty, I suppose?"

"No, you don't," said Sam, with a look full of contempt at the shrunken, degraded man before him, who was receiving the punishment already of his misdeeds, and suffering more keenly than from any which could have been inflicted by the law.

"But how much do you want, my boy?" he faltered—"fifteen shillings?"

"I want two pounds," said Sam coolly, "to pay my expenses. Perhaps I shall have to give some blackguard half-a-sovereign to get the papers for me, and if I come back with them all right, you'll have to give me five pounds."

"Five pounds!" gasped his father.

“Yes, dad; and if you make so much fuss about it I shan’t go unless you give me ten pounds.”

James Brandon looked in a ghastly way, which made his sickly face seem agonised, and he slowly drew out his purse and handed his son the money.

“When will you start?” he said.

“Now, directly,” said Sam, rising from his chair; and his father’s countenance brightened.

“Hah!” he exclaimed, “that’s very prompt and business-like of you, Sam. You’ll be careful though.” And he whispered some instructions.

“You leave me alone for that, dad,” said Sam. “I know what I’m about.”

As he spoke he rose quickly from his chair, gave his father a short nod, and opened the door, to find himself face to face with Pringle, whose hand was raised.

“Oh!” cried the clerk, starting. “Beg pardon, sir, I was just going to knock.”

“What is it?” cried James Brandon angrily, and turning pale in dread lest the clerk should have heard anything which had passed.

“These deeds, sir—finished the copying,” said the man quietly, and with a look of surprise that his employer should have asked him what he wanted.

“Oh yes; put them down,” said Brandon hastily.

“What shall I go on with next?”

“The letters I told you about last night.”

“Cert’ny, sir, of course,” said Pringle; and he hurried out of the room, leaving father and son staring at each other across the table.

“Think he heard, Sam?” said James Brandon, looking more ghastly than ever.

“No, not he. Couldn’t have heard more than a word or two. He daren’t listen.”

“Think not, Sam?”

“Sure of it, dad. There, I’ll be off now.”

“Yes, do; and pray be careful. One moment, Sam: your uncle is not out with you?”

“Which means he is with you,” said Sam, smiling.

“Yes, my boy, a little. We don’t quite agree about—about a little matter; but he would be friendly to you. So don’t you think you had better go down as a visitor?”

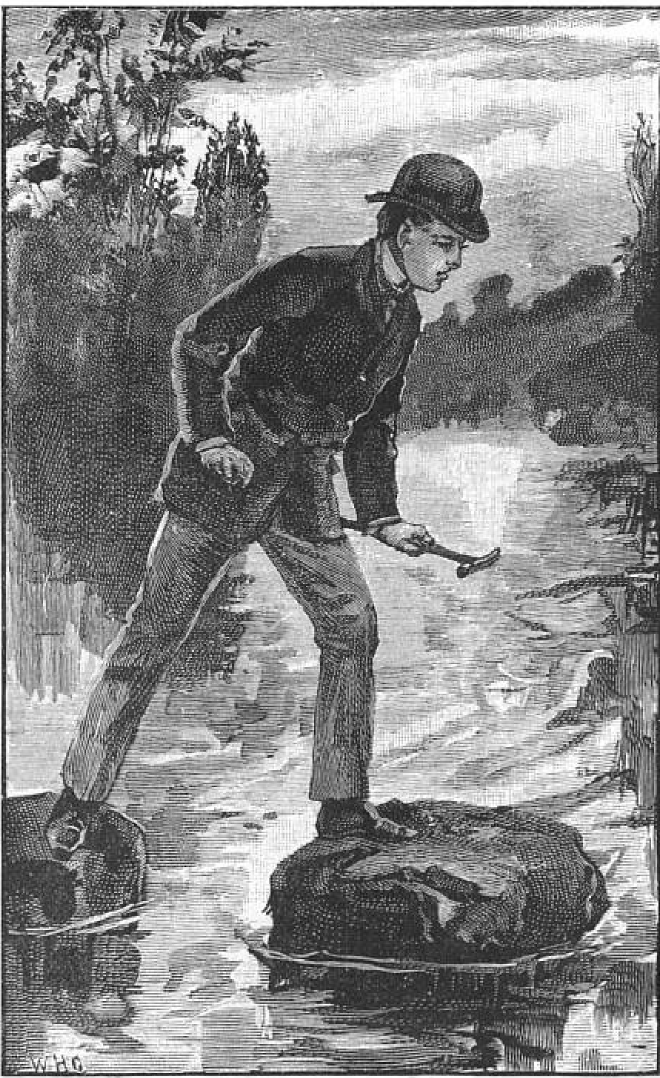
“No, father, I don’t,” said Sam shortly; and he went out at once.

“Gov’nor must have made a terrible mess of it, or he wouldn’t be in such a stew,” said Sam to himself, as he went thoughtfully away, and came to the conclusion that the best thing he could do would be to have a mouthful of something.

The mouthful took the form of a good dinner at a restaurant, and over this he sat thinking out his proceedings in a very cool, matter-of-fact way, till he thought it was time to make a commencement, when he summoned the waiter, and asked for the railway time-table. Then, after picking out a suitable train, he paid his bill with one of his father’s sovereigns, called a cab, and had himself driven to the terminus, where he took his ticket for the station beyond Furzebrough Road, and soon after was on his way down into the wild part of Surrey.

Chapter Forty Three.

Sam Brandon timed himself so accurately that he was crossing the little river-ford just as it was so dark that he could hardly make out the stepping-stones. But he got over quite dry, and after a short walk on the level, began to mount the sandy hill which formed part of the way entering Furzebrough at the top end, and led him by the fork in the road down one side of which his father had steered the bath-chair, and plunged into the soft sand of the great pit.



Sam Brandon crossing the river-ford.—p. 449.

It was a soft, silent time, and the place seemed to be terribly lonely to one accustomed to the gas-lamps of London streets. The shadows under the hedges were so deep that they appeared likely to hide lurkers who might suddenly leap out to rob, perhaps murder, for with all his outward show in bravado, Sam Brandon felt extremely uneasy consequent about the mission which had brought him down there, and he at once decided that it would be better to walk in the middle of the road.

Five minutes later he had to take the path again, for he met a horse and cart, the driver shouting a friendly good-night, to which Sam responded with a stifled cry of alarm, for he had nearly run against a man who suddenly appeared in the darkness, but proved to be quite an inoffensive personage bound for home.

Then as the crown of the hill was reached, there was the great gloomy fir-wood, whose columns stood up quite close to the road, and under whose shade Sam had to make his way toward the village, thinking deeply the while, that after all his task was not so easy as it seemed before he came down into the country.

“No fear of being seen though,” he thought, as he went on, continually on the look-out for danger to himself, but seeing none, hearing none, till he was in the deepest part of the sandy lane, with the side of the fir-wood on his right, a hedge-topped bank on the left.

It was darker now than ever; and as it was early yet for the work he had in hand, he had slackened speed, and finally stopped short, hesitating about going on.

“What a horrible, cut-throat-looking place!” he muttered, as he tried to pierce the gloom which hid the beautifully—draped sand-banks dotted with ferns, and made lovely by flowers at all times of the year. “Any one might be in hiding there, ready to spring out.”

He had hardly thought this when he uttered a cry of horror, swung round, and ran as hard as he could back toward the crown of the hill, for all at once there was a peculiar sound, like the magnified hiss of some large serpent, and, looking up, he could dimly see against the starlit sky a gigantic head with curling horns, whose owner was evidently gazing down upon him where he stood in the middle of the lane twenty feet below.

Sam Brandon must have run five hundred yards back before want of breath compelled a slackening of speed, and his panic fear gave place to common-sense.

“What a fool I am!” he said to himself, with wonderful accuracy; “it must have been some precious old cow.”

This thought brought him quite to a stand, and after a little consideration, he felt so certain of the cause of his alarm that he turned and continued his route again toward the village, reaching the dark part, hesitating for a few moments before going on, and now hearing up to the left and over the dimly-seen hedgerow the regular *crop, crop, crop* of some

animal grazing upon the crisp dew-wet grass.

“If anybody had told me,” he muttered, “that I could have been scared by a jolly old cow, I should have kicked him. How absurd!”

He walked on now firmly enough, till, in spite of the darkness, the road became more familiar, and in due time he could see the lights at Heatherleigh, and looking up to his right against the starry sky, the top of the great mill.

It was too soon, he felt, and turning back, pretty well strung up now to what was rapidly assuming the aspect of a desperate venture, he walked on till the golden sand looked light upon his left, and showed a way into the wood. Here he turned off, walked cautiously in amongst the tall columns for a few yards, and then sat down on the fir-needles, listened to find that all was still, and taking out cigarette-case and match-box he struck a light and began to smoke, sheltering the bright burning end of the little roll of tobacco, and trying as he rested to improve his plans.

For he was hot and tired. He had found the station beyond Furzebrough quite seven miles from the village, and being a perfectly fresh route to him, it had seemed twice as far; while the fact that he wished to keep his visit a profound secret forced him to refrain from asking questions as to the way, after being instructed by the station-master at the first.

It was restful and pleasant there on the soft natural couch of sand and fir-needles, and after a time Sam’s head began to bow and nod, and then, just as he was dropping off fast asleep, the cigarette, which he had been puffing at mechanically, dropped from his lips and fell in his lap.

In a few minutes the fume which had been rising changed its odour from burning vegetable to smouldering animal, and Sam leaped up with a yell of pain, to hastily clap his hands to a bright little round hole upon the leg of his trousers, where the woollen material had caught fire and burned through to his skin.

“Hang the stupid thing!” he grumbled, as he squeezed the cloth and put out the tiny glowing spark. “Must have dropped off. Looked nice if I’d slept all night in this idiotic place. Too soon yet, but I mustn’t go to sleep again.”

To avoid this he began to walk up and down among the trees, but carefully kept close to the road, for he grasped the fact that it would be very easy to go astray in a fir-wood at night.

Now as the dark hours are those when certain animals which live in the shade of trees choose for their rambles abroad, it so happened that one of these creatures was awake, had left its hole, and was prowling about on mischief bent, when the yell Sam Brandon uttered rose on the night air.

The first effect was to cause the prowler to start off and run; the second caused curiosity, and made the said prowler begin to crawl cautiously toward the spot from whence the cry arose, and in and out among the tree-trunks, till the shadowy figure of Sam could be seen going to and fro to avoid more sleep.

Then, as the prowler lay near at hand upon his chest watching, there came a time when Sam went down upon his knees in the densest spot near, to shelter himself from observation while he lit a fresh cigarette.

Now it so happened that the darkest spot was close to where the prowler lay without being able to escape, as it would have caused a noise, and consequent betrayal.

Then after selecting a cigarette by touch, and opening his match-box, Sam struck a little wax taper, began to light his cigarette, and naturally held the flame so near his face that, as he knelt there, it was well illumined for the benefit of the prowler, who crouched close and stared hard, expecting moment by moment to be seen.

But Sam saw nothing for the glare, while the prowler recognised his features, and lay still and waited close by the smoker till nearly another hour had elapsed, when Sam drew a long deep breath and said softly—

“Now for it.”

For *it* meant money, freedom from all domination, and, as the lad thought very unwisely, a general sense of independence of father and the whole world; though in carrying out this act he was riveting, so to speak, moral fetters round his wrists.

He had had hard work to string himself up to his task, but now he showed plenty of determination, and going back into the lane, he walked rapidly toward Heatherleigh, passing nobody on his way.

Upon reaching the bottom of the garden he hesitated for a few moments, peering over the hedge at the house; then seeking the palings, and looking over them at a spot where the trees were rather open, and, lastly, making his way to the gate, where he satisfied himself that there were only two lights visible there—in the servants’ part of the house, and in the little dining-room.

Apparently contented, he walked back to where the yard wall turned off at right angles, and following this for a few yards, he climbed over and made his way like a dark shadow close up to the mill, where he stood listening and looking sharply round.

All was still, and in spite of the glittering stars, it was very dark close up to the tall brick building—so black, in fact, that unless close up, there was not the slightest probability of his being seen even by any one upon the watch.

Satisfied of this, he went softly to the door, took hold of the handle, and tried it, pressing hard at the same time, in expectation that it might yield, as people were so careless about locking up in the country. But he was soon convinced that the door was securely fastened, and he moved now to one of the workshop windows and tried it, with no result. Then he gave it a sharp shake, but there was no suggestion of its yielding, and he at once went right round to the other side and tried the window there.

The result was the same, and he uttered a low ejaculation indicative of his vexation on finding everything so secure.

“More ways than one of killing a cat,” he said softly, and taking a large screw-driver from his pocket, he was in the

act of thrusting its wedgelike flat point in beneath the framework of the casement when there was a step behind him, and as he turned sharply, it was to face a tall, thin, rough-looking figure, very indistinctly seen as it stood close to him, and the word “Halloo!” was whispered hoarsely almost in his ear.

For a few moments Sam was paralysed. Then he recovered himself, and stepping back he raised the screw-driver, as if it had been a short Roman sword.

“You hit me,” said the shadowy figure, “and I’ll let you have this hedgestake right on the head.”

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” said Sam, in a subdued voice.

“And who are you, and what are you a-doin’ of here?” was the retort. “You give me any of your mouth, and I’ll go and ring the old man’s bell.”

Sam had met his match, and stood thinking what course he should pursue when his interrupter continued—

“I know: you’re come because the old man arn’t at home. Think I don’t know yer?”

“Hush! hold your tongue!” said Sam, and for the moment he felt disposed to run for it; but there was the fact that, dark as it was, he had been recognised, and if he had any doubt it was dispelled by his companion saying with a faint laugh—

“Got any more o’ them pears?”

“No,” said Sam shortly; and recovering himself a little, “What do you want?”

“To see what you’re a-going to do,” was the reply.

“But you’ve no business here, sir,” said Sam haughtily.

“More have you. I arn’t a fool. I see you trying to break open the winders with that thing.”

“It’s a lie; you didn’t.”

“Oh yes, I did. I know; I can see in the dark. What are you after?”

Sam was silent, and the disposition was on him strongly now to strike the fellow down.

He dismissed the thought again, feeling how useless it would be to make him an enemy, and the other course now offered itself to him.

“You don’t want to know what I’m after,” he said, with a faint laugh. “It’s only for a bit of fun.”

“Not it. People don’t break in at windows for fun. You give me something, or I’ll go and tell.”

Sam’s heart leaped with satisfaction at this. Money, then, would buy the young scoundrel off, and he hastily took out a coin, and held it out so as to silence his enemy; but at the same time he felt that there was nothing to be done now but get back to town with his mission unfulfilled.

To his great delight the coin was snatched and pocketed, but he did not feel so well satisfied the next moment.

“That’s on’y a shillin’. Give’s another.”

A second was held out and taken.

“Now I wants another,” said Pete, and upon this being given, he demanded a fourth, and then a fifth.

Pete was satisfied now, and he said with a low chuckle—

“If any o’ these is bad ’uns, I shall go and tell.”

“But they’re not, they’re all good,” whispered Sam. “Now be off.”

“Shee-arn’t! I’m goin’ to stop and see what you do. But you can’t get in like that. The winders has all got noo fasteners. I could get in if I liked.”

“How?” said Sam, in spite of himself.

“Think I’m goin’ to tell you for this,” said Pete. “You give me another, and I’ll show you how to get in. I see you come in the wood and smoke over yonder.”

“And you’ve been watching me ever since?”

“Course I have. What do you want to get?”

Sam made no answer, for he was trying to arrange his thoughts, and make out what was the best thing to do. Then all at once Pete broke out with—

“You ain’t half a chap. I could soon get in there if I wanted.”

“Could you? How?”

"I've been in the mill lots o' times," said Pete evasively, "'fore they took the stones out, and since old Dicky Brandon pulled the sails off."

"Tell me how you managed it," said Sam, after a glance round; for, mingled with his uneasy feeling about being betrayed by the great lad before him, he began to feel desperate, and as if he must succeed now he had gone so far. He was convinced in his own mind that the most likely place to find the documents he sought would be in his uncle's study, and to him the first floor of the old mill was that study. Tom had told him as much, and that the old walnut-wood bureau was the depository where their uncle kept his papers.

"People in the country are such idiots," he said to himself; "they never think of having strongrooms or iron safes. He has locked the papers up there as sure as a gun."

It was with a certainty of this being the case that he had come down, and now that there was nothing between him and the prize but a window and this spying lad, the position was irritating to a degree.

Sam thrust his hand into his pocket, where it came in contact with half-a-sovereign and some silver, and he began to think that of these he could perhaps after all make a key. The only question was how to begin.

Pete had uttered a low sniggering laugh on hearing Sam's last question, and now feeling that he must either act or give up; the latter repeated his inquiry.

"I used to have some bantams," replied the young scoundrel. "Bantams like wheat and barley."

"And you used to come and steal some for them?" said Sam sharply.

"Oh, did I? Who said anything about stealing? I didn't eat the barley; the bantams did."

"But you stole it all the same," said Sam, who felt now that he had a handle to take hold of.

"Oh, did I? So are you," snarled Pete. "You've come to steal something, or you wouldn't be here in the dark."

"Never you mind about that," said Sam quickly. "Look here; you tell me the way to get in, and I'll give you another shilling."

Pete thrust his dirty face close to Sam's.

"Give us hold then."

"No; you show me the way first."

"Shee-arn't! Give us the shillin' first."

"I don't believe you know a way."

"Oh, don't I! You give me the shillin', and you'll see."

Sam hesitated, but there was no time to lose. It seemed to be his only policy to make friends with this young ruffian, and he finally took a shilling out of his pocket, the action being grasped at once by the lad in spite of the darkness.

"No games," said Sam. "If I give you the shilling, will you tell me fairly?"

"Course I will."

"There; now tell me."

Pete took the shilling handed, made believe to spit upon it, and thrust it into his pocket.

"Winders is fastened up tight now."

"What, those up higher too?"

"Yes; all on 'em."

"Then how am I to get in?"

Pete laughed softly, and Sam grew angry.

"I thought so," he whispered. "You don't know."

"Oh, don't I just?" said Pete, with his sniggering laugh. "I said I'd tell yer, and I will."

"Quick then. How?"

"There's a kind o' door up atop as opens right over and lies on its back. It's got a bolt to it, but you can shove yer hand under when yer gets up inside them little palings and push it back. Then yer can open the door and get in."

"How do you know?" said Sam sharply.

"How do I know? 'Cause I've done it."

"But up there? How did you get up?"

“Ladder,” said the lad laconically.

“What, is there a ladder here?”

“No,” said Pete.

“Bah!” ejaculated Sam. “What’s the good of telling me that, then?”

Pete chuckled now with satisfaction, as if he enjoyed his companion’s trouble.

“I know where there’s a ladder,” he said.

“One we could get?”

“You couldn’t. I could.”

“Get it for me, then, there’s a good fellow.”

“Ha, ha! Oh, I say; arn’t you getting jolly civil!”

“Hush!” whispered Sam excitedly. “Don’t make that noise. Some one will hear.”

“Yah! There’s no one to hear! The old man’s gone out, and old Mother Fidler’s fast asleep, and snoring by this time.”

“But there’s he,” whispered Sam.

“What, young Tom Blount? Yah! Not him: he won’t come.”

“Where’s the ladder?” whispered Sam, in agony.

“Don’t I tell yer, yer couldn’t get it if yer did know!”

“Then will you get it for me?”

“Give’s another shillin’, and I will.”

“Oh!” groaned Sam. “I’ve given you too much now.”

“All right. I don’t want the ladder. I arn’t going to fetch that and carry it ever so far for nothin’.”

“But is it long enough?”

“Yes; just reaches up to them railings outside the top door. Yer can’t get in without.”

“If I give you another shilling—the last, mind—will you fetch me a ladder?”

“Course I will.”

“All right then; make haste.”

“Give us the shillin’ first.”

“Then you won’t fetch the ladder.”

“Oh yes, I will—honour bright.”

Sam unwillingly produced another shilling.

“There, that’s the last I’m going to give you,” he whispered. “Now, then, fetch the ladder quickly.”

Chapter Forty Four.

He uttered his low, sniggering, malicious laugh again, and without a word went off towards the back, disappearing into the darkness, and then, unseen by Sam, crawling over the wall like some great dark slug, leaving the London boy alone with his thoughts, as he kept close up to the mill, and gazed toward the cottage, dreading moment by moment an interruption from that direction.

His thoughts were not pleasant company. For there he was upon his uncle’s property, feeling that not only had he come down there in the character of a thief, but circumstances had forced him into taking for confederate about as low-typed and blackguardly a young scoundrel as there was for twenty miles round. He had been forced to bribe the fellow heavily for him, and in addition to place himself entirely at his mercy, so that in the future, if he was successful in getting the papers, this scoundrel would be always coming upon him for money, and getting it by threats.

“I can’t help it,” muttered Sam; “it’s the gov’nor’s fault, and he’ll have to pay for it all. He sent me, and—pooh, it isn’t stealing. It’s all in the family, and I’ve a better right to have what there is than young Tom Blount.”

Sam tried to think of other things, but two matters had it all their own way—the dread of being caught, and the coming of Pete with the ladder.

But the time wore on, and neither event seemed likely to happen. He grew hotter and hotter; every now and then he felt a peculiar nervous attack in one leg, which made his right knee tremble violently, and again and again he was on the point of rushing off, leaping the wall, and making for the open country, when at last he heard some faint noise coming out of the darkness.

Once he felt that all was over, and there was nothing left for him to do but flee. For there were heavy steps in the lane coming nearer and nearer, till they stopped opposite the gate, and Sam's heart throbbed like the beating of a soft mallet.

"Policeman!" he thought, and he would have turned to run, but his feet felt as if glued to the ground, and the agony he suffered was intense.

Just as he was at the worst point, there was a scratching sound, a gleam of light, the smell of tobacco, and directly after the steps were heard again, to pass on and die out in the distance.

"'Conscience makes cowards of us all,'" Sam might have said, but he did not know the words; and so he only wiped his forehead, and began to think of how he could get back to town, for it was perfectly evident that Pete had got all he could out of him, and, so far from returning with a ladder, in all probability he had invented the whole story, and there was no ladder anywhere nearer than in the rascal's imagination.

The moments passed on like minutes, and Sam felt as if an hour must have passed.

"It's of no use," he said to himself; "he has been too sharp for me, and I shall have to come down as the dad said, and take my chance. I can do no more."

He sighed in his misery and dread, for he knew that there was an all-night walk before him, till he could take one of the earliest morning trains somewhere on the road. But it had to be done, and he went from out of the deep black shadow of the mill to the wall where he came over, and was in the act of raising himself up, when his neck was caught as if in a fork, and he was thrown down on to his back. Then, as he struggled up, he grasped the fact that Pete must have been coming back, and thrust the top of the ladder over first, sending the ends on each side of his neck.

"Don't do that, mate," came to him in a sharp whisper from the wall. "Ketch hold and steady it while I run it to you."

Sam caught hold of the ladder eagerly, forgetting the pain in satisfaction, and the next minute the bottom round rested on the top of the wall. Then Pete crept over, slug fashion, and lifted the end off and set it down.

"There y'are," he said.

"What a while you've been," whispered Sam.

"Oh, have I! Juss you go and fetch it yerself, and see how quick you'd be. It was worth two shillin' to go for that; there, hyste it up and in with you."

"Hoist the ladder by myself?"

"Yes, it's easy enough. Bottom's heavy and top's light. Shall I do it?"

"Yes, quickly."

"'Nother shillin'. I arn't going to have nothing to do with it, and so I tell yer, without."

"I wish you wouldn't speak so loudly," whispered Sam impatiently.

"Yah! go on! nobody can't hear us. Where's that shillin'?"

"I told you I wouldn't give you any more," said Sam, stoutly now, "and I won't."

Pete chuckled.

"All right; I'll hyste the ladder, only mind you telled me to—it was your doing."

"Yes, my doing," said Sam, who was full of nervous impatience. "Be smart; here, I'll help."

"I can do it," said Pete, and with two or three sharp jerks he raised the ladder right on end, and then, after working it round two or three times, let the light narrow end down against the railing, just in front of the long shutter on the rounded roof.

"Will it bear me?" whispered Sam nervously.

"Bear a dozen on yer. Up you goes, and I'll keep watch. If young Tom Ugly Blount comes, shall I give him one over the head?"

"Yes," whispered Sam, as he began to mount.

"Shove yer hand under the door, and yer can feel the bolt directly. You can open it. Look alive."

Sam mounted round by round, wondering whether the thin ladder would bear his weight or collapse and let him down, as a punishment for the degrading crime he was about to commit; and the higher he went, and the ladder vibrated more easily, the more nervous he grew. Twice he stopped breathless and full of dread.

"Is it safe?" he whispered.

"Yes; up with yer."

Then he grasped the railing, stepped over into the little gallery, and, stooping down, soon found that he could unbolt the shutter.

The next minute he was inside, and descending at once into the laboratory, he took the screw-driver from his pocket, and had no difficulty in prizing open the drawers, the wood bending enough to set free the catch. A match gave him sufficient light, and when he paused before the right drawer, in which were several carefully-sealed-up papers and envelopes, he hesitated, wondering which would be the documents he wished to secure.

Helped by so feeble a light, it was hard work to tell, and at last he came to the conclusion that it would be best to make sure; and to this end he gathered all together, and thrust them, to the number of eight or nine, into his breast-pocket and buttoned his jacket.

"Hurrah!" he muttered. "Safe. Now for home."

He had hardly conceived this thought, when a sound overhead caught his ear, and he felt for the moment that Pete had come to see what he was doing. The next minute he was in full flight, pursued by Tom, as we have seen, and at last reached the ground, thanks to the help of Pete, who, after lying in hiding while the ladder was lowered, hurriedly raised it again.

Just as Tom was half-way down Pete gave the ladder a wrench, hoisted one leg, and sent it sidewise. Then—

"This way," he whispered, catching Sam's hand, guiding him to the corner of the yard, and as soon as they were over leading the way at a steady dog-trot.

"You keep alongside me," he said; "I'll show yer a near cut. Where do you want to go?"

"I want to get on the main road two or three miles away," whispered Sam.

"All right. Did you get it?"

"Yes, but don't talk."

"Shall if I like," growled Pete. "I say, look here. I arn't seen you ter-night, and I don't know nothin' about that ladder. Let 'em think it was Tom Ugly Blount. But I say, you'll give me another shillin'?"

"I'll give you two," panted Sam, "if you'll promise never to blab."

"You're a good 'un," said Pete, laughing softly. "Won't ketch me talking. Hand over; and if you come down again I'll help yer any night. I hates that there t'other chap, but I likes you."

"Thankye," said Sam, who gave the lad a couple of shillings more, when, as good as his word, Pete guided him to the road a good three miles on his way.

"Good-night, mate," the lad said, holding out his hand.

"Mate!" thought Sam in disgust, as he felt constrained to shake hands.

"I say, I know: you're going on to London."

"Am I? you don't know," said Sam hurriedly. "But I say, are you going home to bed now?"

"No," said Pete, with a chuckle; "I'm going back to my roost in the wood. Good-night, matey."

"Good-night," said Sam; and he started off at a rapid rate along the hard road, feeling the papers tightly buttoned up in his pocket, where they soon grew hot, and as if they were going to burn his chest. "Oh, what a terrible walk," he muttered; "and that fellow will know I'm making for London. Don't matter," he said directly after; "he won't tell tales, and if he comes up, ferrets us out, and wants more money, the gov'nor 'll have to pay."

Pete went back to his sandy hole, and in an hour was fast asleep, while Sam was plodding steadily on toward the great city, growing more and more weary as the hours passed, and longing to lie down and sleep, but dreading to do this for fear of some policeman or tramp coming upon him, when he felt that the result would be the same—the papers he had gone through so much to obtain would be found, and perhaps pass entirely from his hands.

Chapter Forty Five.

Sam Brandon was more asleep than awake when he made his way into Westhall Station, and took a ticket for town. He had taken nearly an hour to get over the last mile, after struggling hard during the first part of the night to get as far as possible away from Furzebrough, haunted as he was by the belief that the theft would be discovered before many minutes had passed, and that he would be pitched upon as the criminal. For though the struggle had been in the dark, and he had not spoken a word, he felt sure that Tom must have known him, and that some one would start very soon in pursuit. Hence, with his brain full of handcuffs, prison cells, magistrates, and other accessories of the law, he had toiled on through the night until utterly exhausted.

The early morning train soon came gliding into the station, and Sam took his place, trying in vain to look careless and indifferent, and as if he were occupied over his ordinary affairs; but it could not be done. He looked dusty as to his boots and trousers; there was a bloodshot appearance in his eyes; his cheeks were hollow, and his lips feverish and cracked.

Then the other passengers kept on staring at him, and the more so because he looked uneasily at them. In fact, as one passenger said to himself, he looked "as if he been up to no good."

The drowsy sensation which had made him feel as if walking in a dream had now completely passed away, and though he rested his head in a corner, and, after buttoning up his jacket tightly, tried to sleep, he could not lose consciousness, but sat there with every joint aching, and a miserable feeling of weariness in his back, listening to the rattle of the train, which kept up what sounded like some weird tune, always beginning and never ending.

There came minutes when he felt as if he were going to be seriously ill, for his head throbbed, and there was a burning sensation at the back of his eyes, while the events of the past night seemed as if they had happened a long time back.

Once when the train stopped—though stop it did at every station—Sam closed his eyes tightly and shammed sleep, feeling convinced that when the carriage door was opened, he would hear a rough voice ordering him to get out, consequent upon his description having been telegraphed all along the line; and then the door was opened and banged to again after a man had spoken in a rough voice, but only said jocularly—

“Got room for a little ’un?”

He then squeezed in close to Sam, and proved to be a huge fellow of about twenty stone.

Every one in the compartment laughed but Sam, who went through the same agony again and again, till the tickets were taken at Vauxhall, when the collector looked so much like a detective that the mental suffering was worse than ever.

Waterloo at last. He was parched with fever; his throat felt dry, and there was hot coffee waiting at the buffet, such as would relieve the faintness from which he suffered; but he dared not stop to partake of it. He hurried out of the great station, and walked fast across the bridge, and only began to feel more safe when he was amongst the crowd going and coming in the busy streets.

At last, after dodging in and out in all directions to baffle pursuit, he jumped into a cab to be taken home, but began to feel the next moment that if he were pursued it would be known where he had taken refuge.

Taken altogether, Sam Brandon began to taste very bitterly the agonies of those who break out of straight paths, never having realised till then how thorny the wrong course was, and how deep the pits and chasms in the way.

The cabman looked at him peculiarly when he got in, but that was nothing to the grin which overspread his face when the lad alighted and went up to the front door; while upon his summons being answered, the maid saluted him with the expressive words—“Oh, lor!”

“Is my father down yet?” asked Sam.

“No, sir, and it’s lucky for you as he ain’t. My! he would kick up a fuss, if he see you such a sight after being out all night.”

“Bah!” ejaculated Sam, and he ran up-stairs to his room.

“Bah! indeed,” cried the indignant girl; “serve you right if I was to tell master what time you come home. But I won’t.”

And there was no need. For Sam had hardly shut himself in before there was a hand upon the lock of the door, and his father entered in his dressing-gown, looking haggard and pale, consequent upon a sleepless, anxious night.

He closed and locked the door, before turning excitedly to his son.

“Well?” he whispered in a husky voice.

“Got back,” said Sam laconically.

“Yes; and you have not succeeded?” cried James Brandon.

Sam was silent.

“I say, you have not succeeded?”

“I heard what you said, father,” replied Sam surlily.

“I knew it would be so,” cried his father. “It’s all because you would be so rash, and ready to believe that you know everything. Now if you had gone down as I advised, on a visit, everything would have been as easy as a glove. You could have stayed there two or three days with your cousin now your uncle is in London.”

“Oh, then you knew Uncle Richard was in London?”

“Of course I did, or I shouldn’t have let you go, sir. And then you could have come back with what we wanted decently, and not come crawling into the house as if you had been found out committing a theft, and the detectives were after you.”

Sam gave a sudden jump and glanced at the door, but laughed it off directly with a sneer.

“Don’t be absurd, father,” he said. “Of course I only went on a very honest mission—for you.”

It was James Brandon’s turn to wince now, and as he saw his son’s sneering laugh he turned upon him angrily.

“It’s my own fault,” he cried, “for trusting such an idiot. I might have known what would be the consequences; but I thought you were growing up into a man whom I could trust with important business.”

“Legal business,” said Sam sneeringly.

“Yes, sir, legal business,” cried James Brandon. “You’re worse than your cousin.”

“Ever so much,” retorted Sam. “Well, dad, have you done?”

“Yes, sir, I have done—done with you too. You might have saved me thousands, instead of—”

“How do you know I haven’t?” said Sam sourly.

His father’s mouth opened, and a curious change came over his countenance.

“Why, Sam, my boy!” he panted. “You don’t mean to say—”

“That the idiot has been of some use to you? Yes, I do. There, when you’ve done rowing me let’s get the business over, for I’m sick of it. I want to go to bed.”

“Then—then—you’ve—you’ve—” stammered James Brandon.

“Succeeded?—of course I have,” said Sam coolly, as he lay back in a chair, heavy-eyed, nervous, and utterly exhausted by his night’s work. “If I wasn’t so tired I should have something more to say.”

“My dear boy!” cried James Brandon effusively; and his son uttered a low, unpleasant laugh. “Sam, you have the—the papers?”

“Yes.”

“Quick then—give them to me.”

Sam thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his closely-buttoned coat, and glancing in sidewise, he drew out a folded paper.

“That it?” he said coolly, as he handed it to his father, watching him keenly the while.

“That? Absurd!” said James Brandon, taking it and tossing it back. “The agreement for letting a house. You don’t mean to say—”

Sam interrupted him.

“Try that then,” he said.

But again his father tossed the paper away with an angry ejaculation, while his face grew more haggard and anxious-looking.

“That’s it then,” said Tom. “I had to grab them in a hurry, and get away.”

“That is not the packet,” cried his father. “There were four deeds tied up with green silk ribbon. I explained to you exactly what they were like. Surely you had more common-sense than to think these things were what I wanted!”

“Don’t I tell you I had to take them in a hurry?” said Sam, smiling at his father’s anxious face, as he kept one hand still in his breast, and now with a triumphant air flourished out a great cartridge paper envelope. “There,” he cried; “will that do then?”

“No, no, no,” said James Brandon angrily; “four deeds tied up with green silk ribbon, I tell you;” and he waved the thick envelope aside, but Sam still held it out.

“Don’t you be in such a hurry, gov’nor,” he cried. “That’s the packet, only perhaps the old man put the deeds in the envelope. Look inside.”

Sam’s father snatched the packet from his son’s hand, dragged out its contents, which were tied together with green ribbon indeed, and proved to be written in a round legal hand; but as he read the endorsements one by one, he threw them contemptuously down with a groan.

“What, ain’t those right?” cried the lad, speaking anxiously now.

“Right? No,” cried his father. “There, I see you are playing with me. Where is the right packet?”

“Right? The right packet? I made sure that was it. I opened that old bureau of his, and these deeds and things were all together.”

“Oh, Sam! Sam!” groaned his father.

“It was quite dark, you know, and I had to work by feel till I got the drawers open, and then I lit a match or two, so as to make sure which was the packet I wanted. There were the four things together tied up with green silk ribbon, and I had no time to read them even if I’d wanted to; but I felt so sure it was not necessary.”

“It was madness. You ought to have looked carefully,” said James Brandon.

“Yes; that sounds all right, but it’s a wonder I got them. I only just had time to stuff them into my pocket when he came, and then—”

“He came! Who came?” cried James Brandon.

“Tom; and a pretty fight I had for it before I could get away.”

“Then he caught you steal—caught you seeking for those papers?” cried James Brandon wildly.

“Of course he did; I told you so.”

“Then it’s all over. He has told your uncle by this time.”

“Not he. How could he know? Didn’t I tell you it was dark as pitch?”

“What? Then you think he does not know who it was?” cried James Brandon, with the air of a man catching at a straw to save himself.

“Sure of it,” said Sam coolly, as he opened one of the papers and began reading—“‘Instructions for grinding and polishing specula.’”

He opened another.

“‘The various modes of mounting telescopes.’”

Throwing this down, he took up a third paper, and read—

“‘Elutriation as applied to Emery and other Powders.’”

Lastly he took up the fourth, and read half to himself—

“‘The method practised by Monsieur Foucault in silvering the surfaces of glass specula.’ I seem to have dipped into the wrong drawer, dad,” he said coolly.

James Brandon groaned.

“I made so sure that I had got the right things. They do look like legal papers, don’t they?”

Sam’s father made no reply, but began walking up and down the room.

“What does he mean by tying up his stupid recipes like that!” said Sam angrily.

“Exposed yourself to all that risk, and for nothing,” cried James Brandon.

“Don’t say ‘yourself,’ dad,” cried Sam softly. “It was your doing; you sent me.”

James Brandon was silent for a time.

“You are sure he did not know you?” he said at last.

“Of course I am. Don’t I tell you it was dark as pitch?”

“Then how do you know it was Tom who came?”

“Who else was likely to come?”

“Of course—of course,” murmured James Brandon; “who indeed?”

“Besides, that other chap was outside, and helped me with the ladder.”

James Brandon gave quite a jump.

“That other chap?” he cried. “You don’t mean to say any one else saw you?”

“Yes, a fellow I saw when I was down there before; he came and caught me trying to get in.”

James Brandon threw out his hands, and walked up and down his son’s bedroom gesticulating.

“It’s all over,” he cried wildly; “it’s all over. I’m a ruined man. My position as a solicitor gone; my character destroyed; the money I had saved swept away; and all through the stupidity of my own son.”

Sam sat back watching his father curiously, as he paced about the place, addressing, as it seemed to him, the walls, the windows, and at times the pieces of furniture. He repeated the same things over and over again as he bemoaned his ill-fortune, and the way in which his plans had been brought to naught. Reproach after reproach was piled upon Sam, but the father did not glance at his son, who still watched him, but with eyes that grew fixed and dull-looking, till all at once the lids began to fall, opened up again, fell lower, opened again, and then went right down, and were not raised.

For Sam was utterly exhausted by his many hours’ exertions, and his father’s monotonous, droning voice, as he went on bemoaning his fate, after irritating him for a time, and making him ready to make retorts, gradually began to have a soothing effect, making him feel drowsy; then more drowsy, and at last, when James Brandon paused before the chair in which the lad lay back, and gazed full in his face, saying—

“What I want to know, sir, is, how you could be such an obstinate idiot as to persist in going your own way, after all my strong, carefully-thought-out advice?—what I want to know, I say, is—why, he’s asleep!”

James Brandon was quite right—his son had dropped off into a deep, dreamless sleep, and it is probable that if he had shouted in his ear instead of speaking in a subdued, hurried voice, he would not have succeeded in awaking him to the sense of anything he said.

Chapter Forty Six.

Uncle Richard came back late the second night after the robbery, tired out, and glad to go to bed, so that nothing was said respecting the events at the observatory till the next morning at breakfast.

"Hah! no place like home, Mrs Fidler," he exclaimed. "London hotels are all very well, but I'm always glad to get back to Heatherleigh."

"It does me good to hear you say so, sir," said the housekeeper, "for I'm always afraid, sir, that when you come back from the grand places you've been at you'll be dissatisfied."

"No fear of that, Mrs Fidler," said Uncle Richard merrily. "Well, Tom, my lad, I need not ask how you are; you look quite hardy."

"There, Mrs Fidler," said Tom, "you hear that?"

"Yes, my dear, I hear that," said the housekeeper, compressing her lips; "but you can't deceive me. You know you were ill."

"I know you wanted to dose me with prune tea," cried Tom hastily; and he made a grimace.

"Well, sir, who are you that you are not to be dosed with prune tea?" said Uncle Richard, with a mock-serious look. "Mrs Fidler has on more than one occasion tried to play the doctor's part with me."

"And I'm sure, sir, I meant it for the best," said the housekeeper, drawing herself up.

"Of course you did, Mrs Fidler," said Uncle Richard. Then, to change the conversation—"Well, Tom, how about the plane mirror; have you got one perfect yet?"

"Perfect, uncle?" said Tom, smiling. "I'm afraid not."

"So am I, my lad; but have you made one as perfect as possible?"

"Yes, uncle, I've done that," said Tom, who, ever since he rose that morning, had been in a state of mental perturbation, eager to tell his uncle about the breaking into the mill, but fully determined not to say a word—for several reasons—until they were alone.

"Well, let's hear what you did."

"Exactly as you told me, uncle. I took the three pieces of thick plate-glass, and ground them together, changing their positions over and over again, and ended by polishing them one over the other till I think they are as flat as they can possibly be."

"That remains to be proved, Tom—in the telescope. One of the three ought to be good enough for us; but we shall see."

Then the breakfast went on, with Uncle Richard spending a good deal of time over his letters; and at last Mrs Fidler rose and left the room, while Tom felt his cheeks grow warm with excitement.

The time had come for speaking about the robbery, and the question was how to begin. For the boy felt that he had been left in charge of the observatory, and that his uncle might fancy that he had neglected something in the way of securing the place. How then to begin?

While he was mentally seeking for the words connected with the first plunge, the difficulty was solved, the announcement coming out quite naturally, just as Tom felt that he must plunge at once into the story of how he had—in his ignorance—become once more poor.

"What was the matter with you, my boy?" said Uncle Richard, suddenly dropping the letter he was reading, and looking searchingly at his nephew.

"Matter, uncle?"

"Yes, when Mrs Fidler wanted to physic you. There must have been something wrong or she would not have noticed it. Too much fruit?"

"Oh no, uncle," cried Tom eagerly. "She saw how dull and tired I looked after that night in the mill."

"What? you never were so foolish as to stop up all night at work over those plane mirrors?"

"Oh no, uncle," cried Tom, who was now well started; and he plunged at once into his narration, from the looking out of the window to his return to bed.

"Tut—tut—tut!" ejaculated Uncle Richard, frowning, and looking very grimly at his nephew, who, as soon as he had run down, changed from a state of eager excitement to one of depression, and felt quite chilled by the reception his news had met with.

"You don't think I ought to have done more, do you, uncle?" he faltered.

“More? Goodness gracious, boy, what more could you have done? You behaved very pluckily, but it was a great risk to run. Then you have not made it known?”

“No, uncle. David knows, of course, but I gave him strict orders not to say a word.”

“And he has not spoken?”

“No, uncle, I think not.”

“Good! But you have not spoken to Mr Maxted?”

“No, uncle. I thought you ought to be the first to hear.”

“Quite right, Tom. I am glad that in so serious a matter you kept your own counsel. I don’t think David would speak. Eh? Yes, Mrs Fidler, we have quite done. Come along, Tom. We’ll go over into the workshop.”

Uncle Richard led the way, gazing keenly up at the little gallery as they crossed the mill-yard.

“Tut—tut—tut!” he ejaculated. “Why, Tom, you might have broken your neck.”

He said no more till they were up in the laboratory, where he examined the bureau, frowning heavily the while, and noting how easily, by the insertion of a flat iron tool, the woodwork could be heaved up, so as to allow the locked drawers to be wrenched open; and there were the marks of chisel or screw-driver plainly showing where they had indented the wood.

Then they went up into the observatory, and the great shutter was examined.

“Hah! I see you have locked the stable door, Tom,” exclaimed Uncle Richard.

“Stable door, uncle?”

“Yes, now the steed is stolen. That shutter did not close securely. Any one could pass a hand beneath, and then slip the bolt.”

“Yes, uncle; and so I put a screw in there to hold it fast till you came back.”

“Quite right. I’ll have it done properly. We’ll secure it with a piece of sheet-iron at the bottom. Come along down.”

They went back into the laboratory below. Uncle Richard making a few remarks about the trap-door, and the struggle at the steps, asking a few questions too about the chase up and down, and round the workshop, before he settled himself in an easy-chair, leaving Tom standing by the table.

“Nice fellow you are, sir,” he said severely; “I left you in charge for a few days, and you get up an affair like this ready for me when I come back.”

“Uncle!” cried Tom indignantly.

Uncle Richard’s countenance relaxed.

“Sit down, Tom,” he said, “and let’s talk like business men. That’s right. You did well in keeping the matter perfectly private; but now let’s have everything open and clear as the day. This was nothing more nor less than a burglary, and you surprised the burglar or burglars. Which was it, singular or plural?”

“I only saw—I mean felt—one, uncle,” said Tom uneasily; “but there must have been two.”

“Why?”

“Because there must have been some one outside to lift the ladder up again.”

“After you had laid it down. Of course.”

“And I heard a whispering too.”

“Must have been at least two then, Tom. Well, that’s something. Now then for the next. You had a regular struggle with the burglar—a big strong fellow of course, or he would not have got the better of you.”

“Oh no,” said Tom quickly; “not very big or strong. I held my own with him pretty well, but he had the best of it.”

“You could not see his face?”

“No, uncle.”

“But you formed an idea of who it was?” Tom was silent.

“Some one who must have known the place, eh?”

“Yes, uncle, I think he must have known the place.”

“Such a fellow as our amiable young poaching friend, Pete Warboys, eh?”

“David says he is sure that it was Pete.”

“Why does he say that?”

“Because Pete would know where the ladder was kept, and get it into the yard.”

“To be sure; no one more likely,” said Uncle Richard, watching his nephew keenly, and then opening and shutting two or three of the drawers as if waiting for Tom to go on speaking.

But Tom remained silent.

“But you don’t think it was Pete Warboys, eh?”

Tom still remained silent, and his uncle drew out the drawer in which the deeds had been placed.

“Come, my boy, I must cross-examine you,” continued Uncle Richard. “Out with it. There is always to be perfect confidence between us two.”

“Yes, uncle,” cried Tom passionately, “but don’t make me speak. It is only a suspicion, and I may be wrong.”

“I’ll tell you if you are, Tom, my boy. You heard what I said—there must be perfect confidence between us two. When that ceases, which I think will never be, you and I will part.”

“But it seems so hard, so brutal to say such a thing when perhaps it is all imagination, and due perhaps to one’s not liking some one else.”

“True, Tom,” said Uncle Richard gravely; “but we must have out the truth. Come, I’ll help you, for I’m afraid I think as you do—you fancy it was your cousin Sam?”

Tom nodded quickly.

“Why?”

Tom tightened his lips as if saying, “I won’t speak,” but his uncle’s eyes were searching him, and in a slow, faltering way he said—

“I don’t think Pete Warboys would break in here to steal valuable papers, uncle.”

“No; it hardly seems likely, Tom. Go on.”

“And—and I thought—must I go on, uncle?”

“Yes, boy, to the bitter end,” said his uncle sternly.

“I thought, uncle, that as Uncle James had given me those papers, which made me rich instead of him, my cousin Sam had felt disappointed, and come down here at night, asked Pete Warboys to help him—”

“But he did not know Pete Warboys.”

“Only a little, uncle; he had seen him. He might have asked him to get him the ladder.”

“Might, Tom; but that looks doubtful. Well?”

“And then, as I could not find out that anything else was stolen—or taken,” said Tom, correcting himself, “except those papers, I thought that it must have been Cousin Sam.”

“Nothing else stolen but those papers?—you mean the packet you saw me put in the drawer here?”

“Yes, uncle, in the big envelope. There was nothing else taken but them, and some of the other papers.”

“Sure, Tom?”

“Yes, quite sure, uncle; and this made me think that nobody else was likely to take them—nobody else would care to do such a thing. But, uncle—”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I mind much. I never expected to have any money, except what I could earn for myself; and if it was Sam—”

“What, who came and broke open this bureau like any burglar would?”

“Yes, uncle,” said Tom sadly; “if you too really think it was Sam.”

“Stop a moment, boy. Had your cousin any notion as to what was kept in that bureau?”

“I’m afraid so, uncle. When he came down here, and I took him about and showed him the place, I remember he asked me what was kept there, and I said you kept your valuable papers there.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Uncle Richard.

“But if you do think it could have been Sam—”

“Stop again, sir,” cried Uncle Richard; “are you keeping anything back? Are you sure that you did not recognise him by some word, or when you were near the window? Did you not get a glimpse of his face?”

“No, uncle,” said Tom firmly. “I never once had the slightest idea as to whom it could be, till I began to think about it after the struggle, and he had got away. Then I’m afraid I made sure it was he.”

“Humph!”

“But if you think it was he, uncle—”

“I do think it was, Tom. I feel sure of it, my boy.”

“But you won’t punish him, uncle?”

“I have punished him, Tom.”

“What, you knew, and you have done this?” cried Tom excitedly, as he sprang from his seat, and caught his uncle by the arm.

“I have punished him, Tom, and most severely.”

“Uncle! I’d sooner have given up the money a dozen times over. I wish I’d never known of it. Think what it means. Why, a magistrate would treat him like a thief.”

“Well, he is a thief,” said Uncle Richard sternly.

“Yes; but oughtn’t we to hide it from the world, uncle? He is only a boy, and it will spoil his whole life. I’d give the money, I say, a dozen times over sooner than he should be punished. Boys are stupid and thoughtless, uncle; they often do things in haste that they would not do if they considered first, and such a little thing sometimes means so much afterwards.”

“Was this a little thing, Tom?”

“No, uncle,” cried Tom piteously; “but it would be so horrible. He is my own cousin.”

“Yes, Tom, and my own brother’s son.”

“Yes, uncle; and he never liked me, and I never liked him, but I can’t stand by and let you punish him without saying a word.”

“Then you mean to tell me, Tom, that you would let him go scot free, sooner than have him punished for trying to take *again* what is your heritage?”

“Yes, uncle, I would,” cried Tom excitedly, “every penny, sooner than he and my aunt and uncle should come to disgrace.”

“But they behaved badly to you, sir.”

“Perhaps I deserved some of it, uncle.”

“Then you must have been a bad one, Tom.”

“Yes, uncle, I’m afraid so. But you will let him off? Perhaps he’ll repent and send the papers back.”

“The same way as foxes do with the farmers’ chickens,” said Uncle Richard, smiling.

“Uncle, it is too serious to laugh at,” cried Tom indignantly. “Sam Brandon is your own nephew.”

“Yes, Tom, and all you say is in vain. I have punished him severely for a cruel, cowardly robbery.”

“But you’ll do no more, uncle?” cried Tom. “Humph! Well, no, I think I may say that I shall do no more. Possibly I shall never see him again.”

“Ah, I don’t mind that, uncle,” cried Tom anxiously. “But tell me—how—what you have done. I would not speak to anybody, and kept it all so quiet till you came, uncle, because of that. You—you haven’t put it in the hands of the police?”

“How could I, my boy, when I knew nothing of the robbery until you told me this morning?”

“But you said you had punished him, uncle.”

“So I have—cruelly.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Tom, with his brow puckered-up, and some of the old ideas about his uncle’s sanity creeping back into his mind.

“I suppose not, Tom; but I have punished your cousin all the same—unconsciously of course.”

“I wish you’d tell me what you mean, uncle,” said Tom, with his face one mass of puckers and wrinkles.

“I will, Tom. No; I would never be the man to bring the law to bear on my own brother or nephew, though on your account I should have taken pretty stern measures to enforce restitution of any papers that had been stolen; but I have,

without knowing it, allowed your cousin alone, or perhaps incited, to come down here in my absence, and cunningly attempt to get those deeds back into his or his father's possession."

"Oh, uncle! you don't think—"

"Silence. I don't want to think or surmise, Tom. I only want for you and me to be left alone to our own devices, and you keep interrupting me when I want to explain."

Tom made a deprecating gesture.

"Unconsciously, I say, I have punished your cousin, for he came down here and stole some worthless papers."

"No, uncle," said Tom sadly; "the deeds are gone."

"Yes, my boy," said Uncle Richard; "on second thoughts I felt that it was my duty to place them in a safe depository, and I took them up to London when I went, and saw them locked up in the deed-box with my other valuable papers, and then placed in the strong-room at my lawyer's, where they are out of every would-be scoundrel's reach."

"Uncle!" cried Tom excitedly.

"Well, Tom?"

"I am glad."

"That the papers are safe?"

"Bother the old papers!" cried Tom; "that you have punished him like that."

Then the lad burst into a fit of peculiar laughter, and became calm the moment after.

"Come on, uncle," he cried; "I want to show you the three plane mirrors that I've ground."

"Beauties, Tom," said Uncle Richard a few minutes later. "Tom, my lad, you're my dear sister's son, and the queerest boy I ever met."

"Am I, uncle?" said Tom dryly.

"Yes, my lad."

"You don't mind?"

"Not a bit, Tom. I'm glad."

"Then hooray! let's get to work. I want to see the moon with the new plane mirror."

"Moon, bah! You're lunatic enough as it is, boy."

Tom gave his uncle a comical look, and then shyly held out his hand, which was gripped in a clasp which made him wince.

Chapter Forty Seven.

There was a heavy post one morning at breakfast, and as Mrs Fidler glanced at the letters, she screwed up her face and turned her eyes upon Tom, to shake her head as much as to say, "What work, what work!"

For to write a letter was a terrible effort to Mrs Fidler. She could write a beautifully clear hand, as the names of the contents of her jampots bore witness, but, as she confided to Tom, it was "such a job to find the next word to set down."

One of the letters was so big and legal-looking in its broad blue envelope, whose ragged edges told that it was lined with linen, that it took Tom's eye at once; but Uncle Richard merely slit it open, peered inside, and laid it beside his plate till the meal was at an end.

"I'm going up into the laboratory, Tom," he said then, and left the room.

"That means he'd like me to go too," thought Tom, and in a minute or two he followed, and caught sight of Pete at the end of the lane watching him, with his dog at his heels, but only to turn off and walk away.

"Does that mean mischief?" thought Tom, as he went into the mill, and he shook his head as he felt that Pete was a hopeless case.

To his surprise, on entering the laboratory, where Uncle Richard was seated before the bureau with the great letter before him, he was saluted with—

"I see there's your *protégé* Pete Warboys banging about again. He is always watching this place, or waiting for you to go and play with him."

"You mean fight with him, uncle," said Tom dryly.

"Well, that does seem more in your way. Mr Maxted says you're winning him over, but I doubt it."

"Yes, uncle, so do I," said Tom, smiling.

"I feel in doubt," continued Uncle Richard, "whether I ought not to have tried to prove whether it was really he who helped to break in here. But there: I only want to be left in peace, and a month's imprisonment would do him harm, and bring out matters I want forgotten. Ever seen these before?"

He drew some legal-looking documents from the big envelope and held them out.

"The other papers that were stolen from that drawer, uncle?"

"Yes," said Uncle Richard, looking very stern as he took them back and threw them into the receptacle, which he then locked up, and pocketed his keys. "Which is it, Tom—repentance, or because they are of no use to the thief?"

"Let's hope it is the first, uncle," replied Tom gravely, and his uncle uttered a long, deep-toned—

"Hah!" Then, "Come along, and let's think of something pleasanter, my boy."

They went up into the observatory, where the new diagonal mirror Tom had ground and silvered was fitted into the telescope; and that night being gloriously clear, the new addition was tested, and proved to be almost perfect.

"As nearly perfect as we shall get it, Tom," said Uncle Richard; and then till quite late a glorious evening was spent, searching the dark depths of space for twin stars, Tom having a goodly share of the observations; and when he was not using the glass making shift with the star-finder, and listening the while to his uncle's comments upon that which he saw.

The telescope was directed at the double star Castor; which, with Pollux, was glittering brightly in the black-looking sky, when Uncle Richard made way for the boy to take his place.

"Wonderfully clear, uncle."

"But do you notice anything particular?"

"Yes; I was going to say, it's like it is sometimes when the moon is low-down; the air seems to be all in a quiver."

"That is so, Tom. People don't, as a rule, think that they can see the atmosphere, but you can see it to-night all in motion. I think it means wind."

"Wind blowing hard a very long way up?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom.

"What's the matter?"

"It was so sudden. A cloud has swept right across."

Uncle Richard stepped up to the opening, and looked out into the night.

"Yes," he said, "we may shut up for the night; there's a dense black curtain of clouds drawing across the sky. Come and look. Ah! how brilliant!"

Tom started. He had just taken his eye from the great glass, when the interior of the observatory was lit up for an instant by a flash of lightning, and as soon as his dazzled eyes mastered the intense darkness which followed, he joined his uncle, and looked out of the great shutter opening, to see the singular sight, of one-half of the heavens brilliantly illuminated with the countless orbs, while the Milky Way was clearly defined; the other of an inky blackness, moving steadily, cutting off star after star, till two-thirds of the sky was darkened, and in half-an-hour, when the shutter was drawn over and fastened, not a star was to be seen.

"We are going to have a wild night, Tom, I think," said Uncle Richard; and as he spoke there was a rumbling noise amongst the woodwork overhead, caused by a passing blast. "There, let's go in."

Coffee was waiting when they went in, after leaving all safe, and very welcome, for they were both shivering. Soon after bed was sought, and Tom dropped into a deep sleep, from which he was roused by a rattling at his door, while some one else seemed to be shaking his window. Then there was a rumble like thunder in the chimney, and the beating at the door.

"Tom! wake up, lad!"

"Yes! All right!" cried the boy, springing out of bed. "Anything the matter, uncle?"

"Yes. Terrible storm. The big shutter has been torn open, and is beating about on the top of the mill."

"All right; I'll go and fasten it," cried Tom, beginning to dress rapidly, and waking up more and more to the fact that a wild storm was raging. Every now and then, after a great deal of shrieking and howling, as if the wind was forcing itself through crack and cranny, there came a loud heavy bass booming sound, as a vast wave of air broke upon the house, making the windows seem to be on the point of falling in, while the slates upon the roof clattered and the chimneys shook.

"My word, it blows!" muttered Tom, as he buttoned up his jacket tightly, and hurried down-stairs, to find that there were lights in the kitchen and dining-room, while in the hall stood Mrs Fidler, in a wonderful costume of dressing-gown, shawl, and night-cap.

“What a storm, my dear!” she said.

“You up?”

“Oh yes, my dear; it was impossible to lie. I’ve lit the kitchen fire, for poor cook is in hysterics, and Maria is sobbing and crying—quite helpless.”

“How silly!” muttered Tom. “Where’s uncle?”

“Here I am. Ready?”

For Uncle Richard appeared with a ready-lit lantern and the keys.

“We shall have to go out by the front door, Tom; the wind’s worse on the other side of the house.”

“I’m ready, uncle.”

“Pray take care, sir,” said Mrs Fidler. “If one of the sails of that mill is blown off—oh, dear, dear, what am I thinking about?”

“What indeed, Mrs Fidler! Be ready to close the door after us, for the wind has tremendous force.—Come along, Tom.”

He led the way, opened the door, and the wind rushed in, banging others, setting pictures swinging, whisking a couple of hats off their pegs, and rushing up into the house with a roar.

Mrs Fidler strove to close the door as they passed out, but failed, and Tom had to help, holding on by the handle, and dragging the door to.

Outside, the evergreens were beaten down, and the loose strands of the different creepers were flogging wall and trellis-work in a way which forbode destruction to both tree and trellis. Twice over Tom had to turn his back to get his breath, and in the darkness he could see the ornamental conifers of the garden bent over like grass; while from a short distance away, where the pine-wood commenced, there was a tremendous roar, as of breakers during a storm. Fir-trees in a soft breeze murmur like the sea; in a gale the resemblance is startling.

Half-way to the yard gate Tom was caught by a sudden blast, buffeted, and, staggering hard, had again to turn his back before he could get his breath; while as the gate was reached, another blast caught the lantern, swung it against the post, the glass was broken, and *puff*, the light went out.

“We must go back,” said Uncle Richard, with his lips close to Tom’s ear.

“No, all right; there’s a box of matches in the table-drawer up-stairs.”

They pushed on, Tom closing the gate, which was nearly torn from his hand, while, as they ascended to the mill, the wind came with redoubled violence, and they had quite a struggle to get, to the door.

“It is terrible,” panted Uncle Richard, as soon as they were inside with the door closed, and the wind shrieking and roaring around the tall building as if seeking to sweep it away.

They mounted in profound darkness to the laboratory, where the matches were found, and all the time the trap-door overhead was being lifted a few inches every minute, and fell with a clap, while the shrieking of the wind, and the rattling and banging of the woodwork in the observatory, sounded ominous of danger to the work of many, many months.

“Time we came, Tom,” said Uncle Richard grimly, as the lantern was lit, and the broken pane replaced by the covers torn from an old book just about the size.

“Yes, quite,” replied Tom. “Come on.”

He stepped quickly to the ladder-like stairs, sprang up, threw open the trap-door, and was about to enter the room, when the trap-door was flung back upon him violently.

“Hurt?” shouted Uncle Richard.

“Yes; not much,” cried Tom, and thrusting the trap-door open again, he forced it back, and, aware now of the danger, held it firmly as he got up; and then, while his uncle followed with the light, closing it again directly and securing it with a bolt.

Tom’s heart beat as the dim light of the lantern was thrown upon the great telescope, for fear that it should have met with injury, but to his great delight the top was directed right away from the open shutter, which now gave evidence of its loose state by yielding to the pressure of the wind, and giving a tremendous bang.

“Now, Tom, how are we to stop that?” shouted Uncle Richard, for the roar through the opening, mingled with hissing and shrieking, was deafening.

“Don’t know,” yelled the boy, as he crept to the opening and found that the wind had wrenched it open, and turned it right over upon the roof. “Must do something,” he shouted again, as he drew in his head.

“If we don’t the wind will end by lifting off this roof, and destroying my glass.”

“Cord’s broke,” said Tom in a momentary lull of the wind. Then the roar began again, and the building quivered, while the shutter was lifted and beaten down again with a bang.

Then, from somewhere out in the darkness, came a tremendous roaring crash, apparently very near.

“What’s that?” cried Tom; “house blown down?”

“One of the big elms on the green for certain. Hark!”

Tom was hearkening, for directly after there was another crash, and another.

“No doubt about it,” said Uncle Richard. “One has struck the other, and the great elms have gone down like skittles.”

“There goes another,” cried Tom, as there was a fresh crash, which sounded louder than either of those which preceded it. “But I don’t want our observatory to go, uncle. You put the light down on the other side, where it’ll be sheltered from the wind, and I’ll get out into the gallery and try if I can drag the shutter over, and then we must nail it in its place.”

“Impossible, my lad. You could not stand out there without being blown off.”

“But I must, uncle.—If the wind comes in—”

Whoo!

A tremendous squall struck the place, the shutter banged, the wooden dome roof rattled, and in the midst of the deafening din the wind drove in upon them with such force that they felt as if in the open air, and believed for the time that the round wooden top had been lifted off to go sailing away.

“That was a rum one, uncle,” cried Tom breathlessly. “Now then, I must go, before another comes.”

“No, no, my lad; life is of more consequence than observatories; it is not safe for you to go.”

“But I shall be all right if you hold me tightly,” cried Tom. “Come on.”

Uncle Richard gave way, and took a firm grip of the boy’s jacket as he climbed out through the shutter opening into the little gallery, where he reached over to get to the far edge of the shutter, to draw it to him, but the next moment he had crouched down and held on for dear life.

For, as if the storm had pounced upon him to tear him off the high building and sweep him away, down came the wind with a savage roar, and when for a few moments there was a slight lull, Tom yielded to the drag put on him by his uncle, and half climbed, half allowed himself to be lifted into the observatory.

“I never thought the wind could be so strong,” he panted breathlessly.

“It is terrible to-night. I must go myself.”

“You—uncle? Why, the place would hardly bear a man of your weight, and I couldn’t hold you up if you slipped.”

“Could you reach the edge of the shutter?”

“No, uncle, not by far enough.”

“That was as far as I could reach, too. We must give it up and risk everything.”

Tom gave his uncle a droll look, the light from the lantern shining dimly on his face.

“We can’t give it up, uncle. I’ll try again when the wind is not so strong.”

“But you could not reach, boy, and I dare not loose my hold even for a minute.”

“’Tis awkward,” shouted Tom; “but we must do something. Stop a minute: I know. Rope.”

“Yes, of course, the new strong rope in the bottom of the tool-chest.”

Tom took the lantern, and as his uncle held up the trap-door, the boy went down, to return in two or three minutes with a small coil of thin, thoroughly trustworthy new rope, and a hammer and some strong nails; and as soon as the lantern and trap-door were secured, he began to knot the rope round his waist.

“I don’t like letting you go, Tom,” said Uncle Richard, with his lips to the boy’s ear.

“And I don’t like to go, uncle; but this knot can’t slip, and you won’t loose me.”

“No; you may depend upon that, my lad.”

“Very well, then: look here. I’ve brought the hammer and some nails. We can’t fasten the shutter safely here, it would only break away again.”

“Then it is of no use, boy; we must let the place take its chance.”

“We won’t, uncle,” screamed Tom, to make himself heard. “Look here: I know. Where I touched the nearest corner of the shutter it’s broken-away, so I shall get out in the gallery, turn it over into its place, and nail it down from outside.”

“Are you mad?” cried Uncle Richard. “How are you going to get in?”

“Shan’t get in. You’ll let me down outside.”

“Absurd, boy! The rope would be shut in the door, even if I would harbour such a wild scheme for a moment.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” shouted Tom; “the rope would run through the broken-away corner.”

“Nonsense, it is impossible. The place must go.”

Whoo! came the wind again; and once more it seemed as if the roof was to be lifted off like a gigantic umbrella, and carried far away by the storm.

“I must go and do it,” cried Tom.

“*No*, *no*, *no*!” shouted Uncle Richard. “Let’s go down—we may be hurt.”

“Uncle, the telescope!—all our work! Oh, I can’t come away.”

“But it is risking your life, boy.”

“’Tisn’t, uncle,” cried Tom desperately. “You can hold me tightly with the rope. I should put some nails in my pocket—so, and stick the hammer handle down inside my jacket—so, and then climb out quickly while you held tightly by the rope, and—Just like this, uncle.”

And before he could be checked, Tom stepped to the opening, and with the rapidity born of habit lifted himself out, and then holding on by the sill, lowered his legs into the little gallery.

Uncle Richard darted forward to seize him, but another terrific blast struck the mill, pinning Tom against the woodwork, and literally driving his uncle back from the opening, while the telescope swung round upon its pivot, and various objects were blown to the far side.

For the full space of a minute it seemed as if the dome-like roof must be torn off, while, to add to the confusion and horror, the lantern was blown over and went out, leaving them in utter darkness.

At last, when the strength of the squall was partly spent, Uncle Richard, as he held on by the rope, shouted to Tom to come back; but in his excitement the boy heard nothing. He gave a fierce drag at the rope, crept sidewise beneath the shutter, and exerting all his strength tried to turn it over upon its hinges. But each effort was in vain, for the wind pressed it down.

“I can’t do it—I can’t do it,” he panted, as, pressing his feet against the rail of the gallery, he heaved and heaved with all his might, but only succeeded in getting his arms underneath a little.

Then the rope was dragged fiercely, and his uncle’s voice came through the opening overhead and to his left, but only in a confused murmur, though he felt what must be said; and in despair he was dragging out his hands, for the wind roared louder than ever, pressing him down against the structure with tremendous force. But all at once his hands were set free, for the slight raising of the shutter had been sufficient for the wind to get beneath, and with a rush it was swept by his face, just grazing his chin. There was a tremendous clap, and it was closed, while the boy thought of nothing but holding on as the wind once again pressed him against the building.

And now for a few moments he lost nerve, and clung desperately, feeling as if he must be plucked from his feeble hold and dashed down into the yard. Hammer and nails were forgotten, and he pressed his forehead against the woodwork, while the confusion caused by the roaring of the wind seemed to increase.

Then it was as if a great nerve communicating with safety had been touched, for he felt the rope jerked along sidewise, till it was in the jagged opening at the bottom left-hand corner of the broken shutter.

The feeling was electric, and sent a thrill through the boy.

“I’m all right, I can’t fall,” he muttered; and dragging out the hammer by its head, he felt for the first nail, then ran his hand up the side of the shutter for some distance, judged what would be a fair position for the nail, tapped it in a little way, and then began to drive with vigorous strokes, sometimes missing in the darkness, but nearly always getting good blows on the nail-head, and at last feeling that it was well home.

All this while he felt himself held tightly to the woodwork by the strain upon the cord, and the pressure of the wind:

Getting out another nail, he drove that in a foot lower, close to his chest; another minute, and a third nail was driven home, the exertion and excitement of doing something effectual driving away all thought of danger.

Then jerking the rope a little so as to get more freedom he stood well up, reached as high as possible, and drove in several more nails, and reached over to the other edge of the shutter, where he drove in a couple between the hinges, in case they should be wrenched.

“That must be safe now,” he said to himself, as he lowered himself down to a kneeling position in the gallery, the rope being tightened as he did so, yielding at first, but drawing as if it were made of indiarubber instead of the best hemp.

And now once more Tom felt a sensation of shrinking, for the time had come for his descent, which seemed very easy to talk about in the observatory, but very difficult to perform with the wind blowing a hurricane, and all around him a darkness so thick that it was like that of old—a darkness to be felt.

“But the telescope’s right,” thought Tom, “and the roofs safe;” and getting his lips to the broken opening, he yelled out, doubtful whether his words would be heard in the midst of that bewildering noise—“All right, uncle; lower away!”

He had thrust the hammer back inside his jacket, and now gave the rope a snatch, feeling it yield gently and steadily,

as he rose and tried the knot with both hands, but had to thrust them out again to save himself from being dashed against the building, so fierce a squall once more struck him from behind.

The next instant he was once more pinned against the place, and held by the rope as well. This gave him renewed confidence.

"Uncle is on the look-out," he muttered; and as soon as the worst pressure of the wind was over, he once more shouted through the opening, and losing no time, laid hold of the rail with both hands, resting his chest upon it, raised his legs horizontally, allowed them to drop down, and hung by his arms and the cord; then, as the rope gave, by his hands, and the next minute by the rope, which glided over the rail slowly, and then stopped short, leaving him swinging with his face level with the flooring, and swinging to and fro.

Whoosh! came the wind again, making him lose his hold of the rope and catch at the floor of the gallery, into which he drove his finger-nails for a moment, but only to have them wrenched away, as the wind shrieked and yelled in his ears, and turned him right round and round rapidly like an over-roasted joint.

"Lower away, uncle, lower away!" he shouted; but he might just as well have spared his voice, for not a word could by any possibility have been heard in the observatory, the wind sweeping breath and sound away, and nearly strangling him when he faced it.

Twice over he got a grip of the edge of the gallery, but only to be snatched away again and swung to and fro.

"Why don't you lower away? Quick! quick!" he shrieked out; and as if in response, he descended three or four feet, and then a couple more in little painful jerks. Then the rope stopped; the wind dashed at him, and he was swung to and fro and round and round like a feather. Now his feet touched the bricks of the mill, then he was far away again, for the rail over which the rope passed projected fully four feet from the top.

He was more and more bewildered; the rope cut into his chest, in spite of his seizing it and holding it with both hands, but only to let go again to stretch them out in the darkness, as he was swung about by the gale, for he was seized now by a dread that he would be dashed heavily against the wall.

Once more he was in motion in jerks, but only for a foot or two, and then the horror of being dashed against the wall grew worse, for the greater length of rope gave the wind more power to swing him violently to and fro.

"Why doesn't he let me down?" thought Tom, with a fierce feeling of anger rising against his uncle; but that was only momentary, for a fresh dread assailed Tom—he was certain that he had felt the knot of the rope crawling as it were upon his breast, which he knew must mean its giving way, and with a frantic dash he flung up his hands to grasp the cord high up once more.

"Could he climb back into the gallery?"

He tried, but his strength was failing, and after three or four efforts he gave it up, to hang there inert, certain that the rope was nearly undone, and that as soon as his grasp failed upon the thin cord, which could not be long, down he must go, fully five-and-twenty feet—a distance which the horror and darkness and agony made ten times as terrible as it really was, though it would have been bad enough if half.

And all the while the wind raved and roared and tossed him about till he was giddy, and rapidly losing consciousness; twice over he banged heavily against the wall, though for the most part he was swung to and fro parallel to the little gallery. Then a horrible feeling of sickness attacked him, his hands fell to his sides, his head drooped, but the next moment he felt himself reviving, for he was gliding rapidly down; his feet touched the bottom, the rope slackened, then tightened, slackened again, and fell at his feet; while by the time he had staggered to the door, round at the other side of the building, trailing the rope after him like an elongated tail, and holding his painful chest with his hands, that door was opened, and he staggered into his uncle's arms.

"Well done, my brave lad!" cried Uncle Richard in the comparative silence of the workshop; but Tom could not answer.

"What is it? You are not hurt?"

There was no reply, only a feeble gasp or two, and in his horror his uncle gave him a rough shake, but directly after felt in the darkness for the rope, and rapidly untied it.

"Speak, my boy, if you can," cried Uncle Richard then. "You are not hurt?"

"No; I'm going to be all right now, I think," said Tom hoarsely. Then in quite a fierce way he grasped at his uncle's arm. "Why didn't you lower me down?" he cried.

"I couldn't, boy. It was all in the dark, and the rope kept getting wedged by the broken wood. I was afraid to use violence for fear of breaking it, or ravelling it through. Let me help you back into the house. You've saved the roof of the mill."

"Think so?" said Tom huskily.

"Yes, more, Tom—sure," cried his uncle, jerking the rope into a corner, and re-opening the door.

"Think the light's quite out?"

"Yes, certain," cried Uncle Richard; and banging to and locking the door, he caught hold of Tom's arm.

"I'm all right now," said the boy; and they hurried back into the house, securing gates as they went, to find Mrs Fidler looking whiter than ever; and quite tearful as she exclaimed—

"Oh dear! I was afraid something dreadful had happened. Do pray sit down and have a cup of tea, sir."

They did, and with the storm increasing in violence, Tom went up once more to his room, to lie down in his clothes, and listen to the raging wind, and the sounds which told from time to time of destruction to tile, chimney-pot, or tree.

At least he meant to do this, but in ten minutes or so the sound of the wind had lulled him to sleep, and he did not open his eyes again till morning, to find the storm dropped and the sun shining brightly.

Chapter Forty Eight.

"Them four lights from the cowcumber frames, Master Tom, lifted off, carried eight-and-forty foot, dashed down and smashed, so as there arn't a single whole pane o' glass left."

"That's a bad job, David," said Tom, as he stood looking about him at the ruin caused by the hurricane; "but the telescope is all right."

"Yer can't grow cowcumbers with tallow-scoops, Master Tom. The first thing I see as soon as I goes into the little vinery there was two big slates off the top o' the house, blowed off like leaves, to go right through the glass, and there they was sticking up edgeways in the vine border."

"Well, only a job for the glazier," said Tom.

"Strikes me there won't be glass enough left in the village to do all the mending. Mrs Bray's front window was blowed right in, and all the sucker and lollypop glasses knocked into a mash o' glass splinters and stick. There's a limb off the baking pear-tree; lots o' branches teared loose from the walls; a big bit snapped off the cedar, and that there arby whitey blowed right sidewise. It's enough to make a gardener as has any respect for himself break his 'art."

"Never mind, David; I'll come out and help you try to put things straight."

"Will you, Master Tom?"

"Of course I will."

"But we can't mend them there frame-lights. The wood's gone too."

"No, but I'll ask uncle to buy some new ones; they were very old."

"Well, if you come to that, sir, they was that touch-woody that if it hadn't been for the thick paint I put on 'em every spring, till they had quite a houtside skin o' white lead, they wouldn't ha' held together. Stop, that arn't all: the tool-house door's blowed right off. Natur's very well in some things, but I never could see what was the good o' so much wind blustering and rampaging about. I was very nigh gettin' up and coming to see how things was, on'y the tiles and pots was a-flying, so that I thought I'd better stop in bed."

"I wish you had come," said Tom.

"Ay, that's all very well, Master Tom; but s'pose one o' they big ellums as come down on the green—four on 'em—had dropped atop o' me, what would master ha' done for a gardener? There's nobody here as could ha' kept our garden as it ought to be."

"It was a terrible night, David."

"Terrible arn't the word for it, Master Tom. Why, do you know—Yah! You there again. Here, stop a minute."

David ran to a piece of rock-work, picked up a great pebble, and trotted to the side of the garden, whence a piteous, long-drawn howl had just arisen—a dismal mournful cry, ending in a piercing whine, such as would be given by a half-starved tied-up dog left in an empty house.

David reached the hedge, reached over, hurled the stone, and sent after it a burst of objurgations, ending with—

"Yah! G'long home with yer. Beast!"

"That's about settled him," he said as he came back, smiling very widely.

"Strange dog, David?"

"Strange, sir? Not him. It's that ugly, hungry-looking brute o' Pete Warboys'. That's four times he's been here this morning, chyiking and yelping. You must have been giving him bones."

"I? No, I never fed him."

"Then cook must. We don't want him here. But I don't think he'll come again."

"Did you hit him?"

"Hit him, sir? What with that there stone? Not I. Nobody couldn't hit him with stick or stone neither. Keepers can't even hit him with their guns, or he'd been a dead 'un long ago. He's the slipperest dog as ever was."

"*Hy—yow—ow—oo—ooo*!" came from a distance—a pitiful cry that was mournful in the extreme.

"Hear that, sir?"

Before Tom could answer the gardener went on—

“So you had the trap-door atop busted open, did yer, sir?”

“Yes, and a terrible job to shut it,” said Tom. “I thought we should never get it fast.”

“Ah, I arn’t surprised. Wind’s a blusterous sort o’ thing when its reg’lar on. Just look: here’s a wreck and rampagin’, sir. What am I to begin to do next?”

“David!”

“Yes, sir; comin’, sir,” cried the gardener, in answer to a call; and as he went off to where his master was pointing out loose slates and a curled-up piece of lead on the roof to the village bricklayer, the miserable howl came again from much nearer.

“Pete must be somewhere about,” thought Tom; and then, after giving another glance round at the damage done by the storm, he hurried out to have a look round the village, going straight to the green, where half the people were standing talking about the elms, which lay broken in a great many pieces, showing the brittleness of the wood, for the huge trunks had snapped here and there, and mighty boughs, each as big as a large tree, were shivered and splintered in a wonderful way.

Every here and there a ruddy patch in the road showed where tile or chimney-pot had been swept off and dashed to pieces. The sign at the village inn had been torn from its hinges, and farther on Tom came upon the Vicar examining the great gilt weather-cock on the little spire at the top of the big square, ivy-clad tower.

He was at the edge of the churchyard using a small telescope, and started round as Tom cried, “Good-morning.”

“Ah, good-morning, Tom. What a night! There, you try. Your eyes are young.”

He handed the telescope.

“It’s terrible, my lad,” he said. “There’s a barn out at Huggins’s laid quite flat, they say, and two straw-stacks regularly swept away.”

“The stacks, sir?” cried Tom, pausing, glass in hand.

“Well, not all at once, but the straw. They tell me it has been swept over the country for miles. I never remember such a storm here. I’ve seen them on the coast.”

“Why, the bar under the letters has bent right down, sir,” said Tom, after a minute’s examination. “I can’t see whether it’s broken.”

“Not likely to be, Tom,” said the Vicar; “it is of copper. See anything else broken?”

“One of the arms—the one with the E on it—is hanging right down.”

“Hah! Well, it must be mended. Did you hear the small bell in the night?”

“No,” said Tom.

“It kept on giving a bang every now and then, for the tower shutters are all gone on the other side. Four came into my garden. I can’t find more, so I suppose they have been blown into the tower among the bells. Good-morning. I must go round the place and see who is damaged. Your uncle says you nearly had the top off the mill, and that you behaved splendidly.”

“Oh, nonsense, sir!” said Tom, colouring. “I only nailed down the top shutter.”

“Only? Well, Tom, I wouldn’t have got up there and nailed it down for all the telescopes in England. Good-morning.”

They parted, and Tom continued his way round by the church, getting a glimpse of the gaping window opening in the tower where the bells hung exposed; and then after passing a great horse-chestnut lying in the next field, he went on round by Mother Warboys’ and the other cottages, catching sight of the old woman standing at her door, with her hand over her eyes, as if watching.

The next minute she caught sight of him, and shouted. Then she shook her stick at him, and said something in a threatening way.

But the boy hurried on, crossed the fields, got into the narrow lane, and then went on and on till he was able to turn into the road which divided his uncle’s field and grounds from the mill-yard.

No sooner had he turned into the sandy road than his ears were saluted by the dismal howling of Pete’s dog, which was evidently somewhere near the mill.

“What a nuisance!” thought Tom, and he paused for a few moments, looking in that direction. “Bound to say Master Pete’s hanging about somewhere, and the dog can’t find him.”

However, he did not stop, but trotted off in the opposite direction to have a look at Huggins’s barn, which lay completely flat, the thatch scattered, and the wooden sides and rafters strewed all over the farm-yard.

Of the two straw-stacks nothing was visible on the spot but the round patches of faggots upon which they had been raised. The straw itself decorated hedges, hung in trees, and was spread over fields as far as he could see.

All at once he heard a yelp, and turning, there was Pete Warboys’ dog racing toward him as hard as it could come. As it drew nearer, tearing along the sandy road, it began to bark furiously, and looked so vicious that Tom stooped and

picked up a big stone.

That was sufficient; the dog yelped aloud, turned, leaped over a hedge, and ran for its life.

"Awful coward, after all," muttered Tom, throwing down the stone and returning to the house, where he set to work and helped David for the rest of the day.

Three times had David charged out after the dog, which kept coming and howling close at hand, and each time the gardener came back grumbling about some one having been "chucking that there dog bones."

"Cook says she arn't, sir, and t'other says she arn't; but I put it to you, sir, would that there dog come a-yowling here if he warn't hungry?"

"Perhaps that's why he has come, David," said Tom.

"No, sir, not athout he expected to get something. I wish him and Pete Warboys had been jolly well blowed out o' the parish last night, that I do."

That night at intervals the dog came howling about the place, and kept Tom awake for a while, but the exertions of the past night and the work of the day had told so upon him that he fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep, but only to be awakened just after sunrise by the mournful howl.

Chapter Forty Nine.

"Oh, I can't stand this," said Tom, jumping up, and hurriedly beginning to dress, after throwing open his window to see the east gradually turning red, and the clouds far up tinged and necked with orange.

Then there was another low, piteous howling.

"Lie down, you brute!" he shouted out of the window, to be answered by a quick, yelping bark.

"Perhaps Pete is not about, and the dog really is starving," thought Tom; and he finished dressing as another howl broke out, more piteous and mournful than ever.

"Will you be quiet!" he shouted from the window. "Lie down, and I'll bring you a bone, you ugly, rat-tailed, low-bred dog-ruffian."

He was interrupted by a joyous, yelping bark.

"That dog does want to be friends with me, but I can't have him here," thought Tom, who now opened his door as quietly as he could, but it gave a loud creak, so did one of the boards, as he walked towards the staircase.

"That you, Tom?" came from his uncle's room.

"Yes, uncle."

"There's a dog making a miserable noise. Try and drive it away."

"Just going to, uncle," said Tom. Then to himself, as he went down-stairs—"Driving's no good, or old Dave would have got rid of him yesterday. I shall have to try him with a bone."

He laughed to himself as he made his way into the larder, wondering what Mrs Fidler would say if she could see him; and after looking beneath two or three wire covers, he pounced upon a bladebone of a shoulder of mutton, pretty literally a bone, and bore it away, taking his cap and going out into the garden, getting to the side gate in the lane, and passing out just as the sun rose above the horizon.

"Here, hi! ugly!" he cried, breaking into the midst of a howl; and the dog came bounding toward him with its yelping bark. "There; it's very stupid of me, but just you take that and be off into the woods, and if you come here again look out for squalls."

The dog made a fierce snap at the bone, upon which its sharp teeth clapped, and then with a growl bounded off, but stopped and came back, dropped the bone in the sand, looked up at Tom, and threw up its head to howl again.

"Why, halloo! what's the matter then?" cried Tom, holding out his hand; "got another adder-bite in the nose?"

"Ow—ow!" moaned the dog, pressing its head up against the hand. Then it started away, barked sharply, turned, and looked at Tom.

"Here, let's have a look," he cried; and the dog uttered an eager bark. "Come here."

The dog ran to him directly, and after a momentary hesitation Tom took hold of its head, and held up its muzzle without the slightest resistance being offered.

"Well, we seem to have got to be pretty good friends," said Tom, as he looked carefully, and then let go; "but I don't see anything wrong. Besides, it isn't swollen."

The dog barked loudly now, and started away for a few yards.

"Here, here! Don't leave your sandy bone," cried Tom, and the dog ran back. "Here, catch hold."

Then there was a snap made at the tempting morsel, but it was dropped again directly, for the poor brute to throw up its muzzle and give forth another piteous howl.

"Oh, I say, don't do that," cried Tom; and this was responded to by a burst of barking.

"Why, what's the matter with you? Mouth sore? Toothache?"

There was another burst of barking, and the dog ran on a few yards, and looked back to bark again.

"I don't understand your language, old chap," cried Tom. "What do you want? Found a rabbit round here?"

Another eager bark, and the dog pricked up its ears, and looked more and more excited.

"All right, come and pick this up then. It's too good to leave."

The dog rushed at the bone as Tom turned it over with his foot, seized it, and ran on again, dropped it, and barked. Then, as the boy advanced, it seized the bone and ran on farther, to go through the same performance.

"Very well, I'll come," cried Tom. "Bound to say he has found an adder somewhere, and wants me to kill it, though I should hardly think there are any about now," and he set off at a trot after the dog, whose whole manner changed at this, for it went bounding off along the road, stopping every now and then to drop the bone and bark excitedly; twice over it left the meat and ran on, but at a word it came back, picked it up, and went on as before, with tail and ears erect, looking as full of business as could be.

"Isn't this very stupid?" muttered Tom; "me running after this miserable-looking brute. He's going to change masters, and wants me to go hunting with him—that's what it is. Pete has knocked him about once too often. Wonder what uncle would say if I took such an object back. And old David!"

He laughed heartily as he pictured the gardener's disgust, but somehow he could not help feeling satisfied by the dog's show of affection.

At this point he stopped, for they had gone some distance along beside the fir-wood, and to try how the animal would behave, he called it.

The bone was dropped, and the animal rushed back to him barking excitedly, allowing itself to be patted, and then jumping up and butting its head against him in a way more eager than pleasant.

"Well, isn't that enough?" cried Tom, giving the dog a few friendly pats, which made it dart on again barking.

"Here! hi! The bone!" and the dog dashed back, picked it up, and bolted steadily on again, till at about a mile from Heatherleigh it stopped by an opening into the wood, bounded up the sandy bank, and stood there barking as it looked back.

"Look here," cried Tom, as he came up, and talking to the dog as if it understood him. "No treachery, old chap; Pete hasn't sent you, has he, to lure me into the wood for another fight? Because if that's it I'm going back. I don't want to knock myself about again—or be knocked," he added merrily.

There was a volley of barks here, and the dog was going to plunge into the depths of the fir-wood without the dropped bone, but a word checked it, and it picked up its mouthful and went on, while Tom hesitated at the edge.

"I'm not going any farther," he muttered. "What's the good?" but the dog was back, looking wilder and more excited than ever. "All right! go on then; I'm after you," he cried. "It will be a grand run before breakfast, and there's plenty of time."

From this moment, as Tom trotted quickly over the fir-needles at the dog's heels, the poor brute went steadily on, uttering a low, muffled bark every now and then as it threaded its way in and out among the fir-trees as if bound for some particular spot.

This began to impress Tom now, and he wondered why his companion did not begin to hunt about; then this wonder increased as first one and then another rabbit was put up, to dart away, eliciting low growls from the dog, but that was all. It showed not the slightest disposition to dash after them.

"Can dogs think?" said Tom to himself, with a new interest now in his pursuit. "He must mean something. Is it an adder? I'll be bound to say he is going right away to that open place where he was stung, to show me the dead viper that he has killed."

The farther they went on, the more convinced Tom felt that this was the case, for they were going right in the direction, and making good progress too, the dog never stopping for a moment, but just swinging its ugly head round to see if it was followed before settling to its steady trot once more.

This went on for quite half-an-hour, and Tom was pretty well breathless as he stopped to have a bit of rest, while the dog halted, dropped its bone, turned up its head, and howled again dismally.

"I can't help it, old chap," cried Tom; "I haven't got four legs to run with; I must walk now."

As the dog saw him advance it barked joyously again, and trotted on once more, but more slowly as it found that it was not followed so swiftly.

Then all at once a fresh idea flashed through Tom's brain, and he fell a-wondering whether he could be right. He had never been across the wood this way before, but it was undoubtedly in the direction of Pete's lurking-place under the great pine-tree, and it seemed possible that the dog was making for there.

But why? For what reason?

Tom felt uneasy, and involuntarily, in spite of a slight sensation of shrinking, began to trot once more, while the dog seemed to gladly increase its pace after a look back.

"It must be," thought Tom; "he is leading me straight to the sandy cave. What for?"

An undefined sensation of uneasiness began to increase upon him. He was getting hot with exercise, but his blood was quite cool. Imagination had not stirred him; he had had no breakfast; and if a fight was before him, he felt most decidedly that he would rather not. In this spirit then he kept on telling himself that he might as well turn back now, but all the same he kept trotting on after the dog, putting off the return till he had gone a little farther and a little farther, and always keeping on, till all at once it seemed to be a little lighter on ahead, and he strained his eyes in the full expectation of seeing Pete Warboys waiting for him.

"And if he is," he half thought, half muttered, "as sure as I live I'll get David to help me, and we'll trap and half kill this treacherous brute."

Another hundred yards, and he was looking wonderingly about him, for the place was strange. He had never been there before.

Then he grasped the meaning of the strangeness. The storm had evidently come down here with terrific force, making a path through the pine-forest, some of whose trees were laid like wheat after a heavy wind; while just in front one huge tree had been blown right over, and in falling had crushed down a dozen or more in the path of its fall, letting in light, and strewing the soft earth with broken limbs, and trunks lying like jack-straws on the ground.

"That's why he has brought me," said Tom, half aloud. "Halloo, where is he? Here! here! old boy, here!"

He was answered by a furious barking, and the dog sprang up into sight on the trunk of the big tree close up to its roots, barking furiously at him, and then turning and leaping down out of sight; while Tom felt as if all of a sudden his blood had begun to turn cold, and his legs beneath him had grown weak.

For a horrible thought had suddenly flashed across his mind, like a meteor over the field of the great telescope. He knew now the dumb language of the dog, and why it had fetched him; and as if to endorse his thought, there came from about a dozen yards away so wild and blood-curdling a yell, that for the moment he could not believe it to be the dog, but that it came from some one in mortal peril.

Chapter Fifty.

That cry was "help!" in its meaning as plainly as if it had come from a human throat, and with eyes hot and dry, Tom dashed forward with his worst fears confirmed.

The tree had been blown over by the storm, and he knew it now. It was the great pine whose roots overhung Pete's cavern, and now the hollow which formed the entrance was filled up by the roots, the narrow passage closed, and at the bottom of a new pit formed in the sand, where the buried roots had been torn out and broken off, there was the dog, with jaws open, tongue out, and eyes starting, tearing away at the sand, which kept gliding back as fast as it was thrown out, evidently trying to rescue its master, who must have been buried there.

"Oh, you good old chap!" cried Tom, as he sprang to the side of the pit; and the dog, taking the words for encouragement, uttered a loud bark, and tore away at the sand with its fore feet and kicked it away with its hind at a tremendous rate, sending it flying in quite a mist.

Tom had grasped the situation thoroughly now, and felt that Pete must have been sleeping in his cave that night with his dog, when the tree, only held on one side, had given way, burying him. Then the dog had contrived to scratch its way out, leaving its master prisoned to lie there in darkness, while during all the next day and night the faithful companion for whom he had shown so little kindness had howled, and howled in vain, for help.

Tom saw it all now, and he sprang down into the hollow from which the pine roots had been torn, to begin cheering on the dog, and helping with all his might; till once more he turned cold; but it was with a far more terrible chill, as he felt that it was all those hours since Pete had been covered in. Worse, the position of the root indicated that one side had been driven right into the cave, the old roof, as it were, sinking down, and only one thing could have happened—the unfortunate occupant must have been crushed to death.

But the dog was animated by no such ideas. It knew that its master was below, and it panted, and growled, and snarled as it tore away at the sand.

Then a fresh idea struck Tom. He could do but little good; he must run for help, and bring men with shovels, a rope, levers, and an axe, for they would perhaps have to cut the unhappy prisoner free.

But no; he might be the means of the poor fellow losing his life if a spark still lingered. If he could only reach his face and uncover that before going for aid! And so he toiled on, scooping out the sand with both hands close by where the dog tore, for every now and then it buried its muzzle, snuffling and blowing, and raised it again to bark furiously.

"He knows," thought Tom; and he tore away with all his might down there upon his knees, close at the side of the dog, to whom he uttered a cheering word of encouragement, accompanied by a pat on the back.

But it was slow work, for every now and then the sand from above crumbled down, great pats dropped from amongst the roots as soon as that beneath was taken away, and at the end of half-an-hour a feeling of despair accompanied the deadly weariness that now attacked his arms and shoulders, and involuntarily Tom Blount uttered a piteous cry.

It was from the hopelessness of what he was doing that this cry escaped him, but the dog took it for one of encouragement, and it plunged its nose into the loose sand again, grew more and more excited as it tore away, and suddenly, to Tom's astonishment, head and shoulders disappeared, and it gradually struggled on till even the long thin tail disappeared.

Reaching down, the boy now found the sand come away more easily, and he was thrusting his arm in as far as it would go, when he felt the dog's cold nose against his hand; the dry sand seemed to boil up as he snatched back his arm, and directly after the dog worked itself out again, to stand barking with all its might, and then begin scratching once more.

After working a few minutes longer, Tom reached in again, and found that his hand moved about freely in one direction, but touched pieces of root in the other, and then he started back with a cry of horror, for down in a hollow between two pieces of root he felt a face.

The fear was only momentary. Then he was searching again, and this time easily touched the face, which was quite clear of sand, the roots above striding over it, so to speak, and, as he felt upward, proving to be some inches distant.

But the face was cold and still, and despair crept over the worker again. He fought it back though, tore away at the sand, and at the end of a few minutes had cleared an opening like a rabbit burrow, which he could see led right to the roots and must convey air.

Then with a tremendous burst of barking the dog made a plunge to get in, half filling the burrow before Tom could hold it back, when the intelligent beast stood with its tongue out, panting heavily, and seeming to question him with its eyes.

Tom thought for a moment, then he took off his neckerchief, pulled out his pocket-book, and tore out a leaf of paper, one side of which was covered with the names of the moon's craters.

"Come away," he cried to the dog, as he carefully stepped out on to the firm ground, the dog barking excitedly, but following him.

"Must stop and keep the hole open," thought Tom; and then, laying his paper on a tree-trunk, he wrote clearly:—

"Follow the dog to the fir-wood. Pete buried in sand. Bring help, shovels, axes, ropes.

"T.B."

He rolled this in his neckerchief, tied it round the dog's neck, and then stood pointing homeward.

"Go home!" he shouted; "fetch—fetch! Go home!"

The dog made no sound, but went off at a long loping gallop, Tom watching it till it was out of sight, and then cautiously creeping back into the hole to scoop away some of the sand which lay heaped round the burrow, to keep watch by one who he felt sure was dead.

All Pete's short-comings were forgotten as Tom sat there, feeling that he dare do no more for fear of loosening the sand, and bringing it trickling down like so much water; all he could think of then was, that a fellow-creature lay buried close to him mutely asking for help, and he wanted to convince himself that he had done everything possible in the way of giving that aid.

It was a difficult matter to mentally decide, and there were moments when he felt that he ought not to have trusted to the dog, but should have gone himself, for a dozen things might prevent help coming, even if the dog proved to be a trustworthy messenger.

So strong was this idea, that three times over he was on the point of starting off to run back; but each time just as he was rising, the sand came trickling down in a way which showed how soon the burrow would be closed up; and without air, now that the place had been opened, he felt that the last chance would be gone.

So Tom settled himself down to keep the burrow clear, trembling at times as he listened, faintly hoping that the words he spoke now and then might elicit a reply.

But he hearkened in vain, all was solemnly still save the calls of the birds, and the rustling made by the rabbits as they chased each other in and out among the pines. By and by a squirrel came racing up, caught sight of him, sprang to the nearest tree-trunk, dashed up it, and then out upon the first big horizontal bar, where it sat twitching its beautiful tail, scolding him angrily for intruding in what it looked upon as its own private property.

After a time too there was the cheery call of the nuthatch, and the busy little bird flitted into sight, to alight upon a pine-trunk, and begin creeping here and there, head up or head down, peering into every crack, and probing it in search of insects. A flock of jays, too, came jerking themselves into the tree-tops, displaying their black and white feathers, the china-blue patches upon their wings, and one in particular came quite near, setting up its soft loose crest, and showing its boldly-marked moustachios as it peered with first one light-blue eye, then with the other, at the motionless object seated in the sand-pit, wondering whether it was alive.

Tom saw all these things that morning, for in his excited state they were forced upon him, though all the time he seemed to be following his messenger through the wood, keeping up its long steady canter; now diving between two closely-growing trees, now bounding over a clump of bracken, and now seeming to catch one end of the neckerchief in a strand of blackberry thorn, at which the dog tugged till the silk was torn and freed. Again he saw the dog caught in this fashion, and soon after watched it reach the edge of the wood and bound down into the lane, where it soon after encountered a gipsy-like party, who caught sight of the dog's strange collar, and sought to stop it, and steal the letter, for which the dog fought fiercely, and finally escaped by leaping back into the wood and disappearing entirely, so that he could trace it no more.

All imagination, but as real to him as a troubled dream, till he stooped once more to clear the opening, and gaze in, shuddering, and afraid to break the awful stillness around.

Then he crouched again upon his knees to listen, and wonder whether the dog had reached Heatherleigh yet. Next whether it would ever have the intelligence to make its way there, and if it did, whether it would not pretty surely be chased away by David, who would for certain be the first to see it, and begin throwing stones.

“I wish I had thought of that before,” muttered Tom despairingly; and as the time went on he despaired more and more of seeing the long-looked-for help arrive. For he told himself that he had been mad ever to dream of the dog proving a successful messenger, since, according to his calculation at last, there had been ample time for the journey to have been made thrice over.

It was of no use to shout for help or to whistle, for nobody ever came through these woods, save a poacher now and then by night, to set wires or traps for the rabbits; and at last in despair Tom felt that he must go.

Then hope came once more, as he thought better of the dog, for what greater intelligence could dumb beast have shown than, after struggling out of the cave, to have made its way not to its regular home, where it could only have appealed to the feeble old grandmother, but straight to one whom, though no friend, it had seen more than once with its master?

“See,” he said to himself, “how, in spite of all driving away, the poor thing kept on coming back to the cottage, and how wonderfully it led me here, and worked by my side. He’ll do it. I’m sure he will, and before long I shall see uncle coming.”

Then the time wore on, till these hopes were dashed again, and a despairing fit of low spirits attacked the watcher. “It’s of no use,” he said, half aloud; “I must go;” and he bent over the still open hole, to try and think out some plan of keeping back the sand. But all in vain; he felt that there was no way. Either he must stop there to keep on scooping the place free every few minutes, or leave it to take its chance while he went for help.

“No, I can’t,” he cried; “it’s throwing away the very last hope. I must stay. Oh, why does not some one come?”

Tom’s face darkened now, for his over-strained imagination had painted a fresh picture—that of the miserable-looking cur somewhere close at hand, settled down in a hollow to deliberately gnaw the sandy bone. For it was too much to expect of a dog that, after perhaps starving for eight-and-forty hours, it would leave the meal for which it hungered, and go and deliver such a message as that upon which it was sent.

“Oh, how long! how long!” he groaned. “I could have gone there and back half-a-dozen times.”

It was a moderate computation according to Tom’s feelings, for it seemed to him half the day must have glided by in the agony he was suffering.

But it had not. Time had been going steadily on at its customary rate, in spite of the way in which the lad in his excitement had pushed on the hands of his mental clock.

“I must go,” he cried at last, “or no help will come. That brute is somewhere close by, I’m sure. Here, hi!” he shouted; but there was no reply—no dog came bounding up; and after listening for a few minutes he began to whistle loudly, when his heart seemed suddenly to stop its beating as he leaned forward listening, for, faint and distant but quite clear, there came an answering whistle.

He whistled again, and he pressed his hand upon his breast, feeling half choked with emotion.

The signal was answered, and directly after there was a distant hail, followed by a joyous barking, and the dog came bounding up, to rush down into the hollow, thrust its sharp nose into the burrow, take it out, begin barking again, and then dash off once more among the clustering pine-trunks.

Tom whistled again, then hailed, was answered, hailed again, and sank down half choked by the emotion he felt, and hard pressed to keep back a burst of feeling which tried to unman him.

“This way! ahoy!” he yelled, as he leaped up out of the hole, himself once more. “Quick! help! ahoy!”

Then the dog tore up barking furiously, half wild with excitement, and directly after Tom caught sight of the Vicar, closely followed by his uncle; and then came David with a bundle of tools over his shoulder, followed at a short distance by the village bricklayer, the carpenter, and two more men.

At this a peculiar giddy feeling came over the watcher, there was a strange singing in his ears, and he stood there as if stunned.

Chapter Fifty One.

“Where is he?” cried Uncle Richard. “Yes, I see!”

The words brought Tom back to himself, and he was as active again as the rest, his strange seizure having lasted only a few moments.

“Heaven grant that we are not too late!” said the Vicar. “Here, Tom, you had better keep the dog back.”

“But you are sure some one is buried here?” said Uncle Richard.

“Yes; it is Pete Warboys—he has a kind of cave here. It’s crushed in,” Tom hastened to explain.

“If we try to dig him out we shall suffocate him,” cried Uncle Richard, speaking as if he had no doubt of the boy living still. “Look here, carpenter—David, there is only one way: three of us must be here with a rope fastened to this great root, and three others must work at a branch yonder. We shall have great leverage then, and we may be able to turn the trunk right over.”

“Want a screw-jack, sir,” said the carpenter.

“We must make screw-jacks of ourselves,” cried Uncle Richard. “You, David, take the axe and lop off a few of the

branches that will be in our way; you, carpenter, saw off three or four of these roots as closely as you can; Tom, keep the hole open; Mr Maxted, keep the dog out of the way; I'll make fast the ropes."

Every one went to work at once as Uncle Richard fell back into his old way when he was a planter with a couple of hundred coolies under him, and acre after acre of primeval forest to clear before he could begin to cultivate the ground.

Then the dog barked furiously for a few moments, but at a word from Tom crouched panting with its tongue out and ears pricked, evidently satisfied with the efforts being made to release its master. The strokes of the axe fell thick and fast, the saw rasped through the wood, and dust and chips flew, while the forest echoed to the sounds of busy work.

Best part of an hour's hard toil, and then one side of the tree was fairly clear; the ropes were tied to root and branch projecting at right angles, and the ends passed round tree-trunks.

"Now then!" said Uncle Richard. "Ready?"

"Hadn't we better haul straight, sir?" cried the carpenter. "It'll give us more power."

"No," said Uncle Richard; "the pulling will be harder, but we can hold inch by inch this way, and make fast the ropes when we have turned the trunk over."

"Right, sir," said the man.

Then the word was given, and after a glance to see that the burrow was still open, Tom seized the end of the rope, to add his bit of weight, wondering the while whether they would injure the poor fellow beneath, but pretty well satisfied that they were pulling right away.

The tree creaked and moved, some smaller branches snapped, but no good was done.

"All together again," cried Uncle Richard; and they panted and hauled, but all in vain.

"Off with that rope from the branch," cried Uncle Richard.

This was done, and it was then made fast to another projecting root, so that all could pull at the one end.

Again the word was given, but there was no result, and after a couple more tries the task seemed hopeless, when Tom seized the saw, and began to cut at a piece of root which he had seen rise a little and move some sand.

"Hah, that's right," cried the Vicar; "that's a sound root, and holds the tree down."

In five minutes the saw was through, and once more all began to haul, when the great tree seemed to give, turning over slowly like a wheel, and amidst shouts and cheers, and a furious burst of barking from the dog, the mass turned more and more, till the whole tree, with its vast root, had made a complete revolution; and when the ropes had been made fast, to secure it, there was the great hollow clear, but the sand had gone down with a rush, and the burrow was covered in.

Tom did not wait for the trunk to be secured, for he had seen the result.

"Don't, boy, don't," shouted the Vicar; "the tree may come back and crush you."

"Let it!" muttered Tom between his teeth, as he dropped upon his knees, scooping away at the sand, helped now by the dog, which began to be too useful, and got in the way. All the same though, by the time the tree was fast the sand had been swept from Pete Warboys' face; and David and Uncle Richard stooping and passing their hands beneath him, very little effort was required to draw him right out of the hole, and up among the pine-trees, where he was laid gently down, amid a profound silence, while Uncle Richard knelt beside him, and the dog, after a furious volley of barks, began to snuffle at its master's face.

"Dead?" whispered the Vicar, as Uncle Richard carefully made his examination, just as he had many a time played medicine-man or surgeon to a sick or injured coolie.

He made some answer, but it was drowned by the dog, which threw up its head and uttered a mournful howl, while a feeling of awe made those around look on in silence.

"You are in too great a hurry, my good friend," said Uncle Richard then, as he turned to the dog. "There's a little life in your master yet, but one arm is broken, and I'm afraid that he is badly crushed."

Tom drew a breath full of relief, while his uncle rose to his feet.

"I think, Maxted, if you will go on first, and warn his grandmother, and have a bed ready, and also get the doctor there, we will make a litter of a couple of poles and some fir-boughs, and carry him home. It would be better for you to go to the old woman than for Tom."

"Yes," said the Vicar, who set aside his regular quiet, sedate bearing, and ran off through the wood at a sharp trot.

"Out with your knife, Tom," cried Uncle Richard; "cut a piece three feet long off one of those ropes, and unravel it into string."

Tom set to work, while the carpenter cut off a couple of straight fir-boughs, which David trimmed quickly with the axe, and a few cross-pieces were sawn off about thirty inches long.

Then Tom stared in wonder to see how rapidly his uncle bound the short pieces of wood across the long, afterwards weaving in small pieces of the green fir, and forming a strong, fairly soft litter.

“Not the first time by many, Tom,” he said. “Accidents used to be frequent in clearing forest in the East. There: that will do. Now for our patient.”

He knelt down beside Pete, placed a bough of thickly-clothed fir beneath the injured arm, and then closely bound all to the boy’s side.

“More harm is often done to a broken limb by letting it swing about,” he said, “than by the fracture itself. Now four of us together. Pass your hands beneath him, enlace your fingers, and when I give the word, all lift.”

This was done, Pete deposited upon the litter, and secured there by one of the ropes, after which he was carefully borne to his grandmother’s cottage, where the doctor was already waiting, and the old woman, tramping about stick in hand, looking as if prepared to attack her visitors for bringing down mischief upon the head of her grandson.

At last, as the boy was laid upon a mattress, she began to scold at Uncle Richard, but only to be brought up short by the doctor, who sternly bade her be silent, and not interrupt him while he examined Pete and set his arm.

This silenced the poor old woman, who stood back looking on, till the doctor had finished, and gone away to fetch medicine for his patient.

“Yes,” he said, “very bad, and will be worse, for in all probability he will have a sharp attack of fever, and be delirious when he recovers his speech. It is really wonderful that he is still alive.”

As these words were said, Tom looked back through the open cottage door, to see Pete lying motionless upon the mattress, and the dog sitting up beside him, looking down at the still white face.

“Looking at the dog, Tom?” said the Vicar.

“Yes, sir. What a faithful beast it is.”

“Splendid,” said the Vicar. “And yet I’ve seen Pete ill-use the poor brute, and I’m afraid it was half-starved; but it does not seem to influence the dog’s affection for him.”

“No, sir, not a bit. There are worse things than dogs, sir.”

“Yes, Tom,” said the Vicar, tightening his lips, “a great deal.”

That night Pete’s eyes opened, and he began talking rapidly about falling trees and sand, and the black darkness; but his grandmother, worn-out with watching, had fallen asleep, and there was no one to hearken but the dog, which reached over every now and then to lick his face or hands.

And at the touch the injured, delirious lad grew calmer, to drop off into his feverish sleep again, while, when Tom came early the next morning, it was to meet the doctor coming away.

“Don’t go in,” he said; “you can do no good; quiet and time are the only remedies for him.—Ah, good-morning, Mr Maxted.”

For the Vicar was up early too, and had come to see after his worst parishioner.

“Good-morning, doctor. May I go in?”

“Yes, if you will be quiet.”

The Vicar stole in, stayed for some time, and then came out as silently as he had gone in, to look inquiringly at the doctor.

“You think he will die?” he said.

“I hope not,” replied the doctor earnestly. “Not if I can prevent it.”

Just then there was another visitor to the cottage in the person of Uncle Richard, while soon after David appeared round the corner, where there was a sharp bend in the lane, having risen and started an hour earlier so as to come round by Mother Warboys’, and inquire about the injured lad.

“Don’t you go a-thinking that I keer a nutshell about Pete Warboys, Master Tom,” said David, as he was looking into the cottage with the boy by his side, “because I don’t, and it sims to me as the fewer Pete Warboyses there is in the world the better we should be. It warn’t him I come about’s mornin’—not Pete, you know, but the lad as had had an accident, and got nearly killed. See?”

“Yes, I see, David,” said Tom, nodding his head.

“It’s him as has got the friends—the young accident—not Pete. Say, Master Tom?”

“Yes.”

“If Pete Warboys dies—”

“Hush! don’t talk about it,” cried Tom in horror.

“Oh, cert’ny not, sir, if you don’t wish me to. May I talk about the dog?”

“Oh yes, of course,” cried Tom, as he looked round at the bright, smiling earth, glittering with diamond-like dew, and thought how terrible it would be for one so young to be snatched away.

"Well, sir, I was thinking a deal about that dog last night, for I couldn't sleep, being a bit overcome like."

"Yes, I was awake a long time," said Tom, with a sigh.

"Not so long as I was, sir, I'll bet a bewry pear. Well, sir, I lay a-thinking that if—mind, I only says if, sir—if Pete Warboys was to die, how would it be, if master didn't say no, and I was to knock him up a barrel for a kennel to live in our yard?"

"I should ask uncle to let me keep him, David, for he's a wonderful dog."

"I don't go so far as that, sir, for he's a dog as has had a horful bad eddication, but something might be made of him; and it was a pity, seeing why he came yowling about our place, as you was so handy heaving stones at him."

"What?" cried Tom indignantly.

"Well, sir, p'r'aps it was me. But it weer a pity, warn't it?"

"Brutal," cried Tom.

"Ah, it weer. He's a horful hugly dog though."

"Not handsome certainly," replied Tom.

"That he arn't, sir, nowheres. But if he was fed reg'lar like, so as to alter his shape, and I took off part of his ears, and about half his tail, he might be made to look respectable."

"Rubbish!" cried Tom.

"Oh no, it arn't, sir. Dogs can be wonderfully improved. But what do you say to askin' cook to save the bits and bones while there's no one to feed him? I'll take 'em every day as I go home from work. What do you say?"

"Yes, of course," cried Tom; and from that day the ugly mongrel was regularly fed, but after the first feeding it did not trouble David to take the food, but left its master's side about three o'clock every afternoon, and came and fetched the food itself.

"Which it's only nat'ral," said David, with a grim smile; "for if ever I did see a dog as had ribs that looked as if they'd been grown into a basket to hold meat, that dog is Pete Warboys'; but I hope as good meat and bones 'll do something to make his hair grow decent, for he's a reg'lar worser as he is."

Chapter Fifty Two.

It was about a fortnight after the accident, that Tom was returning one day from Mother Warboys' cottage, where the old woman had sat scowling at him, while Pete lay back perfectly helpless, and smiled faintly at his visitor, when he met Mrs Fidler by the gate looking out for him.

"There's some one come from London to see you, Master Tom."

"From London?"

"Yes, sir; he said his name was Pringle."

"Pringle!" cried Tom eagerly. "Where is he?"

"In the dining-room with your uncle, sir; and I was to send you in as soon as you came back."

Tom hurried in, and found the clerk from Gray's Inn very smartly dressed. His hat was all glossy, and there was a flower in his button-hole.

"Ah, Pringle," cried the boy, "I'm so glad to see you. This is Pringle, who was so kind to me, uncle, when I was at the office."

"Yes," said Uncle Richard, rather grimly; "Mr Pringle has already introduced himself, and—ahem!—told me of the friendly feeling which existed between you."

The clerk, who had evidently been very uncomfortable, had brightened up a little at the sight of Tom, but his countenance fell again at Uncle Richard's words.

"Now, Mr Pringle, perhaps you will be good enough to repeat that which you have told me—in confidence, for I should like my nephew to hear it, so that he can give his opinion upon the matter."

"Certainly, sir," said Pringle, brightening up, and becoming the sharp-speaking clerk once more. "The fact is, Mr Thomas, I have left Mr Brandon's office—which I won't deceive you, sir, he didn't give me no chance to resign, but in consequence of a misunderstanding with Mr Samuel, because I wouldn't tell lies for him, he sent me off at once."

"I am very sorry, Pringle," said Tom sympathetically.

"So am I, sir," replied the clerk; "and same time, so I ain't. But to business, sir. So long as I was Mr Brandon's clerk, sir, my mouth seemed to be shut, sir; but now I ain't Mr Brandon's clerk, sir, it's open; and feeling, as I did, that there are things that you and your respected uncle ought to hear—"

"About my uncle and cousin?" cried Tom, flushing.

"Yes, sir. There was certain papers, sir, as—"

"Thank you, Pringle," cried Tom quickly; "neither my Uncle Richard nor I want to hear a single word about matters that are dead and buried."

"Thank you, Tom," cried Uncle Richard eagerly. "Mr Pringle will bear me out when I say, that you have used my exact words."

"Yes, sir," said Pringle, looking into his hat, as if to consult the maker's name. "I can corroborate that—the very words."

"So you see, Mr Pringle," continued Uncle Richard, rising to lay his hand upon his nephew's shoulder, "you have brought your information to a bad market, and if you expected to sell—"

"Which I'm sure I didn't, sir," cried the clerk, springing up, and indignantly banging his hat down upon the table, to its serious injury about the crown. "I never thought about a penny, sir, and I wouldn't take one. I came down here, sir, because I was free, sir, and to try and do a good turn to Mr Thomas here, sir, who was always a pleasant young gentleman to me, and I didn't like the idea of his being done out of his rights."

"Indeed!" said Uncle Richard, looking at the man searchingly.

"Yes, sir, indeed; I'd have spoken sooner if I could, but I always said to myself there was plenty of time for it before Mr Thomas would be of age. Good-morning, sir; good-morning, Mr Thomas. I'd like to shake hands with you once more. I'm glad to see you, sir, grown so, and looking so happy; but don't you go thinking that I came down on such a mean errand as that. I ain't perfect, I know, and in some cases I might have expected something, but I didn't here."

"I don't think you did, Pringle," cried Tom, holding out his hand, at which the clerk snatched.

"Neither do I, Mr Pringle, now," said Uncle Richard, "though I did at first. Thank you for your proffer, but once more, that unhappy business is as a thing forgotten to my nephew and me."

"Very good, sir; I'm very sorry I came," began Pringle.

"And I am not. I beg your pardon, Mr Pringle; and I am sure my nephew is very glad to see you."

"Oh, don't say no more about it, sir; I only thought—"

"Yes, you did not quite know us simple country people," said Uncle Richard. "There, Tom, see that your visitor has some lunch. Dinner at the usual time, and we'll have tea at half-past seven, so as to give you both a long afternoon. I dare say Mr Pringle will enjoy a fine day in the country."

"I should, sir, but I've to go back."

"Plenty of time for that," said Uncle Richard; "the station fly shall be here to take you over in time for the last train. There, you will excuse me."

That evening, as Tom rode over to the station with his visitor, and just before he said good-bye, Pringle rubbed away very hard at his damaged hat, but in vain, for the breakage still showed, and exclaimed—

"I don't care, sir, I won't believe it."

"Believe what, Pringle?"

"As them two's brothers, sir. It's against nature. Look here, I wouldn't have it at first, but he was quite angry, and said I must, and that I was to take it as a present from you."

"What is it?" said Tom; "a letter?"

"Yes, sir, to your uncle's lawyer, asking him as a favour to try and get me work."

"Then you'll get it, Pringle," cried Tom.

"That I shall, sir. And look here, cheque on his banker for five-and-twenty pounds, as he would make me have, to be useful till I get a fresh clerkship. Now, ought I to take it, Mr Thomas?"

"Of course," cried Tom. "There, in with you. Good-night, Pringle, good-night."

"But ought I to take that cheque, Mr Thomas? because I didn't earn it, and didn't want to," cried Pringle, leaning out of the carriage window; "Ought I to keep it, sir?"

"Yes," cried Tom, as the train moved off, and he ran along the platform, "to buy a new hat."

Chapter Fifty Three.

"And you did not know anything about it, Pete?" said Tom one day, as he sat beside the lad in Mother Warboys' cottage, while the old woman kept on going in and out, muttering to herself, and watching them uneasily.

Pete looked very thin and hollow-cheeked, but for the first time perhaps for many years his face was perfectly clean,

and his hair had been clipped off very short; while now, after passing through a phase of illness which had very nearly had a fatal result, he was slowly gaining strength.

The dog, which had been lying half asleep beside his master, suddenly jumped up, to lay its long, thin nose on Tom's knee, and stood watching him, perfectly happy upon feeling a hand placed for treating as a sheath into which he could plunge the said nose.

"You give him too much to eat," said Pete. Then suddenly, "No, I can't recklect. It was blowin' when I got in to go and sleep, 'cause she was allus grumblin', and then somethin' ketched me, and my arm went crack, and it got very hot, and I went to sleep. I don't 'member no more. I say."

"Yes."

"I shan't take no more doctor's stuff, shall I?"

But he did—a great deal; and in addition soups and jellies, and sundry other preparations of Mrs Fidler's, till he was able to go about very slowly with his arm in a sling, to where he could seat himself in some sandy hollow, to bask in the sun along with his dog.

"But it's bringing up all the good in his nature, Tom," said the Vicar, rubbing his hands, "and we shall make a decent man of him yet."

"Humph! doubtful!" said Uncle Richard.

"You go and look for comets and satellites," cried the Vicar good-humouredly. "Tom's on my side, and we'll astonish you yet. Wait a bit."

Uncle Richard smiled, and David, when Pete formed the subject of conversation, used to chuckle.

"Not you, Master Tom," he said; "you'll never make anything of him, but go on and try if you like. I believe a deal more in the dog. He arn't such a bad one. But Pete—look here, sir. If you could cut him right down the thick part below his knees, which you couldn't do, 'cause he arn't got no thick part, for them shambling legs of his are like pipe-shanks—"

"What are you talking about, David?" said Tom merrily.

"Pete Warboys, Master Tom. I say, if you could cut him down like that, and then graft in a couple o' scions took of a young gent as I knows—never you mind who—bind 'em up neatly, clay 'em up, or do the same thing somewheres about his middle, you might grow a noo boy, as'd bear decent sort o' fruit. But you can't do that; and Pete Warboys 'll be Pete Warboys as long as he lives."

The old gardener had some ground for his bad opinion, for as the time rolled on, Pete grew strong and well, and then rapidly began to grow into a sturdy, strongly-built fellow, who always had a grin and a nod for Tom when they met; but it was not often, for he avoided every one, becoming principally a night bird, and only showed his gratitude to those who had nursed him through his dangerous illness, after saving his life, by religiously abstaining from making depredations upon their gardens.

"Which is something," David said with a chuckle. "But I allus told you so, Master Tom; I allus told you."

Tom, too, proved that the country air and his life with his uncle agreed with him, for he grew wonderfully.

"But you do sit up too much o' nights, Master Tom," said Mrs Fidler plaintively. "I wouldn't care if you'd invent a slope up in the top of the mill; but you won't."

"I often get a nap on the couch down below," said Tom, laughing. "Look here, Mrs Fidler, come up again some evening, and you shall see how grand it all is."

"No, my dear, no," said the housekeeper, shaking her head. "I don't understand it all. It scares me when you show me the moon galloping away through the skies, and the stars all spinning round in that dizzy way. It makes me giddy too; and last time I couldn't sleep for thinking about the world going at a thousand miles an hour, for it can't be safe. Then, too, I'm sure I should catch a cold in my head with that great shutter open. I was never meant for a star-gazer. Let me be as I am."

And time went on, with Tom plunging more and more deeply into the grand science, and rapidly becoming his uncle's right-hand man, helping him with the papers he sent up to the learned societies, till in the course of a couple of years people began to talk of the discoveries made with the big telescope at Heatherleigh.

Then came a morning about two years and a half after the terrible storm. Tom, who had not retired till three o'clock, for it had been a gloriously clear night, and he and his uncle had been busy for many hours over Saturn's satellites, which had been observed with unusual clearness, was sleeping soundly, when he was awakened by the sharp rattling of tiny pebbles against his window.

"Hulloo! what is it, David?" he cried, as he threw open his window.

"I told you so, sir; I told you so," cried the gardener. "I allus said how it would be."

"Some one been after the apples again?"

"Apples! no, sir; ten times worse than that. Pete's took."

"What?"

"Just heard it from our policeman, sir, who has been out all night. Pete Warboys has been for long enough mixed up with the Sanding gang, and was out with them last night over at Brackenbury Park, when the keepers come upon them,

and there was a fight. One of the keepers was shot in the legs, and two of the poachers was a good deal knocked about. They were mastered, and four of 'em are in the lock-up."

"But you said Pete was taken."

"Yes, sir, he's one of 'em; and that arn't the worst of it."

"Then what is?"

"His dog flew at one of the keepers when they were holding Pete Warboys, and the man shot him dead."

"Poor wretch!" said Tom.

"Ay, I'm real sorry about that dog, sir. He was a hugly one surelie, but just think what a dog he'd ha' been if he'd been properly brought up."

The news was true enough; and fresh tidings came the very next day to Heatherleigh, Uncle Richard hearing that his brother had disposed of his practice, and gone to live down at Sandgate for his health.

Then, as the days glided by, the report came of examinations before the magistrates, which the Vicar attended.

"I went, Tom," he said, "because I was grieved about the young man, for I tried again and again to wean him from his life; but nothing could be done—everything was too black against him. He and the others have been committed for trial, and Pete is sure to be severely punished."

"Perhaps it will be for the best, Mr Maxted," said Tom. "It will be a very sharp lesson, and he may make a decent man after all."

"*Nil desperandum*," said the Vicar; "but I am afraid."

The trial came on, and Tom felt tempted to be present. It was not for the sake of seeing his old enemy in the dock, but out of interest in his fate, which on account of his youth resulted in the mildest sentence given to a prisoner that day; and as soon as he heard it pronounced by the judge, Pete rather startled the court by shouting loudly to Tom, whom he had sat and watched all through—

"Good-bye, Master Tom; God bless yer!"

The next minute he was gone, and somehow the young astronomer went away back home feeling rather sad, though he could not have explained why.

It was about a month later that a legal-looking letter arrived, directed to him, beautifully written in the roundest and crabbiest of engrossing hands.

It was from Pringle, telling how, thanks to Uncle Richard's letter of recommendation, he was never so happy in his life, for he was in the best of offices, and had the best of masters, who was a real gentleman, with a wonderful knowledge of the law.

> "You'd have taken to it, Mr Thomas, I'm sure, if you'd been under him; but one never knows, and it wasn't to tell you this that I've taken the liberty of writing to you. I suppose you know that your uncle sold his practice, but perhaps you don't know why. I heard all about it from the new man they had. I met him over a case my gov'nor was conducting. It was all along of Mr Samuel, who used to go on awfully. He got at last into a lot of trouble and went off. You'll never believe it; but it's a fact. He's 'listed in the Royal Artillery."

"And the best place for him," said Uncle Richard, frowning, when he read the letter in turn; "they will bring him to his senses. By the way, Tom, Professor Denniston is coming down to see our glass; he wants to make one himself double the size, and says he would like our advice."

"Our advice, uncle?" said Tom, laughing.

"Yes," said Uncle Richard seriously; "your advice, gained by long experience, will be as valuable as mine."

One more reminiscence of Tom Blount's country life, and we will leave him to his star-gazing, well on the high-road to making himself one of those quiet, retiring, scientific men of whom our country has such good cause to be proud.

Heatherleigh and its neighbourhood had been very peaceful for four years, and the word poacher had hardly been heard, when one day, as Tom was in the laboratory, he heard a sharp tapping being given at the yard gate with a stick, and going to the window he started, for there was a tall, dark, smart-looking artillery sergeant, standing looking up, ready to salute him as his face appeared.

"Cousin Sam!" mentally exclaimed Tom, and his face flushed.

"Beg pardon, sir; can I have a word with you?" came in a loud, decisive, military way.

"Why, it's Pete Warboys!" cried Tom. "Yes, all right; I'll come down," and he went below to where the sergeant stood, drawn up stiff, well set-up, and good-looking, waiting for the summons to enter.

"Yes, sir, it's me," said the stranger, smiling frankly.

"I shouldn't have known you, Pete."

"S'pose not, sir. They rubbed me down, and set me up, and the clothes make such a difference. Besides, it's over four years since you saw me."

“Yes—how time goes; but I did not know you had enlisted.”

“No, sir; I never said anything. You see, I came out of prison, and I didn’t want to come back here, for if I had, I couldn’t ha’ kept away from the rabbits and birds, and I should have been in trouble again. You made me want to do better, sir, but I never seemed as if I could; and just then up comes a recruiting sergeant, just as I was hesitating, and I looked at him, and heard what he had to say, how the service would make a man of me.”

“And you took the shilling, Pete?”

“Yes, sir; and the best day’s work I ever did,” said Pete, speaking sharply, decisively, and with a manly carriage about him that made Tom stare. “I was was bombardier in two years, and a month ago I got my sergeant’s stripes.”

He gave a proud glance at the chevrons on his arm as he spoke.

“I’m very glad, Pete.”

“Thankye, sir. I knew you would be. You did it, sir.”

“I?”

“Yes, sir. Mr Maxted used to talk to me, but it was seeing what you were set me thinking so much; but there was no way, and I got into trouble. I’m off to Malta, sir, in a month. On furlough now, and down here to see the old woman.”

“Ah! She’s very feeble now, Pete.”

“Very, sir. She’s awfully old; but she knew me directly, and began to blow me up.”

“What for?”

“Throwing myself away, sir,” cried Pete, with a merry laugh. “Poor old soul, though, she knows no better. Good-bye, sir. I shall see you again. I read your name in the paper the other day about finding a comet, and it made me laugh to think of the old days. Good-day, sir. I’m going to see Mr Maxted. I find he has been very good to the poor old granny since I’ve been away.”

“And some people say that the army’s a bad school,” said Mr Maxted that night at dinner, when Uncle Richard and Tom were spending the evening at the Vicarage. “If they would only do for all rough young men what they have done for Pete Warboys, it would be a grand thing. But I always did have hopes of him, eh, Tom?”

“Ah,” said Uncle Richard, “it’s a long lane that has no turning.”

“I say, Master Tom,” cried David, who never could see that his young master had grown a man, “did you see Pete Warboys? There: if anybody had took a hoath and swore it, I wouldn’t ha’ believed there could ha’ been such a change. Here, look at him. Six foot high, and as straight as a harrer. ’Member giving him the stick over the wall?”

“Ah, Mr David!” cried Pete, marching up. “How are the apples?—Beg pardon, Mr Blount, I forgot to say something to you last night.”

“Yes; what is it?” said Tom, walking aside with the sergeant.

“There’s curious things happen sometimes, sir; more curious than people think for.”

“Yes, often in science, Pete,” said Tom.

“Dessay, sir; but I mean in every-day life. Your cousin, sir.”

“Yes. What about him?” cried Tom eagerly.

“Him that was down here, sir, and I fetched the ladder for to get in yonder.”

“Then it was you, Pete?”

“Oh yes, sir; I helped him. I was a nice boy then. You’ll hardly believe it, but he’s in my company—a soldier. Private R.A.”

“My cousin?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And is he getting on well?” said Tom.

“Hum! ha!” said the sergeant stiffly. “He gets into trouble too often. I don’t think he’ll earn his stripes just yet. Good-morning, sir, and good-bye. But—”

“Yes, Pete.”

“Would you mind shaking hands, sir—once?” Tom’s hand darted out.

The next minute Pete was swinging along at the steady, firm rate of the British soldier on the march, and Tom Blount went back into the mill, to continue a calculation connected with the stars.

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VAST ABYSS ***

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