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"She grew to love these emerald leaves."

CHRISTMAS STORIES.

* * * * *

BLADE-O'-GRASS. GOLDEN GRAIN.

AND

BREAD AND CHEESE AND KISSES.

BY

B. L. FARJEON,

AUTHOR OF
"GRIF," "JOSHUA MARVEL," AND "LONDON'S HEART."

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LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1874.

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BLADE-O'-GRASS.

By B. L. FARJEON,

AUTHOR OF 'GRIF' and 'JOSHUA MARVEL.'

INTRODUCTION.

STONEY-ALLEY.

In the heart of a very maze of courts and lanes Stoney-alley proclaims itself. It is one of multitude of deformed thoroughfares, which are huddled together--by whim, or caprice, or in mockery--in a populous part of the City, in utter defiance of all architectural rules. It is regarded as an incontrovertible law, that everything must have a beginning; and Stoney-alley could not have been an exception to this law. It is certain that the alley and its surrounding courts and lanes must once upon a time have been a space where houses were not; where, perhaps, trees grew, and grass, and flowers. But it is difficult to imagine; more difficult still to imagine how they were commenced, and by what gradual means one wretched thoroughfare was added to another, until they presented themselves to the world in the shapes and forms they now bear; resembling an ungainly body with numerous limbs, every one of which is twisted and deformed. Easier to fancy that they and all the life they bear sprang up suddenly and secretly one dark night, when Nature was in a sullen mood; and that being where they are, firmly rooted, they have remained, unchangeable and unchanging, from generation to generation. Records exist of fair islands rising from the sea, clothed with verdure and replete with animal fife; but this is the bright aspect of phenomena which are regarded as delusions by many sober persons. Putting imagination aside, therefore, as a thing of small account in these days (if only for the purpose of satisfying unbelievers), and coming to plain matter of fact, it is not to be doubted that Stoney-alley and its fellows grew upon earth's surface, and did sot spring up, ready-made, from below--although, truth to tell, it was worthy of such a creation. In the natural course of things, the neighbourhood must have had architects and builders; but no record of them is extant, and none is necessary for the purposes of this story. Sufficient that Stoney-alley rears its ugly body--though lowly withal--in the very heart of London, and that it may be seen any day in the week in its worst aspect. It has no other: it is always at its worst.

Out of it crawl, from sunrise until midnight, men and women, who, when they emerge into the wide thoroughfare which may be regarded as its parent, not uncommonly pause for a few moments, or shade their eyes with their hands, or look about them strangely, as if they have received a surprise, or as if the different world in which they find themselves requires consideration. Into it crawl, from sunrise until midnight, the same men and women, who, it may be observed, draw their breath more freely when they are away from the wide thoroughfares, and who plunge into Stoney-alley as dusty, heat-worn travellers might plunge into a refreshing bath, where the cool waters bring relief to the parched skin. What special comfort these men and women find there, would be matter for amazement to hundreds of thousands of other men and women whose ways of life, happily, lie in pleasanter places. But Stoney-alley, to these crawlers, is Home.

Its houses could never have been bright; its pavements and roads--for it has those, though rough specimens, like their treaders--could never have been fresh. Worn-out stones and bricks, having served their time elsewhere and been cashiered, were probably brought into requisition here to commence a new and unclean life. No cart had ever been seen in Stoney-alley: it was too narrow for one. A horse had once lived there--a spare sad blind horse belonging to a costermonger, who worked his patient servant sixteen hours a-day, and fed it upon Heaven

knows what. It was a poor patient creature; and as it trudged along, with its head down, it seemed by its demeanour to express an understanding of its meanness. That it was blind may have been a merciful dispensation; for, inasmuch as we do not know for certain whether such beasts can draw comparisons as well as carts, it may have been spared the pangs of envy and bitterness, which it might have experienced at the sight of the well-fed horses that passed it on the road. It was as thin as a live horse well could be--so thin, that a cat might have been forgiven for looking at it with contempt, as being likely to serve no useful purpose after its worldly trudgings were ended. Its mane was the raggedest mane that ever was seen; and it had no tail. What of its hair had not been appropriated by its master the costermonger, had been plucked out ruthlessly, from time to time, by sundry boys and girls in Stoney-alley--being incited thereto by an ingenious youth, who plaited the horsehair into watchguards, and who paid his young thieves in weak liquorice-water, at the rate of a teaspoonful for every dozen hairs--long ones--from the unfortunate horse's tail. For years had this poor beast been wont to stumble over the stones in Stoney-alley when its day's work was over, and wait like a human being before its master's house for the door to open--rubbing its nose gently up and down the panels when a longer delay than usual occurred. The door being opened, it used to enter the narrow passage, and fill the house with thunderous sound as it walked into a little dirty yard, where a few charred boards (filched from a fire) had been tacked together in the form of a shed, which offered large hospitality to wind and rain. In this shed the wretched beast took its ease and enjoyed its leisure, and died one night so quietly and unexpectedly, that the costermonger, when he learnt the fact in the morning, cursed it for an ungrateful 'warmint,' and declared that if his dumb servant had yesterday shown any stronger symptoms of dying than it had usually exhibited, he would have sold it for 'two-pun-ten to Jimmy the Tinman.' So deeply was he impressed by the ingratitude of the animal, that he swore he would have nothing more to do with the breed; and he bought a donkey--a donkey with such a vicious temper, and such an obstinate disposition, that the costermonger, in his endeavours to render it submissive, became as fond of it as if it were one of his own kindred, and soon grew to treat it in exactly the same manner as he treated his wife. It would have been difficult, indeed, to decide which was the more important creature of the two--the wife or the donkey; for on two distinct occasions the costermonger was summoned before magistrate--once for ill-treating his wife, and once for ill-treating his donkey--and the sentence pronounced on each occasion was precisely the same. It may be noted as a curious contrast (affording no useful lesson that I am aware of), that when the costermonger came out of prison for ill-treating his wife, he went home and beat the poor creature unmercifully, who sat sobbing her heart out in a corner the while; and that when he came out of prison for ill-treating his donkey, he went into the rickety shed in his back-yard and belaboured the obstinate brute with a heavy stick. But the donkey, cunning after its kind, watched its opportunity, and gave the costermonger such a spiteful kick, that he walked lame for three months afterwards.

It would be unfair to the costermonger not to state, that he was not the only husband in those thoroughfares who was in the habit of beating his wife. He was but one of a very numerous Brute family, in whose breasts mercy finds no dwelling-place, and who marry and bring up children in their own form and likeness, morally as well as physically. It is to be lamented that, when the inhumanity of the members of this prolific family is brought before the majesty of the law for judgment--as is done every day of our lives--the punishment meted out is generally light and insignificant as compared to the offence. Yet it may be answered, that these wife-beaters and general Brutes were children once; and the question may be asked, Whether, taking into consideration that no opportunity was offered to them of acquiring a knowledge of a better condition of things, they are fully responsible for their actions now that they are men? We wage war against savage beasts for our own protection. But how about savage men, who might have been taught better--who might have been humanised? We press our thumb upon them, and make laws to punish the exercise of their lawless passions. But have they no case against us? Is all the right on our side, and all the wrong on theirs? That the problem is an old one, is the more to be lamented; every year, nay, every hour, its roots are striking deeper and deeper into the social stratum. The proverb, 'when things are quiet, let them be quiet,' is a bad proverb, like many others which are accepted as wisdom's essence. Not by a man's quiet face, but by his busy brain and heart, do we judge him. If there be benevolence in statesmanship, the problem should be considered in its entirety, without delay. By and by it may be too late.

PART I.

A STRANGE EVENT OCCURS IN STONEY-ALLEY.

Delicate feather-flakes of snow were floating gently down over all the City. In some parts the snow fell white and pure, and so remained for many hours. In other parts, no sooner did it reach the ground than it was converted into slush--losing its purity, and becoming instantly defiled. This was its fate in Stoney-alley; yet even there, as it rested upon the roofs and eaves, it was fresh and beautiful for a time. In which contrasted aspects a possible suggestion might arise of the capability of certain things for grace and holiness, if they are not trodden into the mire.

An event had just occurred in Stoney-alley which was the occasion of much excitement. This was nothing more or less than the birth of twin-girls in one of the meanest houses in the alley. The mother, a poor sickly woman, whose husband had deserted her, was so weakened and prostrated by her confinement, and by the want of nourishing food, that she lived but a dozen days after the birth of her babes. No one knew where the father was; he and his wife had not lived long in the neighbourhood, and what was known of him was not to his credit, although with a certain class he was not unpopular. He was lazy, surly fellow, who passed his waking hours in snarling at the better condition of things by which he was surrounded. The sight of carriage made his blood boil with envy; notwithstanding which he took delight in walking in the better thoroughfares of the City, and feeding his soul with the bitter sight of well-dressed people and smiling faces. Then he would come back to his proper home, and snarl at society to pot-house audiences, and in his own humble room would make his unhappy wife unhappier by his reviling and discontent He called himself working-man, but had as much right to the title as the vagabond-beggar who, dressed in broadcloth, is wheeled about in an easy-chair, in the West-end of London, and who (keeping a sharp look-out for the police the while) exhibits placard proclaiming himself to be a respectable commercial traveller, who has lost the use of his limbs. He traded upon the title, however, and made some little money out of it, hoping by and by to make more, when he had become sufficiently notorious as a public agitator. In the mean time, he (perhaps out of revenge upon society) deserted his wife when she was near her confinement, and left her to the mercy of strangers. She could not very well have fared worse than she did in that tender charge. She bore two babes, and died without a sign.

The mother was buried the day before Christmas, and the babes were left to chance charity. There were many women lodgers in the house in which the twin-girls had been born; but not one of them was rich enough to take upon herself the encumbrance of two such serious responsibilities. The station-house was spoken of, the Foundling, the workhouse; but not a soul was daring enough to carry out one of the suggestions. This arose from a fear of consequences--in the shape perhaps of an acknowledged personal responsibility, which might prove troublesome in the event of the station-house, the workhouse, or the Foundling refusing to take charge of the infants. Moses in the bulrushes was not in a worse plight than these unfortunate babes in Stoney-alley.

What on earth was to be done with them? Every person in the house might get into trouble, if they were left to die. The house, small as it was, accommodated five or six distinct families--each occupying room--in addition to two bachelors--one a vagrant, the other hawker in cheap glassware. These last could not be expected to assume the slightest shadow of responsibility. At length, a bright idea struck a charitable woman in the house. Armed only with calico apron with a large bib and an immense pocket in front (like stomacher), the charitable soul went about to solicit contributions in aid of the infants. As she walked round and about the narrow alleys and courts, soliciting from everybody, she made quite a stir in the neighbourhood by the vigorous manner in which she rattled the coppers in her capacious pocket. A great many gave, farthings and halfpence being in the ascendant--the largest contribution being given by the bachelor vagrant above mentioned, who gave twopence with the air of a gentleman--better still, with the true spirit of one; for he gave more than he could afford, and took no glory to himself for the action. Attracted by the rattle of the coppers, a singular-looking little man, with a shrivelled face, came to the door of his shop, and was instantly accosted by the kindhearted soul.

'*You'll* give a copper or two, I know, Mr. Virtue,' said the woman.

'Then you know more than I do,' replied the man. 'I don't give. I lend.'

'What'll you lend on 'em, then?' asked the woman good-humouredly.

'Lend on what?'

'On the poor little twins that was born in our house a fortnight ago?'

'O, that's what you're up to,' exclaimed the man, whose eyes were the most extraordinary pair that ever were seen in human face--for one was as mild as London milk, and the other glared like fury. 'That's what you're up to. Collectin' for them brats afore they learn to tell lies for theirselves.'

'They're as sweet a pair as ever you see,' said the woman. 'Just give it a thought, Mr. Virtue; you're a man o' sense----'

'Yah!' from the man, in the most contemptuous of tones, and with the fiercest of glares from his furious eye.

'There they are, without mother, as 'elpless as 'elpless can be,' persisted the woman, with wonderful display of cheerfulness. 'Come, now, you'll give a copper although you *do* look so grumpy.'

The cynic turned into his dark shop at this last appeal, but as he turned a penny dropped from his pocket. The woman picked it up with a pleasant laugh, and adding it to her store proceeded on her charitable mission. But industrious and assiduous as she was, the sum-total collected was very small; about sufficient to keep the infants for half a week. The kindhearted woman took the babes, and nursed them *pro tem*. She had a family of dirty children of her own, who were bringing themselves up in the gutters; for she could not attend to them, so fully was her time occupied in other ways. She could not, therefore, be expected to take permanent charge of the motherless babes. And so her husband told her, grumblingly, when he came home from his work on Christmas-eve. All that she said was, 'Poor little things!' and fell to--rough as she was--detecting imaginary beauties in the babies' faces--a common trick of mothers, which no man can afford to be cross with, especially in his own wife, and the woman who has borne him children.

'Can't put 'em out in the cold, the pretty dears!' said the woman tenderly.

'We've got enough of our own,' responded her husband not unkindly, and yet with a certain firmness; 'and there's more coming--worse luck!' But these last two words he said beneath his breath, and his wife did not hear them.

'All the more reason for being kind to these,' said the woman. 'They'll be handsome girls when they grow up. Look'ee here, Sam, this one's got a dimple, just like--like----' Her voice trailed off softly, and her husband knew that she was thinking of their first-born, that had lived but a few weeks.

I am aware that it is the fashion with a large class to regard the portrayal of sentiment among very common people as fanciful and untrue to nature. I differ from this class, I am glad to say. True love for women, and true tenderness for children, are common to all of us, whether high or low. Cynics cannot alter what is natural--in others.

The man felt kindly towards his wife and the babes, but he was not at all inclined to saddle himself with a couple of ready-made infants. He saw, however, that his wife was in a foolishly tender mood, and he let the subject drop for the present.

It may have been eight o'clock in the white night, and the bright snow was still falling like feathers from angels' wings, when at the door of the house in which the twins had been born and the mother had died, a lady and gentleman stopped, and, obtaining entrance, asked for the landlady. Unmistakably lady and gentleman, though plainly dressed. Not highly born, but as truly lady and gentleman as the best in the land. They were strangers to the landlady of the house; but she rose the instant they entered her apartment, and remained standing during the interview.

'We have to apologise for this intrusion,' commenced the lady, in a gentle voice; 'but although we are strangers to you, we are not here out of rudeness.'

'I'm sure of that, ma'am,' replied the landlady, dusting two chairs with her apron. 'Will you and the gentleman take a seat?'

'This is my husband,' said the lady, seating herself. 'Every year, on the anniversary of this evening, with the exception of last year, we have been in the habit of coming to some such place as this, where only poor people live----'

'Ah, you may say that, ma'am! The poorest!'

----'It is so, unfortunately. God help them! Every year until the last we have been in the habit of coming to some such place in furtherance of a scheme--a whim, perhaps, you'll call it--the development of which gives us the chief pleasure of our lives. We have no family of our own, no children that can properly call me mother and my husband father; so every year we adopt one and bring it up. We have six now, as many as we have been able to keep; for last year we lost part of our means through unwise speculation, for which I and my husband were equally to blame----'

'I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am,' interposed the landlady sympathisingly, standing in an attentive attitude, with the corner of her apron between her fingers.

'And having as many little responsibilities on us as our means would enable us to take proper care of, we were unable to add another to our family of little ones. But this year a fortunate thing has occurred to us. A kind friend has placed a small sum at our disposal, which will enable us to take a seventh child, and rear it in comfort and respectability.'

'And a lucky child that seventh 'ull be,' remarked the landlady. 'I'm a seventh child myself, and so was my mother before me, and we was both born on a 7th.'

The lady smiled, and continued,

'Every child we have is an orphan, without father or mother, which we believe to be necessary for the proper furtherance of our scheme. We feed them and nourish them properly--indeed, as if

they were really our own--and when they are old enough, they will be put to some respectable occupation, which will render them independent of the world. Among the many poor children round about here, do you know of one who, having no natural protectors, would be bettered by coming under our charge? These letters will satisfy you of our fitness for the task, and that we are in earnest.'

'Lord bless me!' exclaimed the landlady, impelled to that exclamation by sudden thought of the twins upstairs, and not casting a glance at the papers which were placed in her hands. 'You don't mean what you say?'

'Indeed, we do. You will be kind enough to understand that we do not desire to take a child who has parents living, but one whom hard circumstance has placed in the world friendless and alone. These poor courts and alleys abound in children----'

'Ah, that they do; and a nice pest they are, a many on 'em. They're as thick as fleas.'

----'And at this season it is good to think of them, and to try to do some little thing in their behalf. It is but little that we can do--very, very little. Do you know of such a child as we seek for now?'

'A girl?

'A girl or boy.'

'God Almighty bless you, ma'am!' cried the landlady. 'Stop here minute, and I'll let you know.'

She ran in haste upstairs to where her kind-hearted lodger was nursing the twins.

'I beg you a thousand pardons, Mrs. Manning,' she said, panting, 'and you too, Mr. Manning, and I wish you a merry Christmas, and many on 'em! I'm that out of breath and that astonished, that I don't know if I'm on my head or my heels. Stay a minute, my good souls; I'll be back in a jiffey.'

With that, she ran out of the room and downstairs, to assure herself that her visitors had not flown, or that she had not been dreaming. Having satisfied herself she ran upstairs again, and sat down, in more panting state than before.

'I thought I was dreaming, and that they was apparitions.' she gasped.

Mr. Manning, being one of those Englishmen who look upon their habitations as their castles, was inclined to resent these intrusions. Unconsciously throwing a large amount of aggressiveness in his tone and manner, he asked his landlady if he owed her any rent, and received for answer, No, that he didn't, and the expression of a wish that everybody was like him in this respect.

'Very well, then,' said Mr. Manning, not at all mollified by the landlady's compliment, and speaking so surlily that (as the landlady afterwards said, in relating the circumstance) if it had not been for her being out of breath and for thinking of those two precious babes, he would have 'put her back up' there and then; 'if I don't owe you anything, what do you mean by coming bouncing into my room in this manner?'

'I asks your pardon,' said the landlady, with dignity; but instantly softening as she thought of her visitors down-stairs; 'but you've got a 'art in your bosom, and you've got the feelings of a father. The long and the short of it is'----and here she proceeded to explain the visit she had had,

and the object of her visitors. 'Ah, Mr. Manning,' she continued, following the direction of his eyes towards the two babes lying in his wife's lap, 'you've got the same idea as I had in coming up here. Here's these two blessed babes, with no mother, and no father to speak of; for I don't believe he'll ever turn up. What's to become of 'em? Who's to take care of 'em? I'm sure you can't.'

'No, that I can't; and don't intend to.'

'And no one expects you, sir. You've got a big-enough family of your own. Well, here's this lady and gentleman setting downstairs this blessed minute as wants a child, and as'll do what's right and proper by it.'

'But there's a pair of 'em. Won't they take the two?'

'One they said, and one they mean. They can't hardly afford that, they said. And I'm as certain as I am that I'm setting here, that if they knew there was two of 'em, they wouldn't part 'em for the world. No, they'd go somewhere else; and the chance 'd be lost.'

'But they want a child that ain't got no father nor mother. Now, these young uns have a father; and that you know.'

'No, I don't; I don't know nothing of the kind. 'Taint the first story I've told by a many,' said the landlady, in answer to Mr. Manning's look of astonishment; 'and I don't mind telling this one to do a little baby good.'

'What's to become of the other? 'We'll look after her between us.

One'll take her one day, and one another. Lord bless you, Mr. Manning, we shall be able to manage.'

'And if the father comes back?'

'I'll get the lady's address, and give it to him; and then he can do as he likes.'

'It's the best thing that can be done; said Mr. Manning; 'though I've nothing to do with it, mind you; it's none of my business. I've got troubles enough of my own. But it ain't every young un that gets such a chance.'

'No, that it ain't;' and the landlady pulled her chair close to that of Mrs. Manning. 'Which shall it be, my dear?'

This proved to be a very difficult question to answer. First they decided that it was to be this one, then that; then soft-hearted Mrs. Manning began to cry, and said it was a sin to part them. And the babes lay sleeping unconsciously the while this momentous point was being discussed, the decision of which might condemn one to want and dirt and misery--to crime perhaps--and the other to a career where good opportunity might produce a happy and virtuous life. At length it was decided, and one was chosen; but when the landlady prepared to take the child, she found that the fingers of the babes were tightly interlaced; so she left them in Mrs. Manning's lap, with instructions to get the chosen one ready, and went down to her visitors.

'Poor child!' said the lady, at the conclusion of the landlady's recital; 'and the mother was only buried yesterday!'

'Only yesterday, ma'am,' responded the landlady; 'and the dear little thing is left without a friend. There's not one of us that wouldn't be glad to take care of it; but we're too poor, ma'am; and that's the fact.'

'The child's younger than we could have wished,' mused the lady, with a glance at her husband; 'but it would seem like a cruel desertion, now that we have heard its sad story.'

Her husband nodded, and the landlady, keenly watchful, said eagerly:

'I'll bring it down to you, ma'am. One of the lodgers is nursing it; but her husband's grumbling at her, and making her miserable about it He says he's got enough of his own; and so he has.'

By this time Mrs. Manning had the baby ready--she had dressed the child in some old baby-clothes of her own--and before she let it go out of her arms, she said, as if the little thing could understand:

'Kiss sister, baby. You'll never see her again, perhaps; and if you do, you won't know her.'

She placed their lips close together; and at that moment they opened their eyes, and smiled prettily on one another. The man and the two women stood by, gazing earnestly at the babes. Tears were in Mrs. Manning's eyes, as she witnessed the strange parting; the landlady was silent and pensive; and the man, with his hands behind him, seemed to be suddenly engrossed in the consideration of some social problem, which he found too perplexing for him. His wife raised the fortunate babe to his face.

'A happy New-year to you, little un,' said the not unkindly man, as he kissed the child.

'Suppose they were our'n, Sam,' said his wife, softly and tearfully; 'we shouldn't like this to happen.'

'But they're not our'n,' replied her husband; 'and that makes all the difference.'

And yet there was a wistful expression on his face, as the landlady took the baby out of the room.

'I've kept the prettiest one,' his wife whispered to him--'the one with the dimple.'

The lady and gentleman--she with her new charge wrapped in her warm shawl, and pressed closely to her bosom--walked briskly through the cold air towards their home, which lay in a square, about a mile from Stoney-alley. In the centre of the square was a garden, the wood-growth in which, though bare of leaves, looked as beautiful in their white mantle as ever they had done in their brightest summer. The snow-lined trees stood out boldly, yet gracefully, and their every branch, fringed in purest white, was an emblem of loveliness. They gleamed grandly in the moon's light, mute witnesses of the greatness of Him whose lightest work is an evidence of perfect wisdom and goodness.

HOW SHE ACQUIRED THE NAME OF BLADE-O'-GRASS.

Thus, whilst one little babe was tended and watched by benevolent hands and eyes, the fate of the other--the prettier one, she with the unfortunate dimple--was intrusted to the shapeless hands of chance. To such tender care as had happily fallen to its lot, the fortunate one may be left for a time. Turn we to the other, and watch its strange bringing-up.

Proverbially, too many cooks spoil the broth; and this forlorn babe was left to the care of too many cooks, who, however, in this instance, did not spoil the broth by meddling with it, but by almost utterly neglecting it. The landlady's declaration that 'We'll look after her between us; one'll take her one day, and one another,' although uttered in all sincerity, turned out badly in its application. What is everybody's business is nobody's business, and for the most part the babe was left to take care of herself. For a little while Mrs. Manning was the child's only friend; but in the course of a couple of months she fulfilled her husband's apprehension, and added another bantling to his already overstocked quiver. This new arrival (which, it must be confessed, was not received with gratitude by its father) was so fractious, and so besieged by a complication of infantile disorders, that all Mrs. Manning's spare moments were fully occupied, and she had none to devote to other people's children. The motherless child threatened to fare badly indeed. But now and again a mother who had lost her offspring came to the little stranger and suckled her; so that she drew life from many bosoms, and may be said to have had at least a score of wet-nurses. And thus she grew up almost literally in the gutters, no one owning her, no one really caring for her; and yet she throve, as weeds thrive--while her sister, not a mile away, throve, in the care of kind friends, as flowers thrive. Born in equality, with the same instincts for good and evil, with the same capacity for good and evil, equally likely to turn out good or bad, should it have been left entirely to chance that one might live to prove a blessing, and the other a curse, to society? But so it was.

One of the most curious circumstances connected with the little outcast was, that she was not known by any settled name. It grew to be a fashion to call her by all sorts of names--now Polly, now Sally, now Young Hussy, now Little Slut, and by a dozen others, not one of which remained to her for any length of time. But when she was three years of age, an event occurred which played the part of godmothers and godfathers to her, and which caused her to receive a title by which she was always afterwards known.

There was not a garden in Stoney-alley. Not within the memory of living man had a flower been known to bloom there. There were many poor patches of ground, crowded as the neighbourhood was, which might have been devoted to the cultivation of a few bright petals; but they were allowed to lie fallow, festering in the sun. Thought of graceful form and colour had never found expression there. Strange, therefore, that one year, when Summer was treading close upon the heel of Spring, sending warm sweet winds to herald her coming, there should spring up, in one of the dirtiest of all the backyards in Stoney-alley, two or three Blades of Grass. How they came there, was a mystery. No human hand was accountable for their presence. It may be that a bird, flying over the place, had mercifully dropped a seed; or that a kind wind had borne it to the spot. But however they came, there they were, these Blades of Grass, peeping up from the ground shyly and wonderingly, and giving promise of bright colour, even in the midst of the

unwholesome surroundings. Our little castaway--she was no better--now three years of age, was sprawling in this dirty backyard with a few other children, all of them regular students of Dirt College. Attracted by the little bit of colour, she crawled to the spot where it shone in the light, and straightway fell to watching it and inhaling, quite unconsciously, whatever of grace it possessed. Once or twice she touched the tender blades, and seemed to be pleased to find them soft and pliant. The other children, delighted at having the monopoly of a gutter, that ran through the yard, did not disturb her; and so she remained during the day, watching and wondering; and fell asleep by the side of the Blades of Grass, and dreamed perhaps of brighter colours and more graceful forms than had ever yet found place in her young imagination. The next day she made her way again to the spot, and seeing that the blades had grown a little, wondered and wondered, and unconsciously exercised that innate sense of worship of the beautiful which is implanted in every nature, and which causes the merest babes to rejoice at light, and shapes of beauty, and harmony of sound. What is more wonderful, in the eyes of a babe, than vivid colour or light, however kindled? what more sweet to its senses than that perfect harmony of sound which falls upon its ears as the mother sings softly and lulls her darling to sleep? This latter blessing had never fallen to the lot of our child; but colour and light were given to her, and she was grateful for them. She grew to love these emerald leaves, and watched them day after day, until the women round about observed and commented upon her strange infatuation. But one evening, when the leaves were at their brightest and strongest, a man, running hastily through the yard, crushed the blades of grass beneath his heel, and tore them from the earth. The grief of the child was intense. She cast a passionate yet bewildered look at the man, and picking up the torn soiled blades, put them in the breast of her ragged frock, in the belief that warmth would bring them back to life. She went to bed with the mangled leaves in her hot hand, and when she looked at them the next morning, they bore no resemblance to the bright leaves which had been such a delight to her. She went to the spot where they had grown, and cried without knowing why; and the man who had destroyed the leaves happening to pass at the time, she struck at him with her little fists. He pushed her aside rather roughly with his foot, and Mrs. Manning, seeing this, and having also seen the destruction of the leaves, and the child's worship of them, blew him up for his unkindness. He merely laughed, and said he wouldn't have done it if he had looked where he was going, and that it was a good job for the child that she wasn't a Blade-o'-Grass herself, or she might have been trodden down with the others. The story got about the alley, and one and another, at first in fun or derision, began to call the child Little Blade-o'-Grass, until, in course of time, it came to be recognised as her regular name, and she was known by it all over the neighbourhood. So, being thus strangely christened, Little Blade-o'-Grass grew in years and in ignorance, and became a worthy member of Dirt College, in which school she was matriculated for the battle of life.

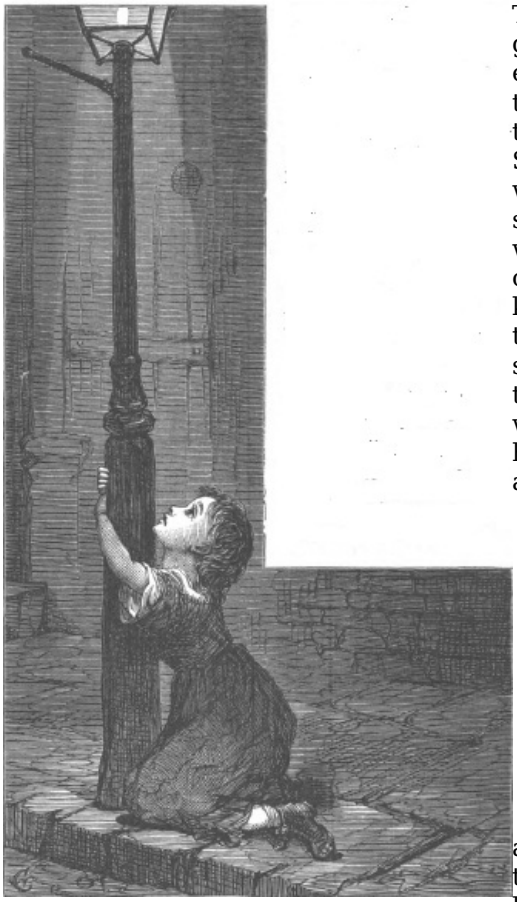
THE LEGEND OF THE TIGER.

At a very early age indeed was Blade-o'-Grass compelled to begin the battle of life. Her greatest misfortune was that, as she grew in years, she grew strong. Had she been a weakly little thing, some one might have taken pity on her, and assumed the responsibility of maintaining her. The contingency was a remote one; but all chance of benefiting by it was utterly destroyed, because she was strong and hardy. She may be said to have had some sort of a home up to the time that she attained the age of nine years; for a corner for her to sleep in was always found in the house in which she was born. But about that time certain important changes took place, which materially affected her, although she had no hand in them. The landlady gave up the house, and some one else took it, and turned it into a shop. The lodgers all received notice to leave, and went elsewhere to live. A great slice of luck fell to the share of Mr. Manning. An uncle whom he had never seen died in a distant land, and left his money to his relatives; and a shrewd lawyer made good pickings by hunting up nephews and nieces of the deceased. Among the rest, he hunted up Mr. Manning, and one day he handed his client a small sum of money. Mr. Manning put his suddenly acquired wealth to a good purpose--he got passage in a government emigrant ship, and with his wife and large family, bade good-bye for ever to Stoney-alley. He left the country, as hundreds and thousands of others have done, with a bitter feeling in his heart because he was not able to stop in it, and earn a decent livelihood; but, as hundreds and thousands of others have done, he lived this feeling down, and in his new home, with better prospects and better surroundings, talked of his native land--meaning Stoney-alley--as the 'old country,' in terms of affection and as if he had been treated well in it. It will be easily understood that when Blade-o'-Grass lost Mrs. Manning, she lost her best friend.

To say that she passed an easy life up to this point of her career would be to state what is false. The child was in continual disgrace, and scarcely a day passed that was not watered with her tears. Blows, smacks, and harsh words were administered to her freely, until she grew accustomed to them, and they lost their moral force. She deserved them, for she was the very reverse of a good little girl. In a great measure her necessities made her what she was, and no counteracting influence for good approached her. If she were sent for beer, she would stop at

corners, and taste and sip, and bring home short measure. There was something fearful in her enjoyment; but she had no power nor desire to resist the temptation. No tragedy queen, before the consummation of the final horror, ever looked round with more watchful, wary, fearsome gaze than did Blade-o'-Grass, when, having nerved her soul to take a sip of beer, she stopped at a convenient corner, or in the shadow of a dark doorway, to put her desire into execution. And then she was always breaking things. The mugs she let fall would have paved Stoney-alley. But there was a greater temptation than beer: Bread. If she were sent for a half-quartern loaf, she would not fail to dig out with liberal fingers the soft portions between the crusts, and eagerly devour them. Even if she had not been hungry--which would have been a white-letter day in her existence--she would have done from habit what she almost invariably was urged to do by the cravings of her stomach. And about that unfortunate stomach of hers, calumnies were circulated and believed in. So persistent an eater was Blade-o'-Grass, so conscientious a devourer of anything that, legitimately or otherwise, came in her way--quality being not of the slightest object--that a story got about that she had 'something' in her inside, some living creature of a ravenous nature, that waited for the food as she swallowed it, and instantly devoured it for its own sustenance. Such things had been known of. At some remote period a girl in the neighbourhood--whose personality was never traced, but whom everybody believed in--had had such an animal--a few called it a 'wolf,' but the majority insisted that it was a 'tiger'--growing inside of her, and this animal, so the story went, grew and grew, and fed upon the girl's life till it killed her. The 'tiger' had been found alive after the girl's death, and having been purchased of some one for a fabulous price, was embalmed in a bottle in a great museum, of which nobody knew the name or the whereabouts. As an allegory, this 'tiger' might have served to illustrate the mournful story of the lives of Blade-o'-Grass and thousands of her comrades--it might have served, indeed, to point a bitter moral; but there was nothing allegorical about the inhabitants of Stoney-alley. They only dealt in hard matter-of-fact, and the mythical story was fully believed in; and being applied to the case of Blade-o'-Grass, became a great terror to her. Many persons found delight in tormenting the helpless child about her 'tiger,' and for a long time the slightest allusion to it was sufficient to cause her the most exquisite anguish, in consequence of certain malevolent declarations, that she ought to be cut open and have the tiger taken out of her. Indeed, one miserable old fellow, who kept a rag-shop, and who had in his window two or three dust-coated bottles containing common-place reptiles preserved in spirits-of-wine, took a malicious pleasure in declaring that the operation ought to be really performed upon Blade-o'-Grass, and that, in the interests of science, she ought not to be allowed to live. It was the cruelest of sport thus to torture the poor child; for the simple fact was, that Blade-o'-Grass was nearly always hungry. It was nature tugging at her stomach--not a tiger.

The very first night of Mrs. Manning's departure, Blade-o'-Grass found herself without a bed. With a weary wretched sense of desolation upon her, she lingered about the old spot where she used to sleep, and even ventured to enter at the back of the house, when the sharp 'Come, get out o' this!' of the new proprietor sent her flying away. She belonged to nobody, and nobody cared for her; so she wandered and lingered about until all the lights in the shops and houses were out. She had gleaned some small pleasure in watching these lights; she had found comfort in them; and when they were all extinguished and she was in darkness, she trembled under the impulse of a vague terror. She did not cry; it was not often now that she called upon the well of tender feeling where tears lay; but she was terrified. There was not a star in the sky to comfort her. She was in deep darkness, body and soul. How many others are there at this present moment in the same terrible condition?



Too full of fear to stand upright, she crept along the ground slowly, feeling her way by the walls, stopping every now and then to gather fresh courage, at which time she tried to shut out her fears by cowering close to the flagstones and hiding her face in her ragged frock. She had a purpose in view. She had thought of a refuge where she would find some relief from the terrible shadows. Towards that refuge she was creeping now. It was a long, long time before she reached her haven--a crazy old lamp-post, the dim light of which was in keeping with the general poverty of its surroundings. At the foot of this lamp-post, clasping it as if it were the symbol of a sacred refuge, Blade-o'-Grass looked up at the light in agony of speechless gratitude, and then, wearied almost to a state of unconsciousness, coiled herself up into a ball, like a hedgehog, and soon was fast asleep.

THE BATTLE OF LIFE.

What followed? Remorseless Time pursued his way, and the minutes, light to some, heavy to some, leaving in their track a train of woe and joy, and grief and happiness; the leaden minutes, the golden minutes, flew by until daylight came and woke the sleeping child. Unwashed--but that was her chronic condition, and did not affect her--forlorn, uncared-for, Blade-o'-Grass looked round upon her world, and rubbed her eyes, and yawned; then, after a time, rose to her feet, and cast quick eager glances about her. The tiger in her stomach was awake and stirring, and Blade-o'-Grass had no food to give it to satisfy its cravings. She prowled up and down, and round and about the dirty courts, in search of something to eat; anything would have more than contented her--mouldy crust, refuse food; but the stones of Stoney-alley and its fellows were merciless, and no manna fell from heaven to bless the famished child. She would have puzzled the wisest philosopher in social problems, if he were not utterly blinded by theory; for, looking at her from every aspect, and taking into account, not only that she was endowed with mental, moral, and physical faculties, but that she was a human being with a soul 'to be saved,' he could have produced but one result from her--a yearning for food. He could have struck no other kind of fire from out of this piece of flint. What resemblance did Blade-o'-Grass bear to that poetical image which declared her to be noble in reason, infinite in faculty, express and admirable in form and bearing; like an angel in action; like a god in apprehension? The beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! Perhaps it will be best for us not to examine too curiously, for there is shame in the picture of this child-girl prowling about for food. Poor Blade-o'-Grass! with every minute the tiger in her stomach grew more rabid, and tore at her vitals tigerishly. In the afternoon she found a rotten apple in the gutter, and she stooped and picked it up, joy glistening in her eyes. It was a large apple, fortunately, and she devoured it eagerly, and afterwards chewed the stalk. That was all the food she got that day; and when night came, and she had watched the lights out, she coiled herself up into a ball by the side of her lamp-post again and slept, and awoke in the morning, sick with craving. Yesterday's experience whispered to her not to look about for food in Stoney-alley; and she walked, with painful steps into the wider thoroughfare, and stopped for a few minutes to recover herself from her astonishment at the vast world in which she found herself. She would have been content to stop there all the day, but that the tiger cried for food, and she cried for food in sympathy with the tiger. Keeping her eyes fixed upon the ground, and never once raising her pitiful face to the faces that flashed past her, hither and thither, she faltered onwards for a hundred yards or so, and then, in a frightened manner, retraced her steps, so that she should not lose herself. 'Give me food!' cried the tiger, and 'Give me food!' cried Blade-o'-Grass from the innermost depths of her soul. At about ten o'clock in the morning, her cry was answered; she saw a cats'-meat man with a basket full of skewered meat hanging upon his arm. Instinctively she followed him, and watched the cats running to the doors at the sound of his voice, and waiting with arched backs and dilating eyes for his approach. Blade-o'-Grass wished with all her heart and soul that *she* were a cat, so that she might receive her portion upon a skewer; but no such happiness was hers. She followed the man wistfully and hungeringly, until he stopped at the door of a house where there were evidently arrears of account to be settled. He placed his basket upon the doorstep, and went into the passage to give some change to the woman of the house. Here was an opportunity for Blade-o'-Grass. She crept stealthily and fearfully towards the basket, and snatching up two portions of cats'-meat, ran for her life, with her stolen food hidden in her tattered frock--ran until she reached Stoney-alley, where she sank to the ground with her heart leaping at her throat, and where, after recovering her breath, she devoured her ill-gotten meat with unbounded satisfaction. She had no idea that she had done a

wrong thing. She was hungry, and had simply taken food when the opportunity presented itself. The fear by which she had been impressed had not sprung from any moral sense, but partly from the thought that the man would hurt her if he caught her taking his property, and partly from the thought (more agonising than the other) that she might be prevented from carrying out her design. The next day she watched for and followed the cats'-meat man again, and again was successful in obtaining a meal; and so on for a day or two afterwards. But the food was not over nice, and the tiger whispered to her that a change would be agreeable. Success made her bold, and she looked about her for other prey. Her first venture, after the cats'-meat man lost her patronage, was an old woman who kept an apple-stall, and who went to sleep as regularly as clockwork every afternoon at three o'clock and woke at five. But even in her sleep this old apple-woman seemed to be wary, and now and then would mumble out with drowsy energy, 'Ah, would yer? I sees yer!' as if the knowledge that she was surrounded by suspicious characters whose mouths watered for her fruit had eaten into her soul. But as these exclamations to terrify poachers were mumbled out when the old woman really was in an unconscious state, she fell an easy victim to Blade-o'-Grass. She was a great treasure to the little girl, for she dealt in nuts and oranges as well as apples. Then there was a woman who sold a kind of cake designated 'jumbles,'--a wonderful luxury, price four a penny. She also fell a victim, and between one and another Blade-o'-Grass managed to pick up a precarious living, and in a few months became as nimble and expert a little thief as the sharpest policeman would wish to make an example of. She was found out, of course, sometimes, and was cuffed and beaten; but she was never given in charge. The persons from whom she stole seemed to be aware of the hapless condition of the child, and had mercy upon her; indeed, many of them had at one time or another of their lives known what it was to suffer the pangs of hunger.

Incredible as it may sound, Blade-o'-Grass still had one friend left. His name was Tom Beadle. He was some five years older than Blade-o'-Grass, but looked so delicate and sickly, and was of such small proportions, that they might have been taken for pretty nearly the same age. Delicate and sickly as he looked, he was as sharp as a weasel. He had a mother and a father, who, when they were not in prison, lived in Stoney-alley, but they--being a drunken and dissolute pair--did not trouble themselves about their son. So he had to shift for himself, and in course of time became cunningest of the cunning. Between him and Blade-o'-Grass there had grown a closer intimacy than she had contracted with any other of her associates, and whenever they met they stopped to have a chat Blade-o'-Grass had a genuine affection for him, for he had often given her a copper, and quite as often had shared his meal with her.

A few months after the change for the worse in the prospects of Blade-o'-Grass, Tom Beadle, lounging about in an idle humour, saw her sitting on the kerb-stone with her eyes fixed upon the old apple-woman, who had begun to nod. There was something in the gaze of Blade-o'-Grass that attracted Tom Beadle's attention, and he set himself to watch. Presently the girl shifted a little nearer to the fruit-stall--a little nearer--nearer, until she was quite close. Her hand stole slowly towards the fruit, and a pear was taken, then another. Tom Beadle laughed; but looked serious immediately afterwards, for Blade-o'-Grass was running away as fast as her legs could carry her. Assuring himself that there was no cause for alarm, Tom Beadle ran after her, and placed his hand heavily on her shoulder. She had heard the step behind her, and her heart almost leaped out of her throat; but when she felt the hand upon her shoulder, she threw away the stolen fruit, and fell to the ground in an agony of fear.

'Git up, you little fool,' exclaimed Tom Beadle. 'What are you frightened at?' Before he said this, however, he picked up the pears and put them in his pocket.

'O, Tom!' cried Blade-o'-Grass, the familiar tones falling upon her ears like sweetest music; 'I thought it was somebody after me.'

Then Tom told her that he ran after her to stop *her* running, and instructed her that it was the very worst of policy, after she had 'prigged' anything, to run away when nobody was looking. And this was the first practical lesson in morals that Blade-o'-Grass had received.

'But, I say, Bladergrass,' observed Tom, 'I didn't know as you'd taken to prig.'

'I can't help it, Tom. The tiger's always at me.'

Tom implicitly believed in the tiger story.

'Well, that's all right,' said Tom; 'only take care--and don't you run away agin when nobody's a-lookin'.'

Months passed, and Blade-o'-Grass lived literally from hand to mouth. But times grew very dull; her hunting-ground was nearly worked out, and she was more often hungry than not. One day she hadn't been able to pick up a morsel of food, and had had insufficient for many previous days. The day before she had had but one scanty meal, so that it is not difficult to imagine her miserable condition. Her guardian angel, Tom Beadle, discovered her crouching against a wall, with fear and despair in her face and eyes. He knew well enough what was the matter, but he asked her for form's sake, and she returned him the usual answer, while the large tears rolled down her cheeks into her mouth.

It so happened that Tom Beadle had been out of luck that day. He hadn't a copper in his

pocket. He felt about for one, nevertheless, and finding none, whistled--curiously enough, the 'Rogues' March'--more in perplexity than from surprise.

'Ain't yer had *any*think to eat, Bladergrass?'

'Not a blessed bite,' was the answer.

It was about five o'clock in the evening; there were at least a couple of hours to sunset. An inspiration fell upon Tom Beadle, and his countenance brightened.

'Come along o' me,' he said.

Blade-o'-Grass placed her hand unhesitatingly in his, and they walked towards the wealthier part of the City, until they came to a large space surrounded by great stone buildings. In the centre of the space was a statue. Blade-o'-Grass had never been so far from her native place as this. The crowds of people hurrying hither and thither, as if a moment's hesitation would produce, a fatal result; the apparently interminable strings of carts and cabs and wagons and omnibuses issuing from half-a-dozen thoroughfares, and so filling the roads with moving lines and curves and angles, that it seemed to be nothing less than miraculous how a general and disastrous crash was avoided, utterly bewildered little Blade-o'-Grass, and caused her for a moment to be oblivious of the cravings of the tiger in her stomach.

'Now, look 'ere, Bladergrass,' whispered Tom Beadle: 'you keep tight 'old of my 'and; if anybody arks yer, I'm yer brother a-dyin' of consumption. I'm a-dyin' by inches, I am.'

Forthwith he called into his face such an expression of utter, helpless woe and misery, that Blade-o'-Grass cried out in terror,

'O, what's up, Tom? O, don't, Tom, don't!' really believing that her companion had been suddenly stricken.

'Don't be stoopid!' remonstrated Tom, smiling at her to reassure her, and then resuming his wobegone expression; 'I'm only a-shammin'.'

With that he sank upon the bottom of a grand flight of stone steps, dragging Blade-o'-Grass down beside him. There they remained, silent, for a few moments, and perhaps one in a hundred of the eager bustling throng turned to give the strange pair a second glance; but before sympathy had time to assume practical expression, a policeman came up to them, and bade them move on. Tom rose to his feet, wearily and painfully, and slowly moved away: a snail in its last minutes of life could scarcely have moved more slowly, if it had moved at all. He took good care to keep tight hold of the hand of Blade-o'-Grass, lest she should be pushed from him and be lost in the crowd. A notable contrast were these two outcasts--she, notwithstanding her fright and the pangs of hunger by which she was tormented, strong-limbed and sturdy for her age; and he drooping, tottering, with a death-look upon his face, as if every moment would be his last. You would have supposed that his mind was a blank to all but despair, and that he was praying for death; but the cunning and hypocrisy of Tom Beadle were not to be measured by an ordinary standard. He was as wide awake as a weasel, and although his eyes were to the ground, he saw everything that surged around him, and was as ready to take advantage of an opportunity as the sharpest rascal in London. As he and his companion made their way through the busy throng, they attracted the attention of two men--both of them elderly men, of some sixty years of age; one, well-dressed, with a bright eye and a benevolent face; the other, poorly but not shabbily dressed, and with a face out of which every drop of the milk of human kindness seemed to have been squeezed when he was a young man. When he looked at you, it appeared as if you were undergoing the scrutiny of two men; for one of his eyes had a dreadfully fixed and glassy stare in it, and the other might have been on fire, it was so fiercely watchful.

Now, overpowered as Tom Beadle might have been supposed to be in his own special ills and cares, he saw both these men, as he saw everything else about him, and a sly gleam of recognition passed from his eyes to the face of the odd-looking and poorly-dressed stranger; it met with no response, however. The next moment Tom raised his white imploring face to that of the better-dressed man, whose tender heart was stirred by pity at the mute appeal. He put his hand in his pocket, but seemed to be restrained from giving; some impulse within him whispered, 'Don't!' while his heart prompted him to give. But the struggle was not of long duration. The words, 'Indiscriminate charity again,' fell from his lips, and looking round cautiously as if he were about to commit a felony, he hastily approached close to the two children, and, with an air of guilt, slipped a shilling in Tom Beadle's hand. After which desperate deed, he turned to fly from the spot, when he saw something in the face of the odd-looking man (who had been watching the comedy with curious interest) which made him first doubtful, then angry. Although they were strangers, he was impelled to speak, and his kind nature made him speak in a polite tone.

'Dreadful sight, sir, dreadful sight,' he said, pointing to the creeping forms of Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass. 'A penny can't be thrown away there, eh?'

The odd-looking man shrugged his shoulders. The shrug conveyed to the benevolent stranger this meaning: 'You are an imbecile; you are an old fool; you are not fit to be trusted alone.' It was the most expressive of shrugs.

'I suppose you mean to say I've been imposed upon,' exclaimed the benevolent stranger hotly.

The odd-looking man chuckled enjoyably, and perked up his head at the questioner in curiosity, as a magpie with its eye in a blaze might have done. But he said nothing. His silence exasperated the benevolent almsgiver, who exclaimed, 'You've no humanity, sir; no humanity;' and turned on his heel. But turned round again immediately and said, 'I've no right to say that, sir--no right, and I beg your pardon. But d'ye mean to tell me that that lad is an impostor, sir? If you do, I deny it, sir, I deny it! D'ye mean to say that I've been taken in, and that those two children are not--not HUNGRY, sir?'

Some words seemed to be rising to the odd-looking man's lips, but he restrained the utterance of them, and closed his lips with a snap. He touched his shabby cap with an air of amusement, and turned away, chuckling quietly; and the next minute the two men were struggling in different directions with the human tide that spread itself over all the City.

In the mean time, Tom Beadle, keeping up the fiction of 'dyin' by inches,' crept slowly away. He had not seen the coin which had been slipped into his hand, but he knew well enough by the feel that it was a shilling. 'A regular slice o' luck,' he muttered to himself, beneath his breath. When they had crept on some fifty yards, he quickened his steps, and Blade-o'-Grass tried to keep up with him. But all at once her hands grew quite cold, and a strong trembling took possession of her.

'Come along, Bladergrass,' urged Tom, in his anxiety to get safely away; ''ow you creep!'

The child made another effort, but, as if by magic, the streets and the roar in them vanished from her sight and hearing, and she would have fallen to the ground, but for Tom's arm thrown promptly round her poor fainting form.

Near to them was a quiet court--so still and peaceful that it might have hidden in a country-place where Nature was queen--and Tom Beadle, who knew every inch of the ground, bore her thither. His heart grew cold as he gazed upon her white face.

'I wish I may die,' he muttered to himself, in a troubled voice, 'if she don't look as if she was dead. Bladergrass! Bladergrass!' he called.'

She did not answer him. Not a soul was near them. Had it not been that he liked the child, and that, little villain as he was, he had some humanity in him--for her at least--he would have run away. He stood quiet for a few moments, debating within himself what he had best do. He knelt over her, and put his lips to hers, and whispered coaxingly, 'Come along, Bladergrass. Don't be a little fool. Open your eyes, and call Tom.'

The warmth of his face and lips restored her to consciousness. She murmured, 'Don't--don't! Let me be!'

'What's the matter, Bladergrass?' he whispered. 'It's me--Tom! Don't you know me?'

'O, let me be, Tom!' implored Blade-o'-Grass. 'Let me be! The tiger's a-eatin' the inside out o' me, and I'm a-dyin'.'

She closed her eyes again, and the sense of infinite peace that stole upon her, as she lay in this quiet court, was like heaven to her, after the wild roar of steps and sounds in which a little while since she had been engulfed. Had she died at that moment, it would have been happier for her; but at whose door could her death have been laid?

Tom Beadle, whispering hurriedly and anxiously, and certainly quite superfluously, 'Lay still, Bladergrass! I'll be back in a minute,' ran off to buy food, and soon returned with it. He had a little difficulty in rousing her, but when she began to taste the food, and, opening her eyes, saw the store which Tom had brought, she tore at it almost deliriously, crying out of thankfulness, as she ate. Tom was sufficiently rewarded by seeing the colour return to her cheeks; before long, Blade-o'-Grass was herself again, and was laughing with Tom.

'But I thought you *was* a-dyin', Bladergrass,' said Tom, somewhat solemnly, in the midst of the merriment.

'No, it was you that was a-dyin', Tom!' exclaimed Blade-o'-Grass, clapping her hands. 'A-dyin' by inches, you know!'

Gratified vanity gleamed in Tom Beadle's eyes, and when Blade-o'-Grass added, 'But, O Tom, how you frightened me at first!' his triumph was complete, and he enjoyed an artist's sweetest pleasure. Then he gloated over the imposition he had practised upon the benevolent stranger, and cried in glee,

'Wasn't he green, Bladergrass? *He* thought I was dyin' by inches, as well as you. O, O, O!' and laughed and danced, to the admiration of Blade-o'-Grass, without feeling a particle of gratitude for the benevolent instinct which had saved his companion from starvation.

After this fashion did Blade-o'-Grass learn life's lessons, and learn to fight its battles. Deprived of wholesome teaching and wholesome example; believing, from very necessity, that bad was good; without any knowledge of God and His infinite goodness, she, almost a baby-child, went out into the world, in obedience to the law of nature, in search of food. A slice of bread-and-butter was more to her than all the virtues, the exercise of which, as we are taught, bestows the light of eternal happiness. And yet, if earnest men are to be believed, and if there be truth in newspaper columns, the vast machinery around her was quick with sympathy for her, as one of a class whom it is man's duty to lift from the dust. Such struggles for the amelioration (fine word!) of the human race were being made by earnest natures, that it was among the most awful mysteries of the time, how Blade-o'-Grass was allowed to grow up in the ignorance which deprives crime of responsibility; how she was forced to be dead to the knowledge of virtue; how she was compelled to earn the condemnation of men, and to make sorrowful the heart of the Supreme!

MR. MERRYWHISTLE RELIEVES HIMSELF ON THE SUBJECT OF INDISCRIMINATE CHARITY.

The name of the man who gave Tom Beadle the shilling was Merrywhistle. He was a bachelor, and he lived in the eastern part of the City, in Buttercup-square, next door to his best friends, the Silvers. Although Buttercup-square was in the east of the City, where the greatest poverty is to be found, and where people crowd upon each other unhealthfully, it was as pretty and comfortable a square as could be found anywhere; and you might live in any house in it and fancy yourself in the country, when you looked out of window. The trees in the square were full of birds' nests, and the singing of the birds of a summer morning was very sweet to the ear.

Mr. Merrywhistle had no trade or profession. When the last census was taken, and the paper was given to him to fill-in, he set himself down as 'Nothing Particular,' and this eccentric definition of himself coming under the eyes of his landlady--who, like every other landlady, was mighty curious about the age, religion, and occupation of her lodgers, and whether they were single, widowed, or divorced men--was retailed by her to her friends. As a necessary consequence, *her* friends retailed the information to *their* friends; and for some little time afterwards, they used to ask of the landlady and of each other, jocosely, how Nothing Particular was getting along, and whether he had lately done Anything Particular; and so on. But this mildest of jokes soon died out, and never reached Mr. Merrywhistle's ears. He had an income more than sufficient for his personal wants; but at the year's end not a shilling remained of his year's income. A pale face, a look of distress, a poor woman with a baby in arms, a person looking hungrily in a cook-shop window--any one of these sights was sufficient to melt his benevolent heart, and to draw copper or silver from his pocket. It was said of him that his hands were always in his pockets--a saying which was the occasion of a piece of sarcasm, which grew into a kind of

proverb. A lady-resident of Buttercup-square, whose husband was of the parsimonious breed, when speaking of Mr. Merrywhistle's benevolence, said, with a sigh, 'My husband is just like Mr. Merrywhistle; his hands are always in his pockets.' 'Yes, ma'am,' said an ill-natured friend, 'but there the similarity ends. Your husband's hands *never come out*.' Which produced a lifelong breach between the parties.

Mr. Merrywhistle was in a very disturbed mood this evening. He was haunted by the face of the old man who had been amused, because he had given a poor child, a shilling. The thought of this old man proved the most obstinate of tenants to Mr. Merrywhistle; having got into his mind, it refused to be dislodged. He had never seen this man before, and here, in the most unaccountable manner, he being haunted and distressed by a face which presented itself to his imagination with a mocking expression upon it, because he had been guilty of a charitable act. 'I should like to meet him again,' said Mr. Merrywhistle to himself; 'I'd talk to him!' Which mild determination, hotly expressed, was intended to convey an exceedingly severe meaning. As he could not dislodge the thought of the man from his mind, Mr. Merrywhistle resolved to go to his friends next door, the Silvers, and take tea with them. He went in, and found them, as he expected, just sitting down to tea. Only two of them, husband and wife.

'I am glad you have come in,' said Mrs. Silver to him. Her voice might surely have suggested her name, it was so mild and gentle. But everything about her was the same. Her dress, her quiet manner, her delicate face, her hands, her eyes, where purity dwelt, breathed peace and goodness. She and her sisters (and there are many, thank God!) are the human pearls of the world which is so often called 'erring.'

'How are the youngsters?' asked Mr. Merrywhistle, stirring his tea.

'All well,' answered Mr. Silver; 'you'll stay and see them?'

Mr. Merrywhistle nodded, and proceeded with his tea. The meal being nearly over, Mrs. Silver said, 'Now, friend, tell us your trouble.'

'You see it in my face,' responded Mr. Merrywhistle.

'Yes; I saw it when you entered.'

'You have the gift of divination.'

'Say, the gift of sympathy for those I love.'

Mr. Merrywhistle held out his hand, and she grasped it cordially. Then he told them of the occurrence that took place on the Royal Exchange, and of the singular manner in which he was haunted by the mocking face of the old man who had watched him.

'You have an instinct, perhaps,' said Mrs. Silver, 'that he was one of the men who might have preached at you, if he had had the opportunity, against indiscriminate charity?'

'No, I don't know, I don't know, I really don't know,' replied Mr. Merrywhistle excitedly. 'I think he rather enjoyed it; he seemed to look upon it as an amusing exhibition, for he was almost convulsed by laughter. Laughter! It wasn't laughter. It was a series of demoniac chuckles, that's what it was--demoniac chuckles. But I can't exactly describe what it was that set my blood boiling. It wasn't his demoniac chuckling alone, it was everything about him; his manner, his expression, his extraordinary eyes; one of which looked like the eye of an infuriated bull, as if it were half inclined to fly out of its head at you, and the other as if it were the rightful property of the meekest and mildest of baa-lambs. Then his eye-brows--lapping over as if they were precipices, and as thick as blacking-brushes. Then his face, like a little sour and withered apple. Your pro-indiscriminate-charity men would not have behaved as he did. They would have asked me. How dare I--how dare I?--yes, that is what they would have said--How dare I encourage pauperism by giving money to little boys and girls and ragged men and women, whom I have never seen in my life before, whom I have never heard of in my life before? This fellow wasn't one of *them*. No, no--no, I say, he wasn't one of *them*. I wouldn't swear that he wasn't drunk--no, I won't say that; tipsy, perhaps--no, nor that either. Uncharitable of me--very. Don't laugh at me. You wouldn't have laughed at the poor little boy if you had seen him.'

'I am sure we should not.'

'That's like me again,' cried the impetuous old bachelor remorsefully; 'throwing in the teeth of my best friends an accusation of inhumanity--yes, inhumanity--positive inhumanity. Forgive me--I am truly sorry. But that indiscriminate-charity question cropped up again to-day, and that, as well as this affair, has set my nerves in a jingle. A gentleman called upon me this morning, and asked me for a subscription towards the funds of an institution--a worthy institution, as I believe. I hadn't much to spare--I am so selfishly extravagant that my purse is always low--and I gave him half-a-sovereign. He took it, and looked at it and at me reproachfully. "I was given to understand," he said in the meekest of voices, so meek, indeed, that I could hot possibly take offence--"I was given to understand that from Mr. Merrywhistle, and in aid of *such* an institution as ours, I should have received a much larger contribution."'

'That savoured of impertinence,' observed Mr. Silver.

'I daresay, Silver, I daresay. Another man might have thought so; but I couldn't possibly be angry with him, his manner was so humble--reproachfully humble. I explained to him that at present I couldn't afford more, and that, somehow or other, my money melted away most surprisingly. "I hope, sir," he then said, "that what I was told of you is not true, and that you are not in the habit of giving away money indiscriminately." I could not deny it--no, indeed, I could not deny it--and I commenced to say, hesitatingly (feeling very guilty), that now and then---- But he interrupted me with, "Now and then, sir!--now and then! You will pardon my saying so, Mr. Merrywhistle, but it may not have struck you before that those persons who give away money indiscriminately are making criminals for us--are filling our prisons--are blowing a cold blast on manly self-endeavour--are crippling industry--are paying premiums to idleness, which is the offspring of the----hem!" And continued in this strain for more than five minutes. When he went away, my hair stood on end, and I felt as if sentence ought to be pronounced upon me at once. And here, this very afternoon, am I caught again by a pitiful face--you should have seen it! I thought the poor boy would have died as I looked at him--and I give away a shilling, indiscriminately. Then comes this strange old fellow staring at me--sneering at me, shrugging his shoulders at me, and walking away with the unmistakable declaration--though he didn't declare it in words--that I wasn't fit to be trusted alone. As perhaps I'm not,--as perhaps I'm not!' And Mr. Merrywhistle blew his nose violently.

His friends knew him too well to interrupt him. The tea-things had been quietly cleared away, while he was relieving his feelings. He had by this time got rid of a great portion of his excitement; and now, in his cooler mood, he looked round and smiled. At that moment a lad of about fifteen years of age entered the room. All their countenances brightened, as also did his, as he entered.

'Well, Charley,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, as the lad, with frank face, stood before him, 'been knocking anything into "pie" to-day?'

'No, sir,' replied Charley. 'I'm past that now; I'm getting along handsomely, the overseer said.'

'That's right, my boy; that's right. You'll be overseer yourself, some day.'

Charley blushed; his ambition had not yet reached that height of desire, and it seemed almost presumption to him to look so far ahead. The overseer in the printing-office where Charley was apprenticed was a great man in Charley's eyes; his word was law to fifty men and boys. The lad turned to Mr. Silver, and said in a pleased tone:

'A new apprentice came in today, and swept out the office instead of me.'

'So you are no longer knight of the broom?

'No, sir, and I'm not sorry for it; and there's something else. Dick Trueman, you know, sir--'

'You told us, Charley; he was out of his time last week, and they gave him a frame as a regular journeyman.'

'Yes, sir; and he earnt thirty-four shillings last week--full wages. And what do you think he did today, sir?' And Charley's bright eyes sparkled more brightly. These small items of office-news were of vast importance to Charley--almost as important as veritable history. 'But you couldn't guess,' he continued, in an eager tone. 'He asked for three hours' holiday--from eleven till two--and he went out and got married!'

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, 'he can't be much more than twenty-one years of age.'

'Only a few weeks more, sir. But he's a man now. Well, he came back at two o'clock, in a new suit of clothes, and a flower in his coat. All the men knew, directly they saw him, that he had asked for the three hours' holiday to get married in. And they set up such a clattering--rattling on their cases with their sticks, and on the stone with the mallets and planers--that you couldn't hear your own voice for five minutes; for every one of us likes Dick Trueman. You should have seen Dick blush, when he heard the salute! He tried to make them believe that he didn't know what all the clattering was about. But they kept it up so long, that he was obliged to come to the stone and bob his head at us. It makes me laugh only to think of it. And then the overseer shook hands with him, and Dick sent for three cans of beer, and all the men drank his health and good luck to him.' Charley paused to take breath. The simple story, as he told it in his eager way, was a pleasant story to hear. Now came the most important part of it Charley's eyes grew larger as he said, with much importance, 'I saw her.'

'Who?' they asked.

'Dick's wife; she was waiting at the corner of the street for him--and O, she's Beautiful!'

'Quite a day of excitement, Charley,' said Mr. Silver.

'There's something more, sir.'

'What is it, Charley?'

'Our wayz-goose comes off next week, sir.'

'Yes, Charley.'

'Only two of the apprentices are asked, and I'm one of them,' said Charley, with a ring of pardonable pride in his voice. 'May I go?

'Certainly, my boy,' said Mr. Silver. And Mrs. Silver smiled approvingly, and told Charley to run and wash himself and have tea; and Charley gave them all a bright look, and went out of the room as happy a boy as any in all London.

Then said Mr. Merrywhistle:

'Charley's a good lad.'

'He's our first and eldest,' said Mrs. Silver, bringing forward a basket filled with socks and stockings wanting repair; 'he will be a bright man.'

Mr. Merrywhistle nodded, and they talked of various subjects until the sound of children's happy voices interrupted them. 'Here are our youngsters,' he said, rubbing his hands joyously; and as he spoke a troop of children came into the room.

MRS. SILVER'S HOME.

There were five of them, as follows:

The eldest, Charles, the printer's apprentice, fifteen years of age--with a good honest face and a bright manner. The picture of a happy boy.

Then Mary, fourteen years. She looked older than Charley, and, young as she was, seemed to have assumed a kind of matronship over the younger branches. That the position was a pleasing one to her and all of them was evident by the trustful looks that passed between them.

Then Richard, twelve years; with dancing eyes, open mouth, and quick, impetuous, sparkling manner--filled with electricity--never still for a moment together; hands, eyes, and every limb imbued with restlessness.

Then Rachel, eleven years; with pale face and eyes--so strangely watchful of every sound, that it might almost have been supposed she listened with them. She was blind, and unless her attention were aroused, stood like a statue waiting for the spark of life.

Lastly, Ruth. A full-faced, round-eyed child, the prettiest of the group. Slightly wilful, but of a most affectionate disposition.

Rachel inclined her head.

'There's some one here,' she said.

'Who, my dear?' asked Mrs. Silver, holding up a warning finger to Mr. Merrywhistle, so that he should not speak.

Rachel heard his light breathing.

'Mr. Merrywhistle,' she said, and went near to him. He kissed her, and she went back to her station by the side of Ruth.

They were a pleasant bunch of human flowers to gaze at, and so Mr. and Mrs. Silver and Mr. Merrywhistle thought, for their eyes glistened at the healthful sight. Ruth and Rachel stood hand in hand, and it was easily to be seen that they were necessary to each other. But pleasant as the children were to the sight, a stranger would have been struck with amazement at their unlikeness to one another. Brothers and sisters they surely could not be, although their presence there and their bearing to each other betokened no less close a relationship. They were not indeed related by blood, neither to one another, nor to Mr. and Mrs. Silver. They were Mrs. Silver's foundlings--children of her love, whom she had taken, one by one, to rear as her own, whom she had snatched from the lap of Destitution.

Her marriage was one of purest affection, but she was barren; and after a time, no children coming, she felt a want in her home. Her husband was secretary in a sound assurance office, and they possessed means to rear a family. Before their marriage, they had both dwelt in thought upon the delight and pure pleasure in store for them, and after their marriage she saw baby-faces

in her dreams. She mused: 'My husband's son will be a good man, like his father, and we shall train him well, and he will be a pride to us.' And he: 'In my baby daughter I shall see my wife from her infancy, and I shall watch her grow to girlhood, to pure womanhood, and shall take delight in her, for that she is ours, the offspring of our love.' But these were dreams. No children came; and his wife still dreamt of her shadow-baby, and yearned to clasp it to her bosom. Years went on--they had married when they were young--and her yearning was unsatisfied. Pain entered into her life; a dull envy tormented her, when she thought of homes made happy by children's prattle, and her tears flowed easily at the sight of children. Her husband, engrossed all the day in the duties and anxieties of his business, had less time to brood over the deprivation, although he mourned it in his leisure hours; but she, being always at home, and having no stern labour to divert her thoughts from the sad channel in which they seemed quite naturally to run, mourned with so intense a grief, that it took possession of her soul and threatened to make her life utterly unhappy. One day he awoke to this, and quietly watched her; saw the wistful looks she cast about her, unaware that she was being observed; felt tears flowing from her eyes at night. He questioned her, and learnt that her grief and disappointment were eating into her heart; that, strive as she would, her life was unhappy in its loneliness while he was away, and that the sweetest light of home was wanting.

'I see baby-faces in my dreams,' she said to him one night, 'and hear baby-voices--so sweet, O, so sweet!' She pressed him in her arms, and laid his head upon her breast. 'And when I wake, I grieve.'

'Dear love,' he said, all the tenderness of his nature going out in his words, 'God wills it so.'

'I know, I know, my love,' she answered, her tears still flowing.

'How can I fill up the void in her life?' he thought, and gave expression to his thought.

Then she reproached herself, and asked his forgiveness, and cried, in remorse, 'How could she, how could she grieve him with her sorrow?'

'I have a right to it,' he answered. 'It is not all yours, my dear. Promise me, you in whom all my life's cares and joys are bound, never to conceal another of your griefs from me.'

She promised, and was somewhat comforted. This was within a couple of months of Christmas. A few nights before Christmas, as he was walking home, having been detained later than usual at his office, he came upon a throng of people talking eagerly with one another, and crowding round something that was hidden from his sight. It was bitterly cold, and the snow lay deep. He knew that nothing of less import than a human cause could have drawn that concourse together, and could have kept them bound together on such a night, and while the snow was falling heavily. He pushed his way through the crowd to the front, and saw a policeman gazing stupidly upon two forms lying on the ground. One was a man--dead; the other a baby--alive in the dead man's arms. He had them--the living and the dead--conveyed to the station-house; inquiries were set afoot; an inquest was held. Nothing was learnt of the man; no one knew anything of him; no one remembered having ever seen him before; and the mystery of his life was sealed by his death. He told his wife the sad story, and kept her informed of the progress, or rather the non-progress, of the inquiry. The man was buried, and was forgotten by all but the Silvers. Only one person attended the parish funeral as mourner, and that was Mr. Silver, who was urged to the act by a feeling of humanity.

'The poor baby? said Mrs. Silver, when he came from the funeral--'what will become of it?'

In the middle of the night she told her husband that she had dreamt of the baby. 'It stretched out its little arms to me.'

Her husband made no reply; but a few nights afterwards, having arranged with the parish authorities, he brought home the child, and placed it in his wife's arms. Her heart warmed to it immediately. A new delight took possession of her; the maternal instinct, though not fully satisfied, was brought into play. During the evening she said, 'How many helpless orphans are there round about us, and we are childless!' And then again, looking up tenderly from the babe in her lap to her husband's face, 'Perhaps this is the reason why God has given us no children.'

From this incident sprang the idea of helping the helpless; and year after year an orphan child was adopted, until they had six, when their means were lessened, and they found they could take no more. Then Mr. Merrywhistle stepped in, and gave sufficient to lift another babe from Desolation's lap. This last was twin-sister to Blade-o'-Grass, and they named her Ruth. From this brief record we pass to the present evening, when all the children are assembled in Mrs. Silver's house in Buttercup-square.

Some little time is spent in merry chat--much questioning of the children by Mr. Merrywhistle, who is a great favourite with them, and to whom such moments as these are the sweetest in his life. Charley tells over again the stirring incidents of the day, and they nod their heads, and laugh, and clap their hands, and cluster round him. Charley is their king.

'Come, children, sit down,' presently says Mr. Silver.

They sit round the table, Charley at the head, next to Mrs. Silver; then come Ruth and Rachel, with hands clasped beneath the tablecloth; then Mary and Richard. Mr. Silver produces a book; they hold their breaths. The blind girl knows that the book is on the table, and her fingers tighten upon Ruth's, and all her ears are in her eyes. It is a study to watch the varying shades of expression upon her face. As Mr. Silver opens the book you might hear a pin drop. Ruth nestles closer to Rachel, and Charley rises in his excitement. Mr. Merrywhistle sits in the armchair, and as he looks round upon the happy group, is as happy as the happiest among them. It is the custom every evening (unless pressing duties intervene) to read a chapter of a good work of fiction, and the reading-hour is looked forward to with eager delight by all the children. Last week they finished the *Vicar of Wakefield*, and this week they are introduced to the tender romance of *Paul and Virginia*. The selection of proper books is a grave task, and is always left to Mrs. Silver, who sometimes herself reads aloud.

'Where did we leave off last night, children?' asks Mr. Silver.

'Where Madame de la Tour receives a letter from her aunt,' answers Mary.

'Yes, from her spiteful old aunt,' adds Richard, 'and where Paul stamps his feet and wants to know who it is that has made Virginia's mother unhappy.'

A 'Hush-sh-sh!' runs round the table; and Mr. Silver commences the beautiful chapter where Virginia gives food to the poor slave woman, and induces her master to pardon her. With what eagerness do the children listen to how Paul and Virginia are lost in the woods! They gather cresses with the young lovers, and they help Paul set fire to the palm-tree, and they see the Three Peaks in the distance. Then they come to the famous part where Paul and Virginia stand by the banks of a river, the waters of which roll foaming over a bed of rocks. 'The noise of the water frightened Virginia, and she durst not wade through the stream; Paul therefore took her up in his arms, and went thus loaded over the slippery rocks, which formed the bed of the river, careless of the tumultuous noise of its waters.' [Thinks Richard, 'O, how I wish that I were Paul, carrying Virginia over the river!'] '"Do not be afraid," cried Paul to Virginia; "I feel very strong with you. If the inhabitant of the Black River had refused you the pardon of his slave, I would have fought with him."' ['And so would I,' thinks Richard, clenching his fists.] Night comes, and the lovers are almost despairing. Profound silence reigns in the awful solitudes. Will they escape? Can they escape? Paul climbs to the top of a tree, and cries, 'Come, come to the help of Virginia!' But only the echoes answer him, and the faint sound of 'Virginia, Virginia!' wanders through the forest. Despairing, they try to comfort each other, and seek for solace in prayer. Hark! they hear the barking of a dog. 'Surely,' says Virginia, 'it is Fidèle, our own dog. Yes, I know his voice. Are we,

then, so near home? At the foot of our own mountain?' So they are rescued, and this night's reading ends happily. The delight of the children, the intense interest with which they hang upon every word, cannot be described. Their attention is so thoroughly engrossed, that the figures of the young lovers might be living and moving before them. When Mr. Silver shuts the book, a sigh comes from the youthful audience. A pause ensues, and then the children talk unreservedly about the story, and what the end will be--all but Ruth, who is too young yet to form opinions. It is of course this and of course that with them all, and not one of them guesses the truth, or has any idea of the tragic ending of the story.

'Charley,' says little Ruth, 'you are like Paul.'

They all clap their hands in acquiescence.

'But where's my Virginia?' asks Charley.

'*I'll* be Virginia,' cries Ruth somewhat precociously; 'and you can carry me about where you like.'

They all laugh at this, and Ruth is quite proud, believing that she has distinguished herself. It is strange to hear the blind girl say, 'I can see Paul with Virginia in his arms.' And no doubt she can, better than the others who are blessed with sight. The three grown-up persons listen and talk among themselves, and now and then join in the conversation. The clock strikes--nine. It is a cuckoo-clock, and the children listen to the measured 'Cuckoo! Cuck-oo!' until the soulless bird, having, with an egregious excess of vanity, asserted itself nine times as the great 'I am' of all the birds in town or country, retires into its nest, and sleeps for an hour. Then a chapter from the Bible and prayers, and in the prayers a few words to the memory of two--a brother and a sister--who have gone from among them. For last year they were seven; now they are five. Their faces grow sad as the memory of their dear brother and sister comes upon them in their prayers, and 'Poor Archie!' 'Poor Lizzie!' hang upon their lips. The night's pleasures and duties being ended, the three youngest children go to bed, the last kind nod and smile being given to Ruth, sister to poor Blade-o'-Grass, who lingers a moment behind the others, and with her arm round Rachel's neck, cries 'Cuck-oo! Cuck-oo!' as her final good-night. But the proud bird in the clock takes no notice, and preserves a disdainful silence, although Ruth, as her custom is, waits a moment or two, and listens for the reply that does not come. Charley and Mary stop up an hour later than the others, reading; but before that hour expires, Mr. Merrywhistle bids his friends good-night, and retires.

MR. MERRYWHISTLE MEETS THE QUEER LITTLE OLD MAN.

But not to his bed. He was restless, and, the night being a fine one, he strolled out of Buttercup-square into the quiet streets. It was a favourite custom of his to walk along the streets of a night with no companions but his thoughts. Almost invariably he chose the quiet streets, for there are streets in London--north and south and east and west--which never sleep; streets which are healthy with traffic in the day, and diseased with traffic in the night.

Mr. Merrywhistle walked along and mused, in no unhappy frame of mind. A visit to the Silvers always soothed and comforted him; and on this occasion the sweet face of Mrs. Silver, and the happy faces and voices of the children, rested upon him like a peaceful cloud. So engrossed was he, that he did not heed the pattering of a small urchin at his side, and it was many moments before he awoke from his walking dream, and became conscious of the importunate intruder.

'If you please, sir!' said the small urchin, for the twentieth time, in a voice of weak pleading.

Mr. Merrywhistle looked down, and saw a face that he fancied he had seen before. But the memory of the happy group in Buttercup-square still lingered upon him. What he really saw as he looked down was a little boy without a cap, large-eyed, white-faced, and bare-footed. No other than Tom Beadle in fact, making hay, or trying to make it, not while the sun, but while the moon shone.

'If you please, sir!' repeated the boy, 'will you give me a copper to buy a bit o' bread?'

Then the dawn of faint suspicion loomed upon Mr. Merrywhistle. He placed his hand lightly upon Tom Beadle's shoulder, and said in a troubled voice, 'My boy, haven't I seen you before to-day?'

'No, sir,' boldly answered Tom Beadle, having no suspicion of the truth; for when the shilling was slipped into his hand, his eyes were towards the ground, and he did not see Mr. Merrywhistle's face.

'Were you not on the Royal Exchange with a little girl, and didn't I give you a--a shilling?'

For a moment Tom Beadle winced, and he had it in his mind to twist his shoulder from Mr. Merrywhistle's grasp and run away. For a moment only: natural cunning and his inclination kept him where he was. To tell the honest truth, a lie was a sweet morsel to Tom Beadle, and he absolutely gloried in 'taking people in.' So, on this occasion, he sent one sharp glance at Mr. Merrywhistle--which, rapid as it was, had all the effect of a sun-picture upon him--and whined piteously, 'Me 'ave a shillin' guv to me! Never 'ad sich a bit o' luck in all my born days. It was some other boy, sir, some cove who didn't want it. They allus gits the luck of it. And as for a little gal and the Royal Igschange, I wish I may die if I've been near the place for a week!'

'And you are hungry?' questioned Mr. Merrywhistle, fighting with his doubts.

''Aven't 'ad a ounce o' bread in my mouth this blessed day;' and two large tears gathered in Tom Beadle's eyes. He took care that Mr. Merrywhistle should see them.

Mr. Merrywhistle sighed, and with a feeling of positive pain gave twopence to Tom Beadle, who slipped his shoulder from Mr. Merrywhistle's hand with the facility of an eel, and scudded away in an exultant frame of mind.

Mr. Merrywhistle walked a few steps, hesitated, and then turned in the direction that Tom Beadle had taken.

'Now, I wonder,' he thought, 'whether the collector was right this morning, and whether I have been assisting in making criminals today.'

Truly this proved to be a night of coincidences to Mr. Merrywhistle; for he had not walked a mile before he came upon the queer little old man, whom he had met on the Royal Exchange. The old fellow was leaning against a lamp-post, smoking a pipe, and seemed to be as much at home in the wide street as he would have been in his own parlour. He looked surly and ill-grained, and his eyebrows were very precipitous. His mild eye was towards Mr. Merrywhistle, as that gentleman approached him, and when Mr. Merrywhistle slowly passed him, his fierce eye came in view and lighted upon the stroller. Before he had left the old man three yards behind him, Mr. Merrywhistle fancied he heard a chuckle. He would have dearly liked to turn back and accost the old man, but a feeling of awkwardness was upon him, and he could not muster sufficient courage. Chance, however, brought about an interview. Not far from him was a building that might have been a palace, it was so grand and light. It was a triumph of architecture, with its beautiful pillars, and its elaborate stonework. Great windows, higher than a man's height, gilt framed, and blazing with a light that threw everything around them in the shade, tempted the passer-by to stop and admire. There were three pictures in the windows, and these pictures were so cunningly surrounded by jets of light, that they could not fail to attract the eye. Awful satires were these pictures. Two of them represented the figure of a man under different aspects. On the left, this man was represented with a miserably-attenuated face, every line in which expressed woe and destitution; his clothes were so ragged that his flesh peeped through; his cheeks were thin, his lips were drawn in, his eyes were sunken; his lean hands seemed to tremble beneath a weight of misery: at the foot of this picture was an inscription, to the effect that it was the portrait of a man who did *not* drink So-and-so's gin and So-and-so's stout, both of which life's elixirs were to be obtained within. On the right, this same man was represented with full-fleshed face, with jovial eyes, with handsome mouth and teeth, with plump cheeks, with fat hands--his clothes and everything about him betokening worldly prosperity and happiness: at the foot of this picture was an inscription, to the effect that it was the portrait of the same man who (having, it is to be presumed, seen the error of his ways) *did* drink So-and-so's gin and So-and-so's stout. A glance inside this palace, crowded with Misery, would have been sufficient to show what a bitter satire these pictures were. But the centre picture, in addition to being a bitter satire, was awfully suggestive. It was this:

Whether to the artist or to the manufacturer was due the credit of ingeniously parading 'Old Tom' in a coffin, cannot (through the ignorance of the writer) here be recorded. But there it shone--an ominous advertisement. As Mr. Merrywhistle halted for a moment before these pictures, there issued from the Laboratory of Crime and Disease a man and a woman: he, blotched and bloated; she, worn-eyed and weary--both of them in rags. The woman, clinging to his arm, was begging him to come home--for his sake; for hers; for the children's; for God's! With his disengaged hand he struck at her, and she fell to the ground, bleeding. She rose, however, and wiped her face with

her apron, and implored him again and again to come home--and again he struck at her: this time with cruel effect, for she lay in the dust, helpless for a while. A crowd gathered quickly, and a hubbub ensued. In the midst of the Babel of voices, Mr. Merrywhistle, looking down saw the strange old man standing by his side. The same surly, sneering expression was on the old man's countenance, and Mr. Merrywhistle felt half inclined to quarrel with him for it. But before he had time to speak, the old man took the pipe out of his mouth, and pointing the stem in the direction of the chief actors in the scene, said, 'I knew them two when they was youngsters.'

'Indeed,' replied Mr. Merrywhistle, interested immediately, and delighted at the opportunity of opening up the conversation.

'She was a han'some gal; you'd scarce believe it to look at her now. She 'ad eyes like sloes; though whether sloes is bird, beast, or fish, I couldn't tell ye, but I've heard the sayin' a 'undred times. Anyways, she 'ad bright black eyes, and was a good gal too; but she fell in love'--(in a tone of intense scorn)--with that feller, and married him, the fool!'

'What has brought them to this?'

'Gin!' said the old man, expelling the word as if it were a bullet, and bringing his fierce eye to bear with all its force upon Mr. Merrywhistle.

Short as was the time occupied by this dialogue, it was long enough to put an end to the scene before them. The woman was raised to her feet by other women, many of whom urged her to 'Give him in charge, the brute!' but she shook her head, and staggered away in pain. Very quickly after her disappearance the crowd dissolved, by far the greater part of it finding its way through the swing-doors of the gin-palace, to talk of the event over So-and-so's gin and So-and-so's stout. Not that there was anything new or novel in the occurrence. It was but a scene in a drama of real life that had been played many hundred times in that locality. Presently the street was quite clear, and Mr. Merrywhistle and the old man were standing side by side, alone. A handy lamp-post served as a resting-place for the old man, who continued to smoke his pipe, and to chuckle between whiles, as if he knew that Mr. Merrywhistle wanted to get up a conversation, and did not know how to commence. As he saw that the old man was determined not to assist him, and as every moment added to the awkwardness of the situation, Mr. Merrywhistle made a desperate plunge.

'When I was on the Royal Exchange to-day----' he commenced.

The old man took his pipe out of his mouth, and expelled a cloud and a chuckle at the same moment.

'I thought you was a-comin' to that,' he said. 'You owe me a bob.'

'What for?'

'I made a bet with you--*to* myself--that the first thing you'd speak about was the Royal Exchange. I bet you a bob--*to* myself--and I won it.'

Without hesitation Mr. Merrywhistle took a shilling from his pocket, and offered it to the old man, who eyed it with his fierce eye for a moment, doubtingly and with curiosity, and then calmly took possession of it, and put it in his waistcoat-pocket.

'When you was, on the Royal Exchange to-day,' he said, repeating Mr. Merrywhistle's words, 'you sor a boy and a girl a-beggin'.'

'No,' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle warmly; 'they were *not* begging.'

'*You* may call it what you like,' said the old man; 'but *I* call it beggin'; and so would that identical boy, if I was to ask him. He wouldn't tell *you* so, though. The boy he looked as if he was goin' to die, and you give him a copper or a bit of silver; and you wasn't pleased because I laughed at you for it. Now, then, fire away.'

'Was that boy starving? Was he as ill as he looked? Was I----'

'Took in?' added the old man, as Mr. Merrywhistle hesitated to express the doubt 'Why? D'ye want your money back? Lord! he's a smart little chap, is Tom Beadle!'

'You know him, then?'

'Know him!' replied the old man, with a contemptuous snort; 'I'd like to be told who it is about 'ere I don't know. And I'd like to know who *you* are. I'm almost as fond of askin' questions as I am of answering 'em. What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If you expect Jimmy Wirtue to answer your questions, you must make up your mind to answer his'n.'

'You're Mr. Virtue, then?'

'You're at it agin. No, I'm not Mr. Virtue' (he had to struggle with the 'V' before it would pass his lips), 'but Jimmy Wirtue--and that's not Jimmy Wice. What's your'n?'

'Merrywhistle,' replied that gentleman shortly.

Jimmy Virtue was pleased at the quick answer.

'Merrywhistle!' he exclaimed. 'That's a rum name--rummer than mine. What more would you like to know? What am I? I keep a leavin'-shop. Where do I live? In Stoney-alley. Now, what are you; and where do *you* live? Are you a Methody parson, or a penny-a-liner, or a detective, or a cove that goes about studyin' human nater, or a feelanthrofist. We've lots o' *them* knockin' about 'ere.'

Mr. Merrywhistle was constrained to reply, but found himself unexpectedly in a quandary.

'I'm a--a--O, I'm Nothing Particular,' blurting it out almost in desperation.

'You look like it,' chuckled Jimmy Virtue, so tickled by his smart retort as to be satisfied with Mr. Merrywhistle's vague definition of his calling. 'We've lots of *your* sort, too, knockin' about here--more than the feelanthrofists, I shouldn't wonder. But I don't think there's any 'arm in you. Jimmy Wirtue's not a bad judge of a face; and he can tell you every one of your organs. 'Ere's Benevolence--you've got that large; 'ere's Ideality--not much o' that; 'ere's Language--shut your eyes; 'ere's Causality--no, it ain't; you 'aven't got it. I can't see your back bumps, nor the bumps atop o' your 'ead; but I could ferret out every one of 'em, if I 'ad my fingers there.'

At this moment an individual approached them who would have attracted the attention of the most unobservant. Mr. Merrywhistle did not see his face; but the gait of the man was so singular, that his eyes wandered immediately in the direction of the man. At every three steps the singular figure paused, and puffed, as if he were a steam-engine, and was blowing off steam. One--two--three; puff. One--two--three; puff. One--two--three; puff.

'What on earth is the matter with the man?' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle to Jimmy Virtue.

'Nothing that I knows of,' replied Jimmy Virtue; 'he's been goin' on that way for the last twenty year. If you're lookin' out for characters, you'll get plenty of 'em 'ere. Perhaps you're a artist for one of the rubbishy picter-papers--one of the fellers who sees a murder done in a Whitechapel court one day, and takes a picter of it on the spot from nater; and who sees a shipwreck in the Atlantic the next day, and takes a picter of *that* on the spot from nater. That there man's worth his ten 'undred golden sovereigns a-year, if he's worth a penny; and he lives on tuppence a-day. The girls and boys about here calls him Three-Steps-and-a-Puff. If you was to go and offer him a ha'penny, he'd take it.'

By the time that Three-Steps-and-a-Puff was out of sight, the tobacco in Jimmy Virtue's pipe had turned to dust and smoke, and he prepared to depart also. But seeing that Mr. Merrywhistle was inclined for further conversation, he said:

'Perhaps you'd like to come down and see my place?'

Mr. Merrywhistle said that he *would* very much like to come down and see Jimmy Virtue's place.

'Come along, then,' said Jimmy Virtue, but paused, and said, 'Stop a bit; perhaps you wouldn't mind buyin' a penn'orth o' baked taters first.'

A baked-potato can, with a man attached to it, being near them, Mr. Merrywhistle invested a penny, thinking that Jimmy Virtue intended the potatoes for supper.

'Did you ever consider,' said the eccentric old man, as they turned down the narrowest of lanes, 'that a big city was like a theaytre?'

'No, it never struck me.'

'It is, though I there's stalls, and dress-circle, and pit, and gallery, in a big city like London. The west, that's the stalls and private boxes; the north, that's the dress-circle; the south, that's the pit; the east, that's the gallery. This is the penny-gallery of the theaytre; 'taint a nice place to lay in.'

He stopped before the forms of two children--a boy and a girl--who, huddled in each other's arms, were fast asleep in a gateway. He stirred them gently with his foot; and the boy started to his feet instantaneously, wide awake, and on the alert for his natural enemies, the police. Mr. Merrywhistle was standing in the abutment of the gateway, and the boy couldn't see his face; but the well-known form of Jimmy Virtue was instantly recognised; and as the boy sank to the ground, he muttered:

'What's the good of waking us up just as we was a-gettin' warm? You wouldn't like it yourself, Mr. Wirtue, you wouldn't.'

Then he crept closer to his companion, and said sleepily:

'Come along, Bladergrass; let's turn in agin.'

The girl, who had been regarding the two dark shadows with a half-frightened, half-imploring look, as if she dreaded that they were about to turn her out of her miserable shelter, nestled in the lad's arms, and the next minute they were asleep again. All blessings were not denied to them.

'I know that lad,' said Mr. Merrywhistle.

'You ought to; it's Tom Beadle.'

'And he was at the Royal Exchange to-day with that poor little girl?'

'Yes, that was him. You thought he was dyin'. What do you think now?

Jimmy Virtue seemed to take positive pleasure in putting the affair in the worst light.

Mr. Merrywhistle did not answer the question, but said, in a sad tone, 'He begged of me again to-night.'

'Did he, though!' exclaimed Jimmy Virtue admiringly.

'And when I asked him if any one had given him a--a shilling on the Royal Exchange to-day, he took an oath that he hadn't been near the Royal Exchange for a month, and that he had never had a shilling given to him in all his life.'

'And did you believe him, and give him anythin'?'

'Yes' (hesitatingly), 'I gave him a trifle.'

Jimmy Virtue stopped by a post, and held his sides. When he had had his laugh out, he said:

'Tom's a smart little thief. But you're not the first gent he's taken in twice in one day. Come, now, he's taken you in twice with your eyes shut; let him take you in once more with your eyes open.'

'I don't understand.'

'Them baked taters--'

'Well?'

'It wouldn't be a bad thing--like returnin' good for evil, as the preachers say--if you was to go and put them taters in the little girl's lap.'

'No--no--no!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, a little violently, and pausing between each negative, 'it'll be paying a premium for dishonesty and lies.'

The good fellow's heart was filled with pain as he uttered these words, which, hotly spoken, served as fuel to flame; for Jimmy Virtue turned upon him almost savagely, and snarled:

'You're a nice article, you are, a-givin' and repentin'! I've been took in by you, I 'ave. If I 'ad my fingers on the back o' your 'ead, I'd find something that would do away with your bumps o' benevolence. Dishonesty and lies! What'd you want, you and the likes? The boy's got to live, ain't he? The boy's got to eat, ain't he? If he can't work and don't beg, what's he to do? Steal? Yah! D'you think he's got money in the bank? D'you think, if he 'ad his pockets full, he'd sleep in the open air, in a gateway?'

'Stop, stop, my good friend!' implored Mr. Merrywhistle, overcome by remorse at his hard-heartedness. He ran quickly to where the children were lying, and deposited the baked potatoes, and a few coppers as well, in the girl's lap and hands. When he came back to where Jimmy Virtue was standing, he found that worthy only half mollified.

'A-givin' and repentin',' muttered the old man, as he walked towards Stoney-alley, 'that's a nice kind o' charity!' Impelled by a sudden thought, he turned back to the gateway, and kneeling by the side of Blade-o'-Grass, opened her hot hand in which the pence were.

'He's not a bad chap, after all,' he murmured, as he retraced his steps, 'but it's enough to rile a feller and put a feller's back up, when a man gives and repents.'

JIMMY VIRTUE INTRODUCES MR. MERRYWHISTLE TO HIS PLACE OF BUSINESS.

The moment Mr. Merrywhistle entered the habitation of Jimmy Virtue he felt as if he were mildewed, and an impression stole upon him that he had been lying on a musty shelf for a dozen years at least, and had not been washed during the whole of the time. The place was dark when they entered, and as Mr. Merrywhistle advanced cautiously, he came in contact with soft bundles, from which a mouldy smell proceeded, and which so encompassed him on all sides, that he was frightened at every step he moved, lest he should bring confusion on himself. When Jimmy Virtue lighted two melancholy wicks--tallow twelves--Mr. Merrywhistle looked about him in wonder. It was the queerest and the dirtiest of shops, and was filled with bundles of rags. Pocket-handkerchiefs, trousers, coats, waistcoats, and underclothing of every description met his eye whichever way he turned; faded dresses and dirty petticoats (many with mud still on them, as if they had been taken off in the streets in bad weather) so choked the shelves, that some of them were in danger of bursting out; old boots hung from the ceiling; old crinolines loomed upon him from the unlikeliest of places, and, as he looked timorously up at them, yawned to ingulf him. One, hanging behind the parlour-door, in the gloomiest corner, was so disposed, that Mr. Merrywhistle's disturbed fancy added the lines of a woman's form hanging in it; and the fancy grew so strong upon him, that although he turned his back to the spot immediately, he could not dismiss the figure of the hanging woman from his imagination. There was an apartment behind the shop which Jimmy Virtue called his parlour; but that was almost as full of rubbish as the shop. Neither in shop or parlour was there fairly room to turn round in; if you wanted to perform that movement, you had to tack for it.

'And this is your dwelling,' Observed Mr. Merrywhistle, feeling it incumbent upon him to speak, as Jimmy Virtue led the way into the parlour, and motioned him to a seat.

'I don't call it by that name myself,' replied Jimmy Virtue, in a not over-polite tone. 'It's where I live and gets my livin', and I don't give you more than a quarter of an hour.'

By which Mr. Merrywhistle understood, that beyond a quarter of an hour it would not be politeness for him to stay.

'Ever been in a leavin'-shop before?' asked the old man.

'No,' replied Mr. Merrywhistle; 'not that I am aware of. May I ask you what a leaving-shop is?'

'This is,' said Jimmy. 'All them things you see in the shop and in the parlour--all them crinolines and peddicuts, and boots and dresses-- belongs to poor people round about 'ere. I lend 'em a trifle on 'em, and takes care of 'em; and charges 'em a trifle when they take 'em out.'

'They don't seem worth much,' observed Mr. Merrywhistle reflectively.

'Perhaps not--to you. But they're worth a deal to them they belongs to. There's a many o' them crinolines and peddicuts that comes in and out like a Jack-in-a-box. Their movements are as regular as clockwork. Monday afternoon in, Sunday mornin' out.'

Here, to Mr. Merrywhistle's consternation, Jimmy Virtue took out his mild eye--it being a glass one--and with the laconic remark, 'A damp night makes it clammy,' wiped it calmly, and put it in again. The effect of this upon Mr. Merrywhistle was appalling. To see that mild eye--knowing that it was a glass one, and that a damp night made it clammy--side by side with that fierce eye which, as he had described, seemed inclined to fly out of its owner's head at you, was almost too much for human endurance. And as Mr. Merrywhistle looked at them--he could not help doing so, there was such a fascination in them--*both* eyes seemed to glare at him, and the glare of the glass was more dreadful and overpowering than the glare of the flesh. Jimmy Virtue, whose one organ of sight was as potent as if he were Argus-eyed, remarked Mr. Merrywhistle's perturbation, and quietly enjoyed it; he did not refer to the subject, however, but considerately treated Mr. Merrywhistle to as much of his glass eye as he could conveniently bestow upon him.

'Speakin' of crinolines and peddicuts,' observed Jimmy, recurring to his stock, 'they're not the only women's things that's left. We're in the fashion down 'ere, I can tell you. In that box that you're a-settin' on, there's a matter of seven chinons, that I takes care of regularly a week-days--real 'air three of 'em are; them as belongs to 'em I do believe would sooner go without their stockin's a Sundays than without their chinons. And now, jumpin' from one thing to another, I should like to know whether you've got over your repentin' fit, and whether you think Tom Beadle ought to be put in quod for takin' your shillin' to-day.'

'No; I've no doubt he did it out of necessity. But I wish he hadn't told me----'

'Lies. Don't stop at the word. Out of necessity! Ay, I should think he did, the clever little thief. And necessity's the mother of invention--consequently, necessity's the mother o' lies. You want a friend o' mine to talk to you. He'd argue with you; but I fly into a passion, and ain't got the patience that he's got. He'd talk to you about Tom Beadle and little Blade-o'-Grass, and put things in a way that ud stun you to 'ear.'

'Little what?'

'Blade-o'-Grass--the little girl that's sleepin' with Tom Beadle in the gateway.'

'What a singular name!--has she a mother and father?'

'No mother; I can't say about father. I remember *him* before the young uns was born. He lived in this alley, and used to come into the shop and leave his wife's things, and talk about the rights of man. The rights of man! I tell you what he thought of them: a little while before his wife was brought to bed, he cut away and left her. She was brought to bed with twins--girls--and after that, she died.'

'Then Blade-o'-Grass has a sister?'

'Who said she 'as? I didn't. No, she ain't got a sister. I don't know what came o' the other; but that don't matter to Blade-o'-Grass. Here *she* is, poor little devil, and that's enough for her, and more than enough, I'll take my davy on. Time's up.'

This was an intimation that it was time for Mr. Merrywhistle to take his departure. Wishing to stand well in the eyes of Jimmy Virtue--notwithstanding the dreadful effect the glass eye had upon him--he rose, and said that he hoped they would meet again; to which Jimmy Virtue said, that *he* had no objection.

'What do you say, now,' suggested Mr. Merrywhistle, 'to you and your friend that you would like to talk to me coming to take a cup of tea or a bit of dinner with me?'

'Which?' asked Jimmy Virtue. 'Tea I don't care for.'

'Dinner, then.'

'A good dinner?'

'Yes.'

'Wine?'

'Yes.'

Something very like a twinkle shone in the old man's fierce eye. He rubbed his hand over his chin, and said,

'It's worth considerin' on.--When?'

'Next Saturday; any time in the afternoon you like to name.'

'That ud suit my friend,' said Jimmy Virtue, evidently impressed by the prospect of a good dinner; 'he leaves off work a Saturdays at two o'clock----'

'Then we'll consider it settled,' said Mr. Merrywhistle eagerly.

'----But I don't know that it ud suit *me*,' continued Jimmy, the twinkle vanishing, and a calculating look taking its place. 'There's the shop. I'd 'ave to shut it up--and then what would the customers do? To be sure, I could put up a notice sayin' that it ud be open at nine o'clock. I keep open till twelve Saturday night.'

'Very well; manage it that way.'

'I think you told me that you was Nothink Particular when I asked you what you was, and bein' Nothink Particular, time's no account to you. Now it *is* some account to me--it's money.' Here he turned his blind eye to Mr. Merrywhistle. 'If you want me to shut up my shop for six hours, say, you must make it up to me. If you want Jimmy Wirtue's company, you must pay for Jimmy Wirtue's time.'

'That's fair enough,' said Mr. Merrywhistle readily, scarcely hearing the suppressed chuckle to which Jimmy Virtue gave vent at the answer. 'What do you value your time at?

'Sixpence an hour--three shillings for the six hours. Then there's the disappointment to the customers, and the injury to the business; but I'll throw them in.'

Without a word, Mr. Merrywhistle took three shillings from his pocket and placed them on the table. Still keeping his blind side to Mr. Merrywhistle, Jimmy Virtue tried the coins with his teeth, and said, 'Done!'

Whether he meant that he had 'done' Mr. Merrywhistle, or that the word referred to the binding of the invitation to dinner, he did not stop to explain, but asked,

'Where?'

'At the Three Jolly Butcher Boys, Cannon-street,' replied Mr. Merrywhistle, not being confident that the resources of his establishment in Buttercup-square would be sufficient to satisfy his new and eccentric acquaintance.

'That's settled, then,' said Jimmy, 'and I'll bring my friend at four o'clock. And now, if you don't mind takin' a bit of advice, take this--never you go talkin' to strangers agin at such a time o' night as this, and never you accept another invitation to visit a man you don't know nothin' of.'

'But I knew I could trust you,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, smiling.

'Did you!' exclaimed Jimmy. 'Then I wouldn't give the snuff of a candle for your judgment. I'll see you out of this, if you please.'

So saying, he led his visitor out of the shop. Mr. Merrywhistle could not, for the life of him, help casting a hurried glance over his shoulder in the direction of the special crinoline which had so distressed him; and again the fancy came upon him, that he saw a woman hanging behind the door. When he was in the open, however, this fancy vanished, and he breathed more freely. They stopped to look at the sleeping forms of Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass in the gateway. The children were fast locked in each other's arms, and were sleeping soundly.

In the wider thoroughfare, Jimmy Virtue bade Mr. Merrywhistle 'good-night,' and as he walked back to his shop in Stoney-alley, amused himself by polishing his glass eye with a dirty pocket-handkerchief, and chuckling over the remembrances of the night.

In the mean time, Mr. Merrywhistle made his way to Buttercup-square, not ill pleased with his adventure. But in the night he was tormented by singular dreams, the most striking one of which contained the horrible incident of Jimmy Virtue glaring at him with his glass eye, and swallowing at one gulp a huge baked potato, with Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass sticking in the middle of it.

THE STRANGE IDEA OF HALLELUJAH ENTERTAINED BY BLADE-O'-GRASS.

Punctually at four o'clock oh Saturday, Jimmy Virtue, accompanied by his friend, presented himself to Mr. Merrywhistle at the Three Jolly Butcher Boys. It might reasonably have been expected, that Jimmy would have made some change for the better in his appearance, in honour of the occasion; but Mr. Merrywhistle fancied that, out of defiance, Jimmy had allowed the accumulated dust of days to lie thick upon his clothes, and that he had purposely neglected to brush them. Indeed, he almost asserted as much by his manner: You saw what I was, and you forced yourself upon me; you invited me and my friend to dinner, and you must take the consequences. His only eye, as it blazed at Mr. Merrywhistle from under its precipice of bushy hair, seemed to be asking of that gentleman how he liked its owner's appearance: and it softened

somewhat in the kindly glances from Mr. Merrywhistle, whose countenance was beaming with amiability and good-nature.

'This is my friend that I spoke of,' said Jimmy Virtue; 'his name is Truefit, Robert Truefit. Truefit by name, and Truefit by nature. This is Mr. Merrywhistle, who sometimes gives and repents.'

Robert Truefit came forward, with a manly bow, and, when Mr. Merrywhistle offered his hand, shook it cordially.

'My friend, Mr. Virtue, here--' he said, and was about to proceed, when the old man struck in with,

'Now, I won't have it. Bob; I won't have it. None of your misters because we're before company. It's Jimmy Wirtue when we are alone, and it's Jimmy Wirtue now; and if you're a-goin' to say anythin' in apology for me, don't. I don't want apologies made for me, and I won't 'ave 'em.'

Robert Truefit laughed, and said, 'We must let old Jimmy have his way, sir, so I won't say what I was going to say.' Robert Truefit was about thirty years of age, and was a stonemason by trade. He had a shrewd intelligent face and clear brown eyes, which, young as he was, already showed the signs of much thought. He was as manly a fellow as you would wish to look upon, and in his speech and manner there was a straightforwardness which at once won for him the good opinion of those with whom he came in contact. So conspicuous was this straightforwardness of speech and manner, that he was often called Straightforward Bob by his comrades and those who knew him intimately. Directly you set eyes upon him, you received the impression, not only that he was a man to be depended upon, but that he was one who was apt to form his own opinions, and would stand by them through thick and thin, unless absolutely convinced, through his reason, that they were wrong. He had a wife who adored him, and children who looked up to him in love and respect, as to a king. He was a true type of English manhood and English shrewd common sense.

By the time the few words were exchanged, dinner was on the table, and Mr. Merrywhistle motioned his guests to be seated. But Jimmy Virtue, turning his blind eye to his host, said, with an odd smile, 'I've got two more friends outside. May I bring them in?'

Without waiting for Mr. Merrywhistle's consent, he went to the door and brought forward Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass. Presenting them to Mr. Merrywhistle, he went through a kind of mock introduction. Mr. Thomas Beadle, Miss Blade-o'-Grass, Mr. Merrywhistle.

Tom Beadle made an awkward bow, and Blade-o'-Grass made a still more awkward curtsey. Blade-o'-Grass was the only one of the four guests who had thought fit to do honour to the occasion in the matter of dress. Jimmy Virtue, as you have seen, had made himself shabbier than usual; Robert Truefit was in his working clothes; and it would have been simply impossible for Tom Beadle to have made any change in his garments, unless he had stolen them, or had had them given to him. But Blade-o'-Grass, who, like Tom Beadle, possessed no other clothes than those she stood upright in--and those were as ragged as clothes could be--had by some strange means acquired a bonnet, and it was on her head now. Such a bonnet! If it had been gifted with a tongue, it could doubtless have told a strange story of its career. For although now it was only fit for a dunghill, it had been a fine bonnet once, and, torn and soiled as it was, the semblance of a once fashionable shape was still dimly recognisable. But Blade-o'-Grass was proud of it, wrecked and fallen as it was from its high estate.

Now it may as well be confessed at once, that Tom Beadle was not at his ease. When he had made his awkward bow, he raised his eyes to the face of Mr. Merrywhistle, and recognised him. He did not know where he was going to when Jimmy Virtue had asked him if he would like to have a good dinner; and when he recognised Mr. Merrywhistle, he sent a reproachful look at Jimmy Virtue, and involuntarily squared his arms and elbows to ward off the knock on the head he expected to receive. But as Jimmy Virtue only chuckled (knowing the fear that possessed Tom Beadle), and as Mr. Merrywhistle was gentleness itself, the lad, after a time, became reassured--though he still kept his elbows ready.

'You sit down in the corner,' said Jimmy Virtue to the children, 'and when we've finished dinner, you may eat what's left.'

'Nay,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, chiming in with the humour of his guest; 'there is more than enough for all. Let them eat with us.' And he placed the children at the table, where they sat watching the filling of their plates with gloating wonderment.

'Stop a minute, young uns,' said Jimmy Virtue, arresting their uplifted forks, which they were clumsily handling, 'Grace before meat. Repeat after me: For this bit o' luck----'

'For this bit o'luck,' they repeated.

'Let us say----' he.

'Let us say----' they.

'Hallelujah!'

'Alleloojah.'

'Now, you can fire away.'

And fire away they did, eating as hungry children only can eat--never lifting their heads once from their plates until they had cleaned them out; then they looked up for more.

Jimmy Virtue was quite as busily employed as the children, and ate and drank with an air of intense enjoyment. Robert Truefit had more leisure. He ate very little, having had his dinner at one o'clock. Scarcely any conversation took place until dinner was over. Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass had eaten their fill, but they still held their knives and forks in their hands, and looked eagerly at the remains of the meal. Jimmy Virtue's face had a purplish tinge on it, and his fierce eye had a mellow light in it, as he saw the children looking eagerly at the food.

'What was it you found in your' lap the other mornin'?' he asked of Blade-o'-Grass.

'Nothin',' was the reply.

'Not baked taters?

'No; we didn't 'ave 'em in the mornin'. Tom and me woke up in the middle o' the night, and eat 'em.'

'Wasn't you astonished to find baked taters in your lap when you woke up?'

'No; we was pleased.'

'Do you know who put 'em there?'

'The baked-tater man?' asked Blade-o'-Grass, after a little consideration.

'No; it wasn't him. Guess agin.'

Blade-o'-Grass considered, and shook her head; but suddenly a gleam lighted up her face. She pulled Tom Beadle to her, and whispered in his ear.

'She ses, if yer please,' said Tom, 'that p'r'aps it was Alleloojah.'

At this suggestion, Jimmy Virtue was seized with one of his fits of noiseless laughter; but both Mr. Merrywhistle and Robert Truefit looked grave. Blade-o'-Grass and Tom Beadle saw nothing either grave or ludicrous in the suggestion, for their attention was fully occupied in the contemplation of the food that was on the table. Mr. Merrywhistle, who was observing their rapt

contemplation of the remains of the feast, observed also Jimmy Virtue's fiery eye regarding him.

'It's your'n? questioned the old man of his host.

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'You pay for it, whether it's eat or not?'

'Yes.'

'Give it to the young uns.'

'How win they take it away?'

'In a newspaper.'

Sharp Tom Beadle followed every word of the dialogue, and his lynx eyes were the first that saw a newspaper on a sofa in the room. He jumped from his seat, and brought forward the paper, his eyes glistening with hope. Mr. Merrywhistle and Jimmy Virtue wrapped up what remained of the joint of meat in the newspaper.

'Food for mind and body,' said Robert Truefit, as the parcel was given to Tom.

Tom ducked his head, without in the least knowing what Robert Truefit meant--and not caring either. His great anxiety was, to get away now that he had as much as was likely to be given to him. Blade-o'-Grass shared his anxiety. The gift of the food was such a splendid one--there really was a large quantity of meat left on the joint--that she feared it was only given to them 'out of a lark,' as she would have expressed it, and that it would be taken from them presently. A premonition was upon her, that she would be hungry to-morrow.

The children stood in painful suspense before the grown-up persons. Their anxiety to be dismissed was so great, that they threw restless glances around them, and shuffled uneasily with their feet. But Mr. Merrywhistle had something to say first. He had great difficulty in commencing, however. He coughed, and hesitated, and almost blushed, and looked at Jimmy Virtue in a shame-faced kind of way.

'The other day,' at length he commenced, addressing himself to Tom Beadle, 'when I saw you and Blade-o'-Grass on the Royal Exchange----'

Tom, in the most unblushing manner, was about to asseverate, upon his soul and body, that he was not near the Royal Exchange, when Jimmy Virtue's warning finger, and Jimmy Virtue's ominous eye, stopped the lie on his lips.

'----On the Royal Exchange,' continued Mr. Merrywhistle, 'and gave you--a--a shilling, were you really ill, as you seemed to me to be?'

A look of triumphant delight flashed into Tom Beadle's eyes. 'Did I. do it well, sir? he cried, nudging Blade-o'-Grass. 'Did I look as if I was a-dyin' by inches?'

Mr. Merrywhistle winced, as if he had received a blow.

'O, Tom, Tom!' he exclaimed gently, 'are you not ashamed of yourself?'

'No,' answered Tom, without hesitation, his manner instantly changing.

Blade-o'-Grass perceiving, with her quick instinct, that something was wrong, and that Tom was likely to get into disgrace because he had made the gentleman believe that he was dying by inches, stepped forward chivalrously to the rescue.

'If you please, sir,' she said, 'you mus'n't blame Tom. It was all along o' me he did it.'

Thereupon the following colloquy took place:

Robert Truefit. Bravo, Blade-o'-Grass!

Mr. Merrywhistle [*only too ready to receive justification*]. Come here, child. How was it all along of you?

Tom Beadle [*taking moral shelter behind Blade-o'-Grass*]. Tell the gent the truth, Bladergrass; he won't 'urt you. Tell him about the tiger.

Mr. Merrywhistle [*in amazement*]. The tiger!

Blade-o'-Grass [*gravely*]. Yes, sir; I got a tiger in my inside.

Mr. Merrywhistle. Who on earth put such a monstrous idea into the child's head?

Blade-o'-Grass. Mr. Wirtue knows all about it, and so does all the others in Stoney-alley.

JIMMY VIRTUE [*nodding gravely in confirmation*]. Yes, she's got a tiger. Tell the gentleman what it does to you, Blade-o'-Grass.

BLADE-O'-GRASS. Eats up everythink as goes down my throat, sir; swallers every blessed bit I puts in my mouth; and when I ain't got nothink to give it, tears at me like one o'clock. Tom's giv me grub for it orfen and orfen, sir; I don't know what I should a' done lots o' times if it 'adn't been for 'im. [*Mr. Merrywhistle sheds a kindly glance on Tom Beadle, who receives it with an air of injured innocence.*] Well, sir, last Monday the tiger was a'-goin' on orfle, and I was so sick that I begins to cry. Then Tom comes up, and arks me what I'm cryin' for; and I tells 'im that the tiger's a-worryin' the inside out o' me. Tom feels in 'is pockets, but he ain't got a copper to giv me, so he ses, 'Come along o' me,' ses Tom; and he ketches 'old of my 'and, and takes me to the Royal Igschange. Then he ses, ses Tom, 'If anybody arks you, Bladergrass, just you say that I'm your brother, a-dyin' of consumption. I'm a-dyin' by inches, I am.' And I cries out, sir, for Tom looked jist as if he *was* a-dyin' by inches. [*A smile of triumph wreathes Tom Beadle's lips; he has the proper pride of an artist.*] But Tom tells me not to be frightened, for he's only a-shammin'. Then the peeler tells us to move on, and you comes up and gives Tom a shillin'; and the first thing Tom does is to buy a poloney for me and a 'unk o' bread for the tiger.

TOM BEADLE. I wish I may die, sir, if she ain't told the truth, the 'ole truth, and nothin' but the truth, so 'elp me Bob!

Blade-o'-Grass gazes at Mr. Merrywhistle eagerly, and with glistening eyes, and seeing that her vindication of Tom has raised him in the estimation of their benefactor, nods at her ragged companion two or three times in satisfaction. Mr. Merrywhistle, in his heart of hearts, forgives Tom for the deception--nay, finds justification for it; and the children are allowed to depart with their spoil.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. That's a sad sight, and a sad tale.

ROBERT TRUEFIT. England's full of such sights and such tales.

Jimmy Virtue pricked up his ears. He knew when his friend Bob was 'coming out,' and he prepared himself to listen by taking out his glass eye and contemplating it with his fierce eye, polishing it up the while.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE [*gently*]. Not full of such sights, surely?

ROBERT TRUEFIT. Yes, full of them, unfortunately. Take London. There are thousands and thousands of such children in such positions as Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass, hanging about the courts and alleys--pushed out of sight, one might almost say. And as London is, so every other large English city is. If they haven't shoals of boys and girls growing up to men and women in one bad way, they have them in another bad way. I know what old Jimmy got me here for to-day--he wanted me to talk; he knows I'm fond of it.

JIMMY VIRTUE. Bob ought to be in Parleyment. He'd tell 'em somethin'.

ROBERT TRUEFIT. That's a specimen of old Jimmy's flattery, sir. I don't see what good I could do in Parliament. I've got to work for my living, and that takes up all my time; if I were in Parliament, I should have to get money somehow to support my wife and family, and it isn't in my blood to become a pensioner. Besides, I should be contented enough with what's called 'the ruling powers,' if they'd only turn their attention more to such social questions as this.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. Ah, I'm glad of that; I'm glad you're not a republican.

ROBERT TRUEFIT. Not I, sir--though I don't know what I might become by and by; for there's no denying that things are unequal, and that working men are talking of this inequality more and more every year. You'd be surprised to know what they think about this and that. And although I don't go so far as some of them do, I can't help agreeing with them in many things.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. But what do they want? Equality? Such a thing is impossible.

ROBERT TRUEFIT. I know it is. You'd have to do away with brains before you got that; though there *are* a many who believe that it is to be arrived at. Some of them are fools, and some of them are rogues; but some of them have really worked themselves up into absolute belief.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. Discontented people are to be found everywhere, and under any form of government.

ROBERT TRUEFIT. Ay, that's the way a great many sum up; when they say that, they think they have found out the cause, and that the matter is settled. 'Tisn't the sensible way to view it.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. What is the reason, then, of this spread of feeling among working-men?

ROBERT TRUEFIT. That's a large question, and would take too long to answer. But I think the penny newspaper is partly accountable for it. They can afford to buy the penny and halfpenny

newspaper, and they read them, and talk more among themselves. You see, things press upon them. They are arriving at a sort of belief that the laws are made more for the protection and benefit of property than for the protection and benefit of flesh and blood; and as *their* value in the market doesn't lie in land and money, but in bone and muscle, the idea isn't pleasant to them.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. But surely they are not right in this idea?

ROBERT TRUEFIT. Are they not? Read the newspapers, and you'll find they are. Why, a man may do anything to flesh and blood, short of murder, and the law won't be very hard on him. But let him touch property, ever so little, and down it comes on him like a sledge-hammer. I'll tell you what I read in the police reports this morning. A man is had up at the police-court for beating his wife. The woman is put into the box, with marks on her face and with her head bandaged; the man doesn't deny that he beat her, and half-a-dozen witnesses prove that he beat her cruelly; the floor of the room in which they lived was covered with blood-stains. There is no excuse for him; no aggravation on her part is set up; a doctor states, that if one of the blows she received had been a little more on the left of her head, she would have been killed; and the man gets three months' hard labour. Afterwards, a man is brought up for stealing three-and-sixpence. He is miserably dressed, and there is want in his face. The evidence in this case is quite as clear as in the other. The prisoner snatched a purse, containing three-and-sixpence, out of a man's hand, and ran away. Being searched, not a farthing is found upon him, nor anything of the value of a farthing. The man does not deny the theft, and says he wanted a meal; the police know nothing of him; and he gets three months' hard labour. Compare these equal sentences with the unequal offences, and you will see the relative value of property and human flesh in the criminal market.

JIMMY VIRTUE. Bob puts it plainly, doesn't he?

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE. But these cases must be rare.

ROBERT TRUEFIT. They are very common; and these two cases that I have put side by side, are two of the mildest. Listen to this--another wife-beating case: Husband comes home at noon. What kind of man he is may be guessed from his first words to his wife: 'I've something to tell thee, you----! I'm going to murder thee, you----!' He takes off his jacket, calls his bulldog, and sets it at his wife. As the dog flies at the woman, her husband hits her in the face; the dog drags her from the sofa, with its teeth in her flesh (it is almost too horrible to tell, but it is true, every word of it), and the husband jumps upon her, and kicks her on the head and shoulders. Imploring him to have mercy upon her, crying for help, the woman is dragged by the dog from room to room, tearing flesh out of her. The frightful struggle continues for some time, until the woman manages to make her escape from the house. It is dreadful to read the doctor's description of the state of the woman, and how he feared, for three or four days, that mortification would set in. The man is sentenced to--what do you think? Six months' hard labour. About the same time, a very young man is found guilty of stealing twenty shillings' worth of metal, and he gets seven years' penal servitude. But I could multiply these instances. You may say, that such cases as these have nothing to do with the broad question of misgovernment; but I maintain that they have. You get your criminal material from such places as Stoney-alley, where poor Blade-o'-Grass lives; and yet Stoney-alley is as bad now--ay, and worse than it was fifty years ago. The law knows of its existence, has its wakeful eye upon it; but what has the law done for its good, or for the good of those who live there? Take the case of Blade-o'-Grass. What does the law do for her?--and by the law you must understand that I mean the governing machinery for keeping society in order and for dispensing justice to all--out of our police-courts as well as in them. Think of the story she told, and the way in which she told it. There is capacity for good, in that child--ay, and in Tom Beadle, too. Can you doubt that, but for your charity, she might have died of hunger?

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE [*eagerly*]. Then you don't disapprove of indiscriminate charity?

ROBERT TRUEFIT. Not I; I don't disapprove of a man putting his hand into his pocket and exercising a benevolent impulse. Your lip-philanthropists, who preach against indiscriminate charity--what would they do for Blade-o'-Grass? What *would* they do! What *do* they do? 'Work,' they say. But they don't? give her work; don't even teach her how to work, if such a miracle happened to fall in her way. And all the while the policeman says, 'Move on.' I know something, through Jimmy here, of Blade-o'-Grass--a hapless waif, an encumbrance, a blot, serving as a theme for countless meetings and oceans of words. What business has she in the world? But she came, unfortunately for herself, and she is so legislated for, that to live is her greatest affliction.

JIMMY VIRTUE. It's my opinion that a good many of the fellers who preach agin indiscriminate charity only do so as an excuse for buttonin' up their pockets.

ROBERT TRUEFIT [*laughing*]. And their hearts as well, Jimmy. You put me in mind of something I saw last Sunday in Upper-street, Islington. The people were coming out of church. A couple--evidently man and wife-were walking before me, talking on religious matters--or, rather, he was talking, and she was listening. I passed them just as he was saying, 'If I haven't got the grace of God in my heart, I'd like to know who *has* got it?' and at the same moment as forlorn-looking a woman as ever I set eyes on, intercepted him, and curtseyed, and held out her hand imploringly. He pushed her aside surlily and with a sour look on his face; and walked along talking of the grace of God. The woman may have been an impostor--in other words, a professional beggar; but I should be sorry to call that Grace-of-God man my friend. No, sir, I don't think that it is a good

thing to crush a kindly impulse, or that we should treat our best feelings and emotions as so many figures in a sum. It is not the giver who makes beggars. The fault is in the system, which opens no road for them at the proper time of their lives.

Mr. MERRYWHISTLE [*sadly*]. But tell me: do you see no remedy for these ills?

ROBERT TRUEFIT. The remedy is simple. Commence at the right end. Train up a child in the way it should go, and when it is old it will not depart from it. And by the same rule, Train up a child in the way it shouldn't go, and when it is old it will not depart from it. It is almost time for me and Jimmy to be off. Jimmy wants to open his shop, and I want to get home to my wife; but I'll just try to explain what I mean. Two poor boys, one six and one nine years of age, lost their mother; a few weeks afterwards they were caught taking some potatoes from a garden. The presumption is, that they were hungry. The potatoes were valued at one penny. The boys were sent to prison for fourteen days, and the State thus commenced their education. I will conclude with a personal experience. I had occasion to go to Liverpool some little time ago, and on the day that I was to return to London I saw a girl standing against a wall, crying bitterly. She was a pretty girl, of about sixteen years of age. I went and spoke to her, and soon saw that the poor girl was utterly bewildered. It appeared that she had landed that morning in Liverpool, having been brought by her sister from Ireland, and that her sister had deserted her. A more simple, artless girl I never met, and she hadn't a penny in her pocket, nor a friend in the Liverpool wilderness. I thought to myself. This girl will come to harm. Hungry, friendless, pretty---- I went to a policeman, and told him the story. The policeman scratched his head. 'Is she a bad girl?' he asked. I was shocked at the question, and said no, I was sure she was not; that she was a simple good girl, almost a child--and was as complete an outcast as if she were among savages. The policeman shrugged his shoulders, and said civilly enough that he couldn't do anything. 'What did you mean by asking if she was a bad girl?' I asked. 'Well, you see,' he answered, 'if she was a bad girl, and wanted to be took care of, I could take her somewhere.' 'Where she *would* be taken care of?' I asked. 'Yes,' he answered. 'And have food given to her? 'Yes.' 'But a good girl,' I said, 'homeless, friendless, and hungry----''Can't interfere with *them*,' said the policeman. 'She'll have to qualify herself for a refuge, then,' I could not help saying bitterly, as I turned away, leaving the poor girl in her distress; for I could do nothing, and had only enough money to take me third-class to London. There, sir! You can draw your own moral from these things. Many a working man is drawing conclusions from suchlike circumstances, and the feeling that statesmen are ignoring the most important problems of the day is gaining strength rapidly. For my own part, I honestly confess that, without one tinge of socialism or even republicanism in my veins, I am not satisfied with things as they are.

With these words, spoken very earnestly, Robert Truefit, accompanied by Jimmy Virtue, took his departure. But Jimmy Virtue found time to whisper in Mr. Merrywhistle's ear,

'Didn't I tell you Bob 'ud talk to you? It ain't dear at sixpence an hour, is it?

Mr. Merrywhistle said no; it was not at all dear, and he hoped soon to see them again.

'All right,' said Jimmy Virtue, with a last flash from his fierce eye; 'when you like;' and so departed.

THE INTERLUDE.

In times gone by, it used to be the sometime fashion in the theatres to have an interlude between the acts of the melodrama, so that the mind might find some relief from the thrilling horrors which had just been enacted, and might prepare itself for the more profound horrors to come. Usually, there was an interval of time between the acts--in most cases seven years--during which the performers neither changed their linen nor grew any older. This was probably owing to the joyous efforts of those who enacted the interlude, which was invariably composed of songs and dances. Of such material as these shall part of this interlude be composed; striking out the songs, however, and introducing flowers in their stead, as being infinitely more innocent and graceful than the gross and impure lessons taught by the popular songs of the day, which unfortunately flow too readily into such neighbourhoods as that of which Stoney-alley forms a limb. Such teaching, in its own sad time, will bear bitter fruit--nay, it is bearing it even now, and the poisoned branches are bending beneath the weight.

Blade-o'-Grass was very young; but the few years she had lived contained many imminent crises--any one of which, but for some timely act of human kindness, might have put an end to her existence. But her life had not been all shade, although it may appear to you and me to have been so; there were lights in it, there were times when she enjoyed. You and I stand in the sun, and contemplate with sadness our fellow-creatures struggling and living in the dark. But it is not dark to them, as it is to us; they were born in it, they live in it, they are used to it. Such sunlight as we enjoy, and are, I hope, thankful for, might make them drunk.

Said Tom Beadle one day to Blade-o'-Grass,

'I say, Bladergrass, why don't yer do somethin', and make a few coppers?'

And Blade-o'-Grass very naturally answered,

'What shall I do, Tom?'

Tom was prepared with his answer.

'Lookee 'ere: why don't you be a flower-gal?'

'O, Tom!' exclaimed Blade-o'-Grass, her face flushing, her heart beating, at the prospect of heaven held out to her. 'A flower-gal, Tom! A flower-gal! O, don't I wish I could be!'

'You'd 'ave to wash yer face, yer know,' said Tom, regarding the dirty face of Blade-o'-Grass from a business point of view, 'and put a clean frock on.'

Down to zero went the hopes of Blade-o'-Grass. A clean face she might have compassed. But a clean frock! That meant a new frock, of course. Blade-o'-Grass had never had a new frock in her life. A new frock! She had never had anything new--not even a new bootlace. Despair was in her face. Tom saw it, and said,

'Don't be down in the mug, Bladergrass. We'll see if it can't be done some'ow.'

What a hero Tom was in her eyes!

'O, Tom,' she cried, 'if I could be a flower-gal--if I could! I've seen 'em at the Royal Igschange'--she was pretty well acquainted with that locality by this time--'and don't they look prime!' She twined her fingers together nervously. 'They've all got clean faces and nice dresses. O, 'ow 'appy they must be!'

'And they make lots o' money,' said Tom.

'Do they! O, don't I wish I was them!'

'And they go to theaytres.'

'Do they! O, don't I wish I could go to the theaytre!'

'There's Poll Buttons. Why, two year ago, Bladergrass, she was raggeder nor you. And now she comes out--she *does* come out, I can tell yer! *She* sells flowers at the Royal Igschange, and she looks as 'appy--as 'appy'--Tom's figures of speech and similes were invariably failures--'as 'appy as can be. Why, I see her the other night at the Standard, and she was in the pit. There was a feller with her a-suckin' a stick. Didn't she look proud! And I 'eerd Bill Britton say as how he saw her at 'Ighbury Barn last Sunday with another feller a-suckin' a stick.'

'Do all the swells suck sticks, Tom?' asked Blade-o'-Grass innocently.

'All the real tip-toppers do,' answered Tom.

'Perhaps there's somethin' nice in the knobs,' suggested Blade-o'-Grass.

'Perhaps; but I don't think it. You see, it looks swellish, Bladergrass.'

'If you 'ad a stick, would you suck it, Tom?'

'I think I should,' replied Tom, after a little consideration; 'and I'd 'ave one with a large knob. They're all the go.' Then Tom came back to the subject of Poll Buttons. 'She makes a 'eap o' money. Why, I 'eerd tell as 'ow she sells crocuses and wilets for a tanner a bunch at first. The swells buy a bunch of wilets, and then she coaxes 'em, and ses as 'ow wilets and crocuses ought to go together, and she uses 'er eyes and smiles sweet. Stand up, Bladergrass!'

Blade-o'-Grass stood up, and Tom Beadle scrutinised her.

'Poll Buttons is a reg'lar beauty, they say. But I wish I may die if you won't be a reg'larer beauty when you're as old as Poll is.'

'Shall I, Tom? Shall I?' And the eyes of Blade-o'-Grass sparkled, and a bright colour came into her cheeks. Even in her ragged frock, and with her dirty face, she looked pretty. 'Then I shall get a tanner a bunch for my crocuses and wilets, and when the roses comes in, I'll--I'll----' But her voice trailed off as she looked at her ragged frock, and her lips trembled, and the little glimpse of heaven that lay in the imaginary basket of flowers faded utterly away.

'Don't take on so, Bladergrass,' said Tom Beadle; 'who knows? I may 'ave a bit o' luck. And if I do, I wish I may die if I don't set you up as a flower-gal! You jist keep up your 'art, and wait a bit.'

And one day Tom Beadle really went to Jimmy Virtue's leaving-shop, and asked the price of a new cotton frock, which, after much bargaining, he bought for two shillings and fourpence.

'Who's it for, Tom?' asked Jimmy, testing the coins before he delivered the frock to Tom. 'Got a new sweet'art?'

'It's for Bladergrass,' replied Tom complacently. 'I'm a-goin' to set her up as a flower-gal. I promised 'er I would when I 'ad a bit o' luck.'

'And you've 'ad a bit o' luck?'

'Yes, a reg'lar slice.'

'How was it, Tom?'

'Arks no questions, and I'll tell 'you no lies,' responded Tom saucily, walking away with his precious purchase.

Neither will we be too curious about how the means were acquired which enabled Tom to give Blade-o'-Grass an honest start in life.

That first new common cotton dress! What joy and delight stirred the heart of Blade-o'-Grass as she surveyed it! She devoured it with her eyes, and was as delicate in handling it as if its texture had been of the finest silk. All that she could say was, 'O, Tom! O, Tom!' She threw her arms round Tom's neck, and kissed him a hundred times; and Tom felt how sweet it is to give. But Tom's goodness did not end here. He conducted Blade-o'-Grass to a room where she could wash herself and array herself in her new dress. She came out of that room transformed. She had smoothed her hair and washed her face, and the dress became her. She smiled gratefully at Tom when she presented herself to him.

'I'm blessed if Poll Buttons'll be able to 'old a candle to you!' exclaimed Tom admiringly, and Blade-o'-Grass thrilled with joy.

Thus it came about that Mr. Merrywhistle, walking near the Royal Exchange one day, saw a clean little girl, with a basket of humble flowers on her arm, and a bright little face looking earnestly at him.

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed the benevolent gentleman. 'Blade-o'-Grass!'

'Yes, sir, if you please. Tom's set me up as a flower-gal.'

'Tom!'

'Tom Beadle, sir; 'im as you guv a shillin' to once, and as come along o' me when we 'ad that jolly dinner.'

'Dear me! Dear me!' said Mr. Merrywhistle, honest pleasure beaming in his eyes. 'And Tom's set you up, eh? And you're getting an honest living, eh?'

'Yes, sir, if you please, sir. Do you want a flower for your button'ole, sir? 'Ere's a white rose, sir--a reg'lar beauty; and 'ere's a piece o' mingyonet to show it off', sir, and a bit o' maiden 'air to back it up.'

And before Mr. Merrywhistle knew where he was, he had put the flowers in his button-hole, and, instructed by Blade-o'-Grass, had fastened them with a pin she took out of her frock. It was thirty years since he had worn a flower, the good old fellow! and as he looked upon them now, there came to him the memory of a few sunny months when he was young. The crowds of people, the busy streets, the noise and turmoil, vanished from sight and sense; and for one brief moment--which might have been an hour, the vision was so distinct--he saw fair fingers fastening a piece of mignonette in his coat, and a fair head bending to his breast---- It was gone! But as Mr. Merrywhistle awoke to the busy hum about him, there was a sweet breath in his nostrils, and a dim sweet light in his eyes. Most unwisely he gave Blade-o'-Grass a shilling for the flowers, and patted her head, and walked away; while Blade-o'-Grass herself, almost fearing that the shilling was a bad one, bit it with her strong teeth, and being satisfied of its genuineness, executed a double-shuffle on the kerbstone.

That very afternoon, Blade-o'-Grass, having had a good day, purchased a walking cane of a street vendor. It was a cane with the largest knob he had in his stock. This cane she presented to Tom Beadle the same evening. Tom was immensely delighted with it. To the admiration of Blade-o'-Grass, he put the knob in his mouth, to the serious danger of that feature, and comported himself as became a tip-top swell.

'You're a reg'lar little brick,' said Tom; 'and I'm blessed if I don't take you to the theaytre.'

Blade-o'-Grass jumped for joy and clapped her hands. How she had longed to go to a theatre! And now the magic hour had come. She had been rich enough lately to pay twopence a night for a bed, and she went to the cheap lodging-house she patronised, and washed her face and combed her hair, and made herself as smart as she could. Tom Beadle had also smartened himself up, and to the theatre they went, arm in arm, he with the knob of the stick in his mouth, and she, in her rags, as proud as any peacock.

In what words can the awe and wonder of Blade-o'-Grass be described? She had her own ideas of things, and she was surprised to find the interior of the theatre so different from what she had imagined. Boxes, pit, and gallery, she knew there were. But she had set down in her mind that the boxes were veritable boxes, in which the people were shut, with little eye-holes to peep through; and the pit she had imagined as a large dark space dug out of the earth, very low down, where the people were all huddled together, and had to look up to see what was going on. It was to the pit they went, and for some time Blade-o'-Grass was too astonished to speak. A very, very large O would fitly describe her condition. Tom Beadle, on the contrary, was quite composed; theatres were but ordinary places to him. But used-up as he was to the pleasures of the town, he derived a new pleasure from the contemplation of the wonderment of Blade-o'-Grass.

'O, Tom! O, Tom!' she whispered in ecstasy, edging closer to him, when at last she found courage to use her tongue. It was a large theatre, with a great deal of gold-leaf about it; and the audience were evidently bent upon enjoying themselves, and vehemently applauded at every possible opportunity. Thus, when the lights are turned up, and a bright blaze breaks out upon the living sea of faces, there is much clapping of hands, and much stamping of feet, and other marks of approval. When the musicians straggle into the orchestra, they are also vehemently applauded; but those 'high and mighty' might have been by themselves in the Desert of Sahara, for all the heed they pay to the audience. The occupiers of the gallery are very noisy in their demonstrations, and issue their commands with stentorian lungs. 'Now, then; scrape up, cat-gut!' 'Hoo-o-o-o! Scrape up! Up with the rag!' with cries, and shouts, and whistles, which strike fresh wonderment to the soul of Blade-o'-Grass. She is not frightened at the noise; for even Tom Beadle puts his two little fingers to the corners of his lips, and adds shrill whistles to the general confusion--in the performance of which duty he stretches his mouth to such an extent that, as a feature, it becomes a hideous mockery. But at length the band strikes up with a crash, the sound of which is speedily drowned in the roar of delight that follows. In due time--but not in time to satisfy the impatient audience--the music ceases, and a general shifting and rustling takes place among the audience. A moments breathless expectation follows; a cracked bell gives the meanest of tinkles; and Blade-o'-Grass bends a little more forward as that awful and magic green curtain is drawn upwards by invisible hands. The piece that is there and then represented to the wondering soul of Blade-o'-Grass is a 'strong domestic drama,' as the playbill has it, and Blade-o'-Grass gasps and sobs and catches her breath at the 'striking' situations with which the play is filled. The piece is a narration of the struggles and vicissitudes of the poorest class of the community--the class indeed, the lower stratum of which is occupied by just such persons as Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass; and a curious commentary is made on it the next day by Blade-o'-Grass, who, dilating upon its wonders and entrancements, declares that she 'never seed sich a thing in all her born days.' There are of course in the piece a painfully-virtuous wife, a desperate villain, to whom murder is child's play, a delirium-tremens beggar, a Good Young Man, and a vilified Jew; and as these characters play their parts, Blade-o'-Grass thrills and quivers with delicious excitement. Tom Beadle also enters into the excitement of the representation, and stamps and claps his hands and whistles as vigorously as any one there. But when the 'strong domestic drama' is concluded, and the glories of the burlesque are unfolded to the ravished senses of Blade-o'-Grass, then, indeed, is she in heaven. Never has she conceived anything so enchanting as this. It is the first fairy story that has ever been presented to her. How she screams over the meaningless songs! How she devours with her eyes the display of female limbs! 'O, 'ow lovely, Tom!' she whispers. 'O, don't I wish I was them!'

'You'd look as well as any of 'em, Bladergrass,' says Tom, who knows everything, 'if you was

took in 'and, and if you could darnce.'

'O no, Tom--O no!' exclaims Blade-o'-Grass: 'I ain't got sich legs.'

Tom laughs, and whispers confidentially that 'them legs ain't all their own. He knows a cove who knows a balley-gal, and she pads her legs like one o'clock.' Blade-o'-Grass, in her heart of hearts, can't believe it; but she is too much absorbed in the performance to enter into argument. So the pageant passes before her eyes until all the songs are sung and all the dances danced; and when the curtain falls upon the brilliant last scene, she looks solemnly at Tom, and a great sob escapes her because it is all over. She can scarcely repress her tears. It is a wondrous night for Blade-o'-Grass, and lives in her memory for long afterwards. Tom Beadle proposes 'a eel supper,' and they sit in state, like the best nobles in the land, in a dirty box in a dirty eel-pie shop; and as they eat their eels off a dirty plate, with a dirty spoon and fork, Blade-o'-Grass looks up to her companion as to a god; and Tom, noticing the girl's sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, says, with an approving nod, 'I'm blessed if you won't beat Poll Buttons into fits.' Then they go home, and Blade-o'-Grass dreams that she is an angel hanging from the flies.

That first night at a theatre filled Blade-o'-Grass with a new ambition, and her better prospects inspired her with confidence. She determined to learn to dance.

You will, I am sure, be amazed to hear, that every night in Stoney-alley, when the weather was in any way propitious, there was a ball--an open-air ball; the orchestra, an Italian organ-grinder; the company, nearly all the dirty boys and girls in the neighbourhood. At a certain hour every evening an Italian organ-grinder, on whose dark face a fixed expression of stolid gloomy melancholy for ever rested, made his appearance in Stoney-alley; and, as if he were a lost soul, and this agony was his penance, ground out of his afflicted organ a string of waltzes and polkas and quadrilles, so inexpressibly dismal that the very dogs howled in despair, and fled. But directly the first note sounded--and that first note always came out with a wail--the children, from two years old and upwards, began to congregate, and without any curtseying, or bowing, or engaging of partners, the strangest ball commenced that ever was seen.

Girls with babies in their arms glided round and round in the entrancing waltz; children who could scarcely toddle toddled round; and young ladies without encumbrances clasped each other by the waist, and spun round in a state of beatific bliss. When the waltz music ended with a groan, and the polka commenced with a wheeze, the big children hopped and the toddlers toddled in perfect contentment. Then came the quadrilles, in which many new figures were introduced, which Belgravia might have profited by. But the strangest dance of all was a Scotch reel, which, by some unearthly means, had got into this decrepit organ, and which, being set to work by the inexorable handle, came out of its hiding-place spasmodically, and with stitches in its side. It was a sight to remember to see these ragged children dance this Scotch reel, with their toes up to their knees, their right arms elevated above their heads, and their left hands stuck in their sides as if they grew there. Blade-o'-Grass had never had courage to join in the revels; she had been too ragged and forlorn to claim equality with even this ragged and forlorn troop. But now her prospects were brightening, and her ambition was roused. The very evening following that on which she visited the theatre she boldly joined the dancers. And there she hopped and twirled and glided until the music ceased; and every evening thereafter she made her appearance at the entertainment as punctually as some people attend their places of worship, and with more devotion than many. She was looked upon as a guest of high distinction at the ball, for she was liberal with her farthings and halfpence. In course of time she became one of the very best dancers in the alley, and often and often dreamt that she was a ballet-girl, and was twirling before an admiring audience, in the shortest of short spangled skirts, and the pinkest of pink legs.

These were the happiest days she had ever known. Now and then the tiger set up its claims, and was not satisfied; but these occasions were very rare. She went to the theatre often, and sometimes treated Tom Beadle, who did not show a stupid pride and independence. She sold flowers in the season, and lived how she could when there were no flowers to sell. 'I wish they growed all the yeer round,' she said to Tom many and many a time. She and Tom were always together, and it was understood that they had 'taken up with one another.'

This being an interlude, in which the promise set forth has been faithfully carried out--for dances and flowers have been introduced in profusion--it will perhaps be considered out of place to mention that, excepting that she knew how to speak an intelligible language, Blade-o'-Grass was as ignorant of morals and religion as if she had been a four-footed animal. But it is necessary to state this, or you might condemn her unjustly, and look down upon her uncharitably. And while she grew in deeper and deeper ignorance, how the great world laboured, in which she lived and moved and had her being! One section was in agony because a man of science had by his writings thrown doubt on the grand story of the Creation, and had attempted to prove that Adam and Eve were not created; and nine-tenths of the people shrunk in horror from a man who denied the truth of biblical miracles. Yet one and all believed in a future state--a better one than this, a higher one than this, a holier one than this--to be earned by living a good life, and by doing unto others as we would others should do unto us. And Blade-o'-Grass had never raised her eyes and hands to God; she had never said a prayer.

PART II.

THE PRISON WALL.

Seven years have passed, and the curtain rises upon a high gloomy stone wall. Grouped about the pavement which skirts the wall are nearly a score of persons, waiting in a state of painful expectancy. They are waiting for friends and relatives; and this gloomy stone wall encloses a prison.

Although it is broad day, the aspect of the scene is inexpressibly depressing. It is September; but the treacherous month has crept upon November, and stolen one of its cheerless days, when dull sky and dull atmosphere conspire to send the spirits down to zero. Not that these unhappy mortals require any outward influence to render them miserable; their countenances and attitude show that clearly enough. There are among them young women, almost children, and they stand about the prison with pale faces and clasped hands, with eyes cast down to the earth. They exchange but few words; they have sufficient special occupation in their thoughts to render them indisposed for conversation. They are poorly clad, and some of them shiver as the damp wind steals round the massive wall which shuts out hope.

Near to the prison door are a young and an old woman--one seventeen years of age on her last birthday, the other seventy. The young woman has no covering on her head; the old woman wears an ancient bonnet, which was the fashion once upon a time. Her little wrinkled face is almost hidden in the bonnet, and her ancient cotton dress falls in such straight lines about her, that, but for the pale wrinkled face and the shrivelled hands that peep from out the folds of a faded shawl, it might reasonably have been supposed it covers the limbs of a child. The bonnet has moved several times in the direction of the girl-woman, as if its owner were curious about her companion; but the girl takes no notice. At length, a piping voice asks, 'Are you waiting for some one, my dear?'

The girl answers 'Yes,' but does not look at the questioner.

'Who for, my dear?'

No answer.

'You needn't mind me,' pipes the old woman; 'I don't mean any harm; and it does my old heart

good to talk. Perhaps you've got a mother of your own.'

'Mother!' echoes the girl, somewhat bitterly, and yet with a certain plaintiveness. 'No, I've got no mother; I never 'ad one as I knows of.'

'Poor dear, poor dear! Come, my dear, talk kindly to an old woman who might be your grandmother. Ay, I might, my dear. I'm seventy-one come the 10th of November, and I'm waiting for my daughter. You've got a long time before you, my dear, before you come to my age.'

'Seventy-one!' exclaims the girl, '*I* shall never be seventy-one. I shouldn't like to be. What's your daughter in for? How old is she? She must be older than me.'

'She's thirty, my dear, and she's in for begging. What's yours in for?'

'My what in for?' sharply and sullenly.

'Your friend. You needn't be so sharp with an old woman like me. You may be a mother yourself one day, poor dear!'

The girl turns with a gasp--it may be of joy or pain--and takes the old woman's hand and begs her pardon.

Her friend is in for worse than beggin', the girl says, and relapses into silence, retaining the old woman's hand in hers, however, for a little while.

Many persons pass this way and that, but few bestow a second glance upon the group; and even if pity enters the heart of one and another, it does not take practical shape, and in its passive aspect it is, as is well known, but cold charity. One man, however, lingers in passing, walks a few steps, and hesitates. He has caught a glimpse of a face that he recognises, and it is evident that he is distressed by it. He turns boldly, and pauses before the forms of the old woman and the girl.

'Blade-o'-Grass!' he exclaims.

She raises her head, and looks him in the face. No shame, no fear, no consciousness of degradation, is in her gaze. She drops him a curtsey, and turns her face towards the prison doors.

Girl as she is, she is a woman, and well-looking. Her dress is of the poorest, and she is not too tidy; but the grace of youth is upon her. It is not upon all who are brought up as she has been. But she has this charm, and good looks as well; and she is grateful for them, for she likes to be called pretty. Remember that, at that momentous period in the life of Blade-o'-Grass when her future hung on a chance, Mrs. Manning 'kept the prettiest one, the one with the dimple.'

What is it that causes the gravest of expressions to pass into the countenance of Mr. Merrywhistle as Blade-o'-Grass looks up? He does not say; but the grave expression remains upon his face during the interview. He has not seen her since the spring. Somehow or other, he lost sight of her. Years ago, when Tom Beadle 'set her up' as a flower-girl, he had a strong inclination to do some substantial good for her--to remove her from the associations by which she was surrounded, and which dragged her down to the lowest level. But, in the first place, he could ill afford it; and, in the second, when he had spoken of his wish to Jimmy Virtue, that worthy had asked him if he thought he could take all the world's work upon his one pair of shoulders. 'And after all,' Jimmy Virtue had said, 'isn't the gal gettin' a honest livin'?'

The old woman peers into Mr. Merrywhistle's face, and as her ancient bonnet goes up in the air, it seems capacious enough to bury her whole body in. Mr. Merrywhistle gives her a kind look, and addresses himself to Blade-o'-Grass.

'This is not a fit place for you--' he is about to add, 'my poor child,' but her womanly appearance checks him.

'Ain't it?' she replies, with a smile on her lips that is not pleasant to see. 'What is then?'

He is surprised at her reckless manner. 'Have you business here? Are you waiting for any one?

'Yes.'

'For whom?'

'Ah, that's what I asked her,' pipes the old woman; 'but she wouldn't tell me.'

'I'm waitin' for Tom,' she says, answering him.

'Tom Beadle?'

'Yes, Tom Beadle.'

'Is he in prison, then?' he asks, very gently.

'Yes; he's been doin' a month.'

'What for?'

'What does it matter? Priggin'--anythin'.'

Perceiving that Blade-o'-Grass does not wish to pursue the conversation, Mr. Merrywhistle steps aside, sad at heart; but lingers, looking pityingly at Blade-o'-Grass. As he does so, a clock strikes the hour, and the eyes of the expectant group turn eagerly to the prison door, which presently opens. Six or seven persons walk out. The women blink their eyes as they come into the light; the men shake themselves like dogs; some raise their hands to their brows, and look about them as Gulliver might have done when he found himself in a strange land. The little old woman hastens to her daughter, a patient-looking woman, and for a moment two faces are hidden in the ancient bonnet. One man, who has seven or eight friends waiting for him, shakes his fist at the prison, and kicks the stone wall savagely.

'That's how I'd like to serve the guvner of that there cussed hole!' he exclaims. 'Give me something to drink, or I shall choke!'

Another man looks around with a vacant stare: there is no one to meet him. With something like a sigh his head sinks into his shoulders, and he slinks away, hugging the wall as he goes.

The last to come out is Tom Beadle. Blade-o'-Grass is by his side in an instant.

'Come along, Tom,' she says, clinging fondly to his arm, and pulling his face down to hers and kissing it; 'I've got something nice to eat at home.'

'You're a good sort, Bladergrass,' says the thief. 'Let's get away from this place quick, and go home.'

Home! Yes, to Stoney-alley, not twenty yards from where her mother had died. A room in an attic, which had been thoroughly cleaned and made tidy for the return of the prodigal. No furniture to speak of; a fire, and a saucepan on the hob; a mug of beer, a flat bottle with gin in it; one chair and a stool, and a table; a bed in the corner.

Tom surveys the room with satisfaction beaming in his eyes. Blade-o'-Grass looks at him, and joy breaks like sunlight over her face because he is pleased.

'Drink some beer, Tom.'

He takes a deep draught, puts the jug down, heaves a long breath, and repeats,

'You're a real good sort, Bladergrass. Give us another kiss, old gal!'

ONE OF MANY HAPPY NIGHTS.

But that the gray streaks are thickening in Mrs. Silver's hair, and that her husband is fast growing bald, it might have been but yesterday that we were sitting with them in the cosy parlour in Buttercup-square. Everything inanimate is the same as it was seven years ago, and does not appear to have grown any older or shabbier; the very cuckoo in the clock retains its youth, and its tones, as it asserts itself to be the great 'I am,' are as fresh as ever they were. Hark! it is speaking now, and 'Cuck-oo!' issues six times from its throat, sparklingly, as if defying time. It is six o'clock. The days are drawing in, and it is dark enough for lights. But Mr. and Mrs. Silver sit in the dusk before the fire, talking of the matters nearest to their hearts. Their married life has been a happy one--with clouds in it, of course. Natural griefs and sorrows have come to them, as to others. At first a storm threatened their future, but it did not burst over them. The exercise of kindly impulse; the wise and good desire to accept the inevitable, and to make the loneliness of their lives a means of happiness to others; their dependence on one another, and mutual love and faith; their recognition, in their every action, of higher duties of life than are generally acknowledged in practice,--turned the storm to sunshine, brought happiness to them. If they were to die now, they would be blessed with the happy assurance that their lives had been productive of good to others. So might we all live; so should we all live. The world would be the better for it. No man or woman is unblessed with the want of continual opportunity for doing good or being kind.

'Christmas will very soon be here once more,' says Mr. Silver.

'We'll have a merry gathering,' Mrs. Silver answers. 'There will be changes before the next comes round.'

'Yes; our little children are men and women now.'

'Good men and women, thank God!'

'Wife,' he says, 'I have thought many times of your words when I brought little Charley home twenty-three years ago. The child was lying in your lap, and you said, "Perhaps this is the reason why God has given us no children."'

She looks at him with a tender light in her eyes. Between these two love does not show itself in words, but in ministering to each other unselfishly.

'They have been a blessing to us, dear,' she says. 'Our household will be smaller presently. Charley and Ruth, I think, are fond of each other. He brings her home now every night.'

'What did Charley earn last week?

'Thirty-eight shillings.'

'Is that sufficient to marry on?'

'Quite sufficient, and to spare; and Charley has money put by to start with. They must live near us. Charley would like to, I know, and Ruth too; but it will be time enough to talk of these things by and by.'

'Carry your mind ten years on, my dear.'

'Well, I do so.'

'What do you see?'

'If we live?'

'If we live.'

She muses a little, looking into the fire.

'Ourselves old people; Charley and Ruth happily married, with children of their own; Mary married also, although her prince is not yet come, and is a stranger to us. Richard will go abroad: I can tell, by his reading and conversation, that his heart is set upon it. And Rachel--poor Rachel!--stopping sometimes with us, and sometimes--nearly always indeed--with Ruth and Charley. I can see myself with hair perfectly white, and you with only a fringe of white hair round your head.'

He laughs softly and pleasantly, and caresses her hand.

'I can see nothing but happiness, dear.'

They sit quietly before the fire, and the darkness grows deeper. The door opens, and Mr. Merrywhistle enters softly.

'Don't stir,' he says; 'and don't light the gas. I was told you were here, and I know how fond you are of sitting in the dark.'

It was indeed a favourite habit with them when they were alone. He sits by them in silence; for a minute or two no word is spoken. Then Mrs. Silver places her hand lightly on his shoulder.

'I understand, I understand,' he says; 'you are waiting for me to speak. You always know when I am in trouble.'

'How can I help knowing? Your face I cannot see, but I hear your heart in your voice.'

'Tell me: is it a good thing to make other persons' troubles ours?'

'What is sympathy for?' she answers in return.

'I have spoken to you now and again of a child--a girl--whom I have seen occasionally----

'The flower-girl?'

'Yes, the flower-girl; the girl whom I met for the first time in the company of a boy who deceived me--a boy who told me the most unblushing l---- stories, and who yet had some humanity in him.'

'That is many years ago. The girl must be almost a woman now.'

'She *is* a woman, God help her!--more woman than her years warrant I should think she is about the same age as Ruth. And it comes upon me again, that fancy, when I speak of Ruth and think of this poor girl.'

'Yes; you have told us there is a singular likeness between them.'

'It is striking--wonderfully striking. But there can be nothing in it; for Ruth, you have said, was the only child of a poor woman who died a fortnight after the little thing was born.'

'Yes, my friend.'

'So that it is pure accident; but the fancy remains, for all that I shall never forget the sad story that this poor Blade-o'-Grass told me of the tiger that worried her, and clamoured for food. It was hunger, my dear friends, hunger. I shall never forget her notion that Hallelujah came to her while she was asleep, and put baked potatoes in her lap. I shall never forget my pleasure when I first saw her with a basket of flowers, and bought a flower of her. But I have told you of these things before, and here I am babbling of them again, like an old man that has lost his wits.'

'Never mind, friend; go on.'

'I saw poor Blade-o'-Grass this morning. I haven't seen her for many months. I had occasion to pass by a certain prison early, and I saw her, with a dozen others, waiting outside. She was waiting for this boy that was--this man and thief that is. I lingered until the prison doors were opened, and let him and others out. And when he came'--there were tears in the old man's voice as he spoke--'and when he came, this unhappy girl kissed him and clung to him as with less shame she might have kissed and clung to a better man, had she been taught something good when she was younger.'

'My dear, dear friend!' says Mrs. Silver, taking his hand in hers.

'I cannot tell you what I feared as I saw her, and spoke to her before the prison doors were opened. Poor Blade-o'-Grass! poor child! Nay, let me have my way.'

And this good old man, whose heart is as tender as that of a good woman, sheds tears and trembles; if a daughter's happiness had been at stake, he could not have been more moved. Wisely, Mr. and Mrs. Silver do not disturb him, but talk together of other subjects until Mr. Merrywhistle exclaims, with something of his usual cheerfulness, 'What on earth are we sitting in the dark for?' Whereat Mr. Silver smiles, and lights the gas. As if the light is the means of suddenly waking up the cuckoo from a nap, it immediately proclaims seven o'clock, and in another hour the whole of Mrs. Silver's family are assembled in the parlour. Rachel, the blind girl, has no outdoor occupation, but all the others have. Charley, as you know, is a printer, and, being out of his time, is earning good wages; Richard is a watchmaker, still an apprentice, and making famous progress; and Mary and Ruth are both of them in the postal telegraph office. For it has been part of Mrs. Silver's plan to give her family the opportunity of making their way in the world, and boys and girls have been taught that to work is one of the chief duties and one of the best blessings of life. Charley and Ruth come in together. He has grown quite a man since we last saw him, and Ruth, Blade-o'-Grass's sister, is as bright and cheerful-looking a lass as one can meet. She is particularly bright just now, and looks particularly happy, for she and Charley have had a brisk walk; her cheeks are glowing healthfully, and there is a bright sparkle in her eyes. Then questions are asked and answered. The events of the day are narrated, and it is wonderful what interest is manifested in these trifles. Every few minutes the comfortable parlour in Buttercup-square is filled with merry laughter.

'Come, come, children,' says Mr. Silver, after nearly an hour has been spent in this manner; 'are we to have any reading to-night?'

The books are instantly brought forward, and the youngsters are busy turning over the leaves. When last we were in their company they were deep in the beautiful story of Paul and Virginia. Since then, they have had rare nights with their favourite authors, and have laughed and cried, as hundreds of thousands of others have done, over the sayings and doings of the men and women and children who play their parts in the pages of Thackeray and Scott and Dickens and Jerrold, and authors of long ago. It is not a novel that engages their attention now; this is one of their 'play' nights, when scenes from Shakespeare are read. When the rustling of the leaves has ceased, they all with one accord turn to Rachel, the blind girl. She knows they are looking at her, and her face flushes as she says, 'Yes, I am ready.' Then says Richard, in a deep bass voice, laying his finger on the first line of the fourth act of *The Merchant of Venice*, 'What, is Antonio here?' And Charley forthwith answers, 'Ready, so please your grace;' and the play commences. They all take parts, with the exception of Mr. Merrywhistle, who is the audience, and who applauds as if the house is packed, and there is not standing room for one. Mr. Silver takes Shylock (the villain's part generally falls to his share), and Ruth reads the few lines that Nerissa has to say. But the great wonder of the reading takes place when Richard, as the Duke, says,

'You hear the learned Bellario, what he writes:
And here, I take it, is the doctor come.'

Up rises Rachel, the blind girl.

'Give me your hand. Come you from old Bellario?'

And Rachel bows, and answers, in a gentle voice, 'I did, my lord.' The scene proceeds, and Rachel speaks Portia's lines with grace and power, and does not falter at a word. How they all praise her and cluster round her when the act is finished, and the books are closed!

But this is only one of very many such nights passed in that happy home in Buttercup-square.

FACE TO FACE--SO LIKE, YET SO UNLIKE.

On the following Saturday, Ruth and Charley had a holiday, which, with the sanction of their kind guardians, they intended to spend at the International Exhibition. The holiday had been planned a month before its arrival, and had indeed been the occasion of an innocent conspiracy between Ruth and Rachel and Charley, and of much mysterious conversation. Rachel was to accompany them. The day, which had been looked forward to with such rapturous anticipation as only the young can experience and enjoy, at length arrived. In a very flutter of delight, the two girls and their hero--for Charley was Rachel's hero as well as Ruth's--bade Mrs. Silver good-morning, and went out into the streets with joy in their hearts. Very tender were they to each other, and very tender were Ruth and Charley to their blind companion. No words of love had passed between Ruth and Charley, although their attachment was known to their kind guardians, as you have read. But, indeed, no words were required; their looks, their almost unconsciously-exercised tenderness towards one another, were sufficient confirmation of mutual affection. These two young persons were enjoying the purest, happiest dream that life contains. May all the grown-up people who read these pages have enjoyed such a pure and happy dream! May all others live to enjoy it!

Ruth and Charley, of course, with the usual blindness of lovers, believed that no one noticed anything particular in their behaviour; but in this respect they were as blind as Rachel--more so indeed, if there be degrees in blindness, for even she guessed their secret In the course of their rambles through the Exhibition, she sat down and asked to be left alone for a while, and when Ruth and Charley demurred, insisted, with a pretty and affectionate wilfulness, on having her own way.

'And don't hurry,' she said, turning her face to them and smiling sweetly. 'You will find me here when you come back. I am tired, and want a long, long rest.'

And there the blind girl sat, seeing nothing, enjoying everything, while unsuspecting Ruth and Charley wandered away into fairyland, arm in arm. Soft strains of music came to Rachel's ears, and she listened and drank them in, with clasped hands and head inclined, She was as one

inspired; visions of beauty passed before her, and the melodious notes were imbued with palpable loveliness for her. Many a passer-by paused to look at her beautiful face, and felt the better for it, and a great lady came and sat down beside her. When the music ceased, the lady said, 'My dear, are you here alone?'

'O no,' replied Rachel, 'I have friends; I asked them to let me sit by myself. I wanted to listen to the music. They will come for me presently.'

'You love music?'

'Who can help loving it? I can see it'

The lady's voice was soft and sweet, and Rachel *felt* goodness in her manner. 'Tell me,' she said, 'what is before me.'

They were sitting opposite a piece of sculpture--a perfect work--and the lady described it, and described it well, and told the story that it illustrated.

'Ah,' sighed the blind girl, 'it is beautiful!'

The lady was accompanied by her husband and child.

'Is this your little daughter?' asked Rachel.

'My dear,' exclaimed the lady, 'I thought--thought----'

'That I was quite blind,' said Rachel, smiling. 'So I am. But see--your little girl's hand is in mine.'

And indeed the child, who was standing by her mother's side, had placed her hand in Rachel's, beneath the folds of the blind girl's shawl.

'And without that I think I could tell,' added Rachel.

'Yes, my dear, it is my little girl,' said the lady.

Rachel stooped and kissed the child, whose hand stole round Rachel's neck, and caressed it. Lips purer and more innocent had never met. So they sat, talking for a little while longer, until Rachel raised her face, and smiled a happy greeting to Ruth and Charley, who were standing before her. The lady and the child bade good-bye to Rachel, and kissed her; and when they met again, an hour afterwards, the child gave Rachel a flower.

Like the incense of a breeze that has been wandering among sweet-smelling plants; like the soft plash of water on a drowsy day; like the singing of birds, are such small circumstances as these. Thank God for them!

And what had Ruth and Charley been doing? Dreaming--nothing more--walking almost in silence among the busy eager bustling crowd, standing before works of beauty, and enjoying. Everything was beautiful in their eyes. Perfect harmony encompassed them; the commonest things were idealised; their souls were filled with a sense of worship.

How quickly the hours passed! It seemed to them that they had been in the place but a few minutes, and it was already time for them to go. They left with many a sigh, and many a parting glance at the wonders which lined the spaces through which they walked. Ruth's hand was clasped in Charley's beneath her mantle, and a tender light was in her eyes as they made their way through the restless throng. It was still light when the omnibus put them down within a mile of Buttercup-square. The tramway carriage would have carried them to the avenue that led to Buttercup-square; but both Ruth and Rachel expressed a desire to walk, wishful perhaps to prolong the happy time. Charley, nothing loth, gave an arm to each of the girls, and they walked slowly onwards, Rachel being nearest to the wall. They were passing a man and a girl, who were talking together. The girl had just uttered some words to the man, who was leaving her, when Rachel cried suddenly in a voice of alarm,

'Ruth, was it you who spoke?'

Her face was deadly pale, and her limbs were trembling.

'No, Rachel,' answered Ruth, surprised at the blind girl's agitation.

As she replied, both she and Charley turned, and saw Blade-o'-Grass. Thus, for the first time since their infancy, the sisters looked each other in the face. Each saw, instantaneously, such a resemblance to herself, that they leant towards each other in sudden bewilderment Their gaze lasted scarcely as long as one might count three, for Charley hurried Ruth and Rachel on; he also had seen with amazement the likeness that Blade-o'-Grass bore to Ruth, and that there should be any resemblance to his treasure in such a forlorn disreputable--looking creature as Blade-o'-Grass, smote him with a sense of pain. Ruth walked along, dazed; but before they had gone a dozen yards she stopped, and pressed her hand to her heart.

'Ruth! dear Ruth!' exclaimed Charley, placing his arm round her, for indeed she was almost falling. She released herself, and said in a faint voice:

'Rachel, why did you ask if it was I who spoke?'

'The tone was so exactly like yours, Ruth,' answered Rachel, 'that the words slipped out from me unaware. Who was it that spoke?'

'It must have been a poor girl whom we have just passed.'

'What is she like?' Ruth's lips trembled, but she did not answer the question.

'Why must the words have slipped from you unaware, Rachel?'

'Because, if I had considered an instant, I should not have asked. You could not have said such a thing.'

'What thing?--Nay, Charley, don't interrupt me,' said Ruth, in such an imploring tone, that he was mute from fear, for Ruth's eyes were filled with tears, and her face was very pale. 'What thing, Rachel?'

'Just, then,' answered Rachel slowly and solemnly, 'a voice said, "For God's sake, Tom, bring home some money, for there's not a bit of bread in the cupboard!"'

'Charley!' cried Ruth hurriedly, 'stand here with Rachel for a few moments. Don't follow me; let me go alone.'

She was his queen, and he obeyed her; but his apprehensive looks followed her, although he did not stir from the spot Ruth hastened to where Blade-o'-Grass was standing. The poor outcast was very wan and wretched. Ruth knew part of her own history; for Mrs. Silver, when her adopted children arrived at a proper age, had told them, gently, as much of the story of their lives as she deemed it right and necessary for them to know. The hours in which she unfolded their stories to her children were quiet and solemn; there was no one present but she and her adopted one; and she told them their history so gently and with such sweet words of love, that they were never unhappy when they learnt the truth. Ruth therefore knew that she was an orphan; and she, in common with the others, had shed many grateful tears, and had offered up many grateful prayers, for the merciful heart that had made life a blessing to her. As she stood before her sister, so like, yet so unlike--her sister never to be recognised, or acknowledged as of her blood--the thought came to her, 'But for my dear good mother I might have been like this--ragged, forlorn, hungry, with not a bit of bread in the cupboard!'

Blade-o'-Grass, whose wistful eyes had followed the strange likeness to herself, saw Ruth turn back, and dropped a curtsey as her sister in her warm soft dress stood before her.

Then said Ruth timidly, 'It *was* you who said that?' She herself might have been the suppliant, her voice and manner were so quiet and humble.

'Said what, miss?'

'That you hadn't a bit of bread in the cupboard.'

'It's true, miss, and to-morrow's Sunday.'

Ruth thought of what a happy day the Sabbath was to her and hers in Buttercup-square, the goodness of it, the peacefulness of it! And this forlorn girl before her, the sight of whom had so strangely unnerved her, had only one thought of that happy Sabbath to-morrow--whether she would be able to get bread to eat. Tears choked her voice as she asked, 'Will you tell me your name?'

'Blade-o'-Grass, miss.'

Ruth looked up in surprise. 'Is that your real name?'

'Yes, miss, I ain't got no other.' Ruth's hand had been in her pocket from the first, with her purse in it; but she could scarcely muster sufficient courage to give. She judged poor Blade-o'-Grass with the eyes of her own sensitive soul, and felt that if money were offered to her, she would sink to the earth in shame.

'Will you pardon me,' she said hesitatingly, the hot blood flushing her neck and face; 'will you pardon me if I offer you--if I beg of you to--to----'

The hand of Blade-o'-Grass was held out eagerly, imploringly, and Ruth emptied her purse into it. Blade-o'-Grass wondered at the munificence of the gift, and the modesty with which it was given, and her fingers closed greedily on the silver coins.

'God Almighty bless you, miss!' she exclaimed, taking Ruth's hand and kissing it 'God Almighty bless you!' The tears were streaming down both their faces. A warm hand pressure, a last grateful look from Blade-o'-Grass, and the sisters parted.

'O, Charley! Charley!' sobbed Ruth, as she clasped his arm, 'I might have been like that!' They walked in silence to their home, and Ruth whispered to her companions not to say anything to their kind guardians of what had taken place. 'It might make them sad,' she said.

It was dusk when they went indoors. Rachel went to her room first, and Ruth and Charley lingered in the passage.

'Ruth!' he whispered.

She laid her head upon his breast with the confidence and innocence of a child. He stooped and kissed her cheek, still wet with her tears. She clung to him more closely--hid her face in his neck. A wondering happiness took possession of them.

ROBERT TRUEFIT ALLOWS HIS FEELINGS TO MASTER HIM.

The chance acquaintanceship which had so strangely sprung up seven years ago between Mr. Merrywhistle, Robert Truefit, and Jimmy Virtue had ripened into intimacy, and it was not unusual for the three to meet in the old man's leaving-shop in Stoney-alley. The shop and the stock were, on the whole, less fragrant than on the occasion of Mr. Merrywhistle's first introduction to them. An additional seven years' mouldiness lay heavy on the shelves; but familiarity had rendered the musty vapour less objectionable to the benevolent gentleman. There was no perceptible change of importance in Jimmy Virtue; his skin certainly had got tougher and dryer and yellower, but otherwise he did not seem to be a day older. His eyebrows were as precipitous, and his glass eye as mild, and his fierce eye as fierce, as ever they were. No perceptible change either was to be observed in the articles which filled his shop: the same faded dresses and dirty petticoats were crammed into inconvenient corners; the same crinolines loomed from unlikely places; the same old boots hung from the ceiling; and doubtless the same vanities of vanities were enclosed in the box which served as a resting-place in Jimmy Virtue's parlour.

It was a dull, miserable November night. A thick fog had lain upon Stoney-alley during the day, necessitating the use of candles and gas; towards the evening the fog had cleared away, and a dismal rain had set in; Stoney-alley and its neighbouring courts and lanes were overlaid with dirty puddles. It was by a strange chance, therefore, that Mr. Merrywhistle and Robert Truefit found themselves in Jimmy Virtue's parlour on this evening; they said as much to each other. Each of them had some special business which brought them in Jimmy's neighbourhood, and he expressed his pleasure when he saw them. They were the only living friends he had; other friends he had, but they were not human; notwithstanding which some hours would have hung dreadfully upon Jimmy's hands, if he had been deprived of them. These friends were aces, deuces, knaves, and the like; in other words, a pack of cards. Very dirty, very greasy, very much thumbed and dog's-eared, but very useful. Jimmy spent comfortable hours with these friends. Sitting in his chair, he would place an imaginary opponent on the seat opposite to him, and would play blind All-Fours with his unreal foe for large sums of money. 'Jack' was the name of his opponent, and Jimmy often talked to him, and called him a fool for playing, and abused him generally for incapacity. For Jimmy nearly always won; and many and many a night Jack was dismissed a ruined and brokenhearted shadow, while Jimmy, after putting up his shutters, let down his turn-up bedstead, and went to bed a winner of hundreds, sometimes of thousands of pounds. For Jack's wealth was enormous; he never refused a bet, never declined 'double or quits.' So reckless a player was he--being egged on by Jimmy--that it was impossible he could have come by his money honestly. Be that as it may, his ill-gotten gains were swept into Jimmy's imaginary coffers, to the old man's delight and satisfaction. It is a positive fact, that Jimmy had grown into a sort of belief in Jack's existence, and often imagined that he saw a shadowy opponent sitting opposite him. There was a very good reason why Jimmy so invariably won and Jack so invariably lost. Jimmy cheated. He often slipped into his own cards an ace or a knave that properly belonged to Jack. When Jimmy did this, his manner was as wary and cautious as though flesh and blood opposed him. It was a picture to see this old man playing All-Fours with Jack for ten pounds a game, or for 'double or quits,' and cheating his helpless adversary.

When Mr. Merrywhistle and Robert Truefit entered Jimmy's parlour--they had met at the door of the leaving-shop--he was playing greasy All-Fours with Jack, and had just scored a winning game. Robert Truefit always had something new to speak of: a trade-union outrage, a strike, a flagrant instance of justices' justice, a mass meeting and what was said thereat, and other subjects, of which a new crop springs up every day in a great country where tens of millions of people live and have to be legislated for. The late war, of course, was a fruitful theme with Robert Truefit, who spoke of it as an infamous outrage upon civilisation. Especially indignant was he at the sacrilege which lay in one king invoking 'the God of Battles,' and in the other praying to the Supreme to assist him in bringing desolation and misery to thousands of homes. But this is no place for the outpourings of Robert's indignation on those themes. From those lofty heights they came down, after a time, to Blade-o'-Grass. It was Mr. Merrywhistle who introduced her name.

He asked Jimmy if he had seen her lately. No; Jimmy hadn't seen her for a month.

'You see,' said Jimmy, 'she's a woman now, and 'as been on 'er own 'ook this many a year. Besides which, once when I spoke to her she was sarcy, and cheeked me because I wanted to give 'er a bit of advice--good advice, too. But she was up in the stirrups then.'

'Has she ever been prosperous?' inquired Mr. Merrywhistle.

'Well, not what *you* would call prosperous, I daresay; but she's 'ad a shillin' to spare now and agin. And then, agin, she 'asn't, now and agin. She's 'ad her ups and downs like all the other gals about 'ere; you couldn't expect anythin' else, you know. And of course you've 'eerd that Tom Beadle and 'er----'

'Tom Beadle and her--what? asked Mr. Merrywhistle, as Jimmy paused.

'O, nothin',' replied Jimmy evasively; 'it's sich a common thing that it ain't worth mentionin'.'

'I saw her myself about six weeks ago,' said Mr. Merrywhistle; and he narrated how he had met Blade-o'-Crass outside the prison, and what had passed between them, and what he had seen. 'Tell me,' he said, 'is she married to Tom Beadle?'

Jimmy Virtue's eye of flesh expressed that Mr. Merrywhistle outrivalled Simple Simon in simplicity. 'I do believe,' thought Jimmy, 'that he gits greener and greener every time I see him.' Then he said aloud contemptuously, 'Married to Tom! As much as I am!'

Mr. Merrywhistle twisted his fingers nervously, and otherwise so comported himself as to show that he was grieved and pained.

'I wouldn't 'ave a 'art as soft as yours,' thought Jimmy, as Mr. Merrywhistle rested his head upon his hand sadly, 'and as green as yours--no, not for a 'atful of money.'

'Poor child! poor child!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle. 'I wish I could do something for her.'

'Too late,' said Jimmy shortly.

'Yes, too late, I'm afraid,' said Robert Truefit. 'Blade-o'-Grass is a woman now. Her ideas, her principles, her associations, are rooted. When she was a sapling, good might have been done for her, and she might have grown up straight. But she had no chance, poor thing! And Jimmy's tone and your fears point to something worse than hunger. You fear she is leading a bad life.'

'No, no!' interposed Mr. Merrywhistle earnestly; 'not that--indeed, not that. But I would give more than I could afford if I knew that she was married to Tom Beadle.'

'Thief as he is? questioned Robert Truefit.

'Thief as he is,' replied Mr. Merrywhistle.

His grief was contagious: Robert Truefit turned away, with a troubled look on his face; Jimmy Virtue preserved a stolid silence, as was his general habit on such occasions. 'What can one good man do?' presently said Robert Truefit, in a low tone; but his voice was singularly clear. 'What can a hundred good men do, each working singly, according to the impulse of his benevolent heart? I honour them for their deeds, and God forbid that I should harbour a wish to check them! Would that more money were as well spent, and that their numbers were increased a hundredfold! They do *some* good. But is it not cruel to know that Blade-o'-Grass is but one of thousands of human blades who are cursed, shunned, ignored, through no fault of theirs, and who, when circumstances push them into the light, are crushed by System? If they were lepers, their condition would be better. And they might be so different! To themselves, and all around them. To the State; to society. In actual fact, and putting wordy sops in the pan out of the question, what do statesmen do for such poor places as these? Give them gin-shops and an extra number of police. No prompt effort made in the right direction; no clearing away of nest-holes where moral corruption and physical misery fester and ripen. Where legislation is most needed, it moves at a snail's pace. So wrapt up are statesmen in the slow hatching of grand schemes, that they cannot stoop to pour oil upon these festering social wounds. And what is the result? While they legislate, Blades-o'-Grass are springing up all around them, and living poisoned lives. And while they legislate, if there be truth in what preachers preach, souls are being damned by force of circumstance. What should be the aim of those who govern? So to govern as to produce the maximum of human happiness and comfort, and the minimum of human misery and vice. Not to the few--to the many, to all.' He paused, and turned to Mr. Merrywhistle. 'Seven years ago,' he continued, 'we talked of poor Blade-o'-Grass. I told you then--I remember it well--that England was full of such pictures as that hungry ignorant child, with the tiger in her stomach, presented. Seven years before that, it was the same. During that time Blade-o'-Grass has grown up from a baby to a woman. What a childhood must hers have been! I wonder if she ever had a toy! And see what she is now: a woman for whom you fear--what I guess, but will not say. What will she be--where will she be--in seven years from now? Seventy years is the fulness of our age. Carry Blade-o'-Grass onwards for seven years more, and find her an old woman long before she should have reached her prime. What has been done in the last seven years for such as she? What will be done in the next--and the next? There are thousands upon thousands of such babes and girls as

she was seven years and twice seven years ago growing up as I speak; contamination is eating into their bones, corrupting their blood, poisoning their instincts for good. What shall be done for them in the next seven years? Pardon me,' he said, breaking off suddenly; 'I have let my feelings run ahead of me perhaps; but I'll stick to what I've said, nevertheless.'

With that he wished them goodnight, and took his leave. Mr. Merrywhistle soon followed him, first ascertaining from Jimmy Virtue the address of Blade-o'-Grass.

Jimmy, being left to his own resources, went to the door to see what sort of a night it was. The rain was still falling drearily. It was too miserable a night for him to take his usual pipe in the open air, and too miserable a night for him to expect to do any business in. So he put up his shutters, and retired to his parlour. Then he took out his greasy pack of cards, and conjured up Jack for a game of All-Fours. With his eye on his opponent, he filled his pipe carefully, lighted it, puffed at it, and cut for deal. He won it, and the first thing he did after that was to turn up a knave (slipping it from the bottom of the pack) and score one. He was in a more than usually reckless and cheating mood. He staked large sums, went double or quits, and double or quits again, and cheated unblushingly. He won a fortune of Jack in an hour; and then contemptuously growled, 'I'll try you at cribbage, old fellow,' The cribbage-board was his table, and he scored the game with a bit of chalk. Jack fared no better at cribbage than he had done at All-Fours. Jimmy had all the good cribs, Jack all the bad ones. By the time that the table was smeared all over with chalk figures, Jimmy was sleepy. He played one last game for an enormous stake, and having won it and ruined Jack, he went to bed contentedly, and slept the sleep of the just.

TOO LATE.

Mr. Merrywhistle had no very distinct plan in his mind when he left Jimmy Virtue's shop to visit Blade-o'-Grass. Sincerely commiserating her condition, he wished to put her in the way to get an honest and respectable living, but was deeply perplexed as to the method by which she was to arrive at this desirable consummation. Some small assistance in money he might manage to give her; but in what way could it be applied? by what means was she to be lifted out of that slough into which she had been allowed to sink? And then he feared that she was past training. As Robert Truefit had said, Blade-o'-Grass was a woman now, with a grown-up person's passions and desires firmly rooted in her nature. And he feared something else, also. But he would see her and speak to her freely; good might come of it.

The room she occupied was at the extreme end of Stoney-alley, and Mr. Merrywhistle was soon stumbling along dark passages and up flights of crippled stairs. When he reached the top of the house, as he thought, he tapped at a door, and receiving no answer, turned the handle, and

entered. A very old woman, sitting before a very small fire, smiled and mumbled in reply to his questions; and he soon discovered that she was deaf and childish, and that he was in the wrong apartment. As he stumbled into the dark again, a woman, with a child in her' arms, came on to the landing with a candle in her hand, and showed Mr. Merrywhistle that there was still another flight of stairs to mount. Blade-o'-Grass lived up there, the woman said; first door on the right She didn't know if the girl was at home. And then she asked if he was a doctor. No, he answered, surprised at the question; he was not a doctor. The crazy stairs complained audibly as he trod them. He knocked at the first door on the right, and paused.

'You'd better go in, and see, sir,' called the woman from below; 'perhaps she's asleep.' Mr. Merrywhistle hesitated. What right, he thought, had he to intrude on the girl's privacy, and at this time of night? But the knowledge that he was there for no bad purpose made him bold, and he opened the door. A candle that was burning on the table threw a dim light around, but the corners of the miserible apartment were in shade. The woman was right in her conjecture: Blade-o'-Grass was in the room, asleep. She was lying on the ground, dressed, before a mockery of a fire; her head was resting on a stool, round which one arm was thrown. The faintly-flickering flames threw occasional gleams of light on the girl's face, over which, strange to say, a smile was playing, as if her dreams were pleasant ones. The benevolent old gentleman looked round upon the miserable apartment, and sighed. It was a shelter, nothing more--a shelter for want and destitution. Then he looked down upon the form of the sleeping girl, clothed in rags. Child-woman indeed she was. Her pretty face was thin and pale; but there was a happy expression upon it, and once her arm clasped the stool with fond motion, as if she were pressing to her breast something that she loved. Yet, doubtless, there are many stern moralists, philanthropic theorists, and benevolent word-wasters, who would have looked coldly upon this sleeping child, and who--self-elected teachers as they are of what is good and moral--would only have seen in her and her surroundings a text for effervescent platitudes. But the school in which they learn their lessons is as cruel and harsh as the school in which Blade-o'-Grass learns hers is unwholesome and bitter.

Mr. Merrywhistle was debating with himself whether he should arouse her, when a slight motion on his part saved him the trouble of deciding. 'Is that you, Tom?' she asked softly, opening her eyes, and then, seeing a strange figure before her, scrambled to her feet.

'I have come to see you,' said Mr. Merrywhistle.

Although she curtseyed, she was scarcely awake yet. But presently she said, 'O, yes, sir; I arks yer pardon. It's Mr. Merrywhistle?

'Yes, child; may I sit down?'

She motioned him to the only chair the room contained. 'It's very late, ain't it?' she asked. And then anxiously, 'Is anythink up?'

Mr. Merrywhistle was sufficiently versed in vulgar vernacular to understand her meaning. No, he said, there was nothing the matter. She gave a sigh of relief as she said, 'I thought you might 'ave come to tell me somethin' bad.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'O, ever so long.'

'Alone?' he asked, after a slight pause.

But to this question she made no reply.

'Times are hard with you, are they not, my child?' he said, approaching his subject.

'Very 'ard,' she answered, with a weary shake of the head.

'Have you given up selling flowers?'

'"Tain't the season for flowers,' she answered; 'wilets won't be in for three months.'

He felt the difficulty of the task he had set himself. 'How do you live when there are no flowers?'

'Any'ow; sometimes I sells matches; I can't tell you 'ow, and that's a fact.'

'But why don't you work?' he inquired, with a bold plunge.

'Work!' she exclaimed. 'What work? I don't know nothin'. But I've been arksed that lots of times. A peeler told me that once, and when I arksed him to get me some work that I could do, he only larfed.'

'Suppose now,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, 'that I were to take you away from this place, and put you somewhere where you could learn dressmaking or needlework.'

She gave him a grateful and surprised look. 'I don't think it'd answer, sir. I knows lots o' gals

who tried to git a livin' by needlework, and couldn't do it. I knows some as set up till two o'clock in the mornin', and got up agin at eight, and then couldn't earn enough to git a shoe to their foot. And they couldn't always git work; they'd go for weeks and couldn't git a stitch.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, who was as ignorant as a child in such matters. 'What did they do then?'

Blade-o'-Grass laughed recklessly. 'Do! what do you think? Beg, or----somethin' else.'

He was pained by her manner, and said, 'My poor child, I have only come here out of kindness, and to try if I could do some good for you.'

'I know, sir,' she said gratefully; 'you've always been kind to me as long as I can remember; I don't forget, sir. But there's some things I know more about nor you do, sir. A gal can't git a livin' by needlework--leastways, a good many of 'em can't. There was a woman livin' in the next room: she worked 'er fingers to the bone, and couldn't git enough to eat. Last winter was a reg'lar 'ard un; and then she lost her work, and couldn't git another shop. She took to beggin', and was 'ad up afore the beak. She was discharged with a caution, I 'eerd. It *was* a caution to her: she died o' starvation in that there room!'

Grieved and shocked, Mr. Merrywhistle was silent for a little while; but he brightened up presently. He was sincerely desirous to do some tangible good for Blade-o'-Grass. He thought of the situations held by Ruth and Mary in the Postal Telegraph Office. Suppose he was to take Blade-o'-Grass away from the contaminating influences by which she was surrounded; give her decent clothes, and have her taught the system, so that she might be an eligible candidate. He could set some influence at work; Mr. Silver would do his best, and there were others also whom he could induce to interest themselves. He felt quite hopeful as he thought. He mooted the idea to Blade-o'-Grass. She listened in silence, and when she spoke, it was in a low voice, and with her face turned from him.

I've see'd them gals, and I'd like to be one of 'em; but----'

'But what, Blade-o'-Grass?' he asked kindly, almost tenderly; for there was a plaintiveness in her voice that deeply affected him.

'They must be able to read, mustn't they?'

'O, yes; they would be useless without that.'

'And they must be able to write, too. Where do you think *I* learnt to read and write? I don't know one letter from another.'

Here was another difficulty, and a gigantic one; but it seemed as if each fresh obstacle only served to expand Mr. Merrywhistle's benevolent heart.

'Why, then,' he said cheerfully, 'suppose we teach you to read and write. You'd learn quickly, I'll be bound.'

A sudden rush of tears came to her eyes, and she sat down on the floor, and sobbed, and rocked herself to and fro.

'It's too late!' she cried. 'Too late!'

Too late! The very words used by Robert Truefit They fell ominously on Mr. Merrywhistle's ears. He asked for an explanation; but he had to wait until the girl's grief was spent, before he received an answer. She wiped her eyes in a manner that showed she was mad with herself for giving way to such emotion, and turned on her would-be benefactor almost defiantly.

'Look 'ere,' she said, in a hard cold voice, 'all them gals are what you call respectable, ain't they?'

'Yes, my child.'

'Don't call me your child; it 'urts me--O, it 'urts me!' She was almost on the point of giving way again; but she set her teeth close, and shook herself like an angry dog, and so checked the spasms that rose to her throat 'They must show that they're respectable, mustn't they, or they couldn't git the billet?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then, I ain't respectable, as you call it; 'ow can I be? A nice respectable gal *I'd* look, comin' out of a orfice! Why, they've got nice warm clothes, every one of 'em, and muffs and tippets, and all that I've see'd 'em, lots of times.'

'But you can leave your past life behind you,' urged Mr. Merrywhistle, overleaping all obstacles; 'you can commence another life, and be like them.'

'Be like them! I can't be. It's too late, I tell you. And I'll tell you somethin' more,' she added,

slowly and very distinctly: 'I wouldn't leave Tom Beadle to be the best-dressed gal among 'em.'

'Why?'

'Why!' she echoed, looking into his face with wonder. 'Why! Tom Beadle's been the best friend I ever 'ad. He's give me grub lots and lots o' times. When I was a little kid, and didn't know what was what; when the tiger was a-tearin' my very inside out; Tom Beadle's come and took pity on me. No one else but 'im did take it. I should 'ave starved a 'undred times, if it 'adn't been for Tom. Why, it was 'im as set me up for a flower-gal, and 'im as took me to the theaytre, and 'im as told me I should lick Poll Buttons into fits. And so I did, when I 'ad a nice dress on; they all said so. And there's another reason, if you'd care to know. No, I won't tell you. If you arks about 'ere, I daresay you can find out, and if you wait a little while, you'll find out for yourself. She stood up boldly before him, and said in a low passionate voice, 'I love Tom, and Tom loves me! I wouldn't leave 'im for all the world. I'll stick to 'im and be true to 'im till I die.'

Here was an end to Mr. Merrywhistle's benevolent intentions; he had nothing more to urge. The difficulties Blade-o'-Grass herself had put in the way seemed to him to render her social redemption almost impossible. Blade-o'-Grass saw trouble in his face, and said, as if he were the one who required pity:

'Don't take on, sir; it can't be 'elped. Next to Tom, no one's been so good to me as you've been. Perhaps I don't understand things as you would like me to understand 'em. But I can't 'elp it, sir.'

Mr. Merrywhistle rose to go. He took out his purse, and was about to offer Blade-o'-Grass money, when she said, in an imploring tone:

'No, sir, not to-night; it'll do me more good, if you don't give me nothin' to-night I shall be sorry to myself afterwards, if I take it. And don't believe, sir, that I ain't grateful! Don't believe it!'

'I won't, my poor girl,' said Mr. Merrywhistle huskily, putting his purse in his pocket. 'I am sorry for all this. But, at all events, you can promise me that if you want a friend, you'll come to me. You know where I live.'

'Yes, sir; and I'll promise you. When I don't know which way to turn, I'll come to you.'

He held out his hand, and she kissed it; and went down-stairs with him with the candle, to show him the way. He walked home with a very heavy feeling at his heart. 'There's something wrong somewhere,' was his refrain. He was conscious that a great social problem was before him, but he could find no solution for it. Indeed, it could not be expected of him. He was ready enough (too ready, many said) with his sixpences and shillings when his heart was stirred, but he was not a politician.

When Blade-o'-Grass reëntered her cheerless room, she set the candle on the table, and began to cry. Her heart was very sore, and she was deeply moved at Mr. Merrywhistle's goodness. She started to her feet, however, when she heard the sounds of a well-known step on the stairs. Wiping her eyes hastily, she hurried into the passage with the candle. Tom Beadle smiled as he saw the light He was a blackguard and a thief, but he loved Blade-o'-Grass.

'I've got some trotters, old gal,' he said, when they were in their room, 'and 'arf-a-pint o' gin. Why, I'm blessed if you 'aven't been turnin' on the waterworks agin.'

Her eyes glistened at the sight of the food.

'Look 'ere, old woman,' said Tom Beadle, with his arm round her waist ''Ere's a slice o' luck, eh?' And he took out a purse, and emptied it on the table. A half-sovereign and about a dozen shillings rolled out. She handled the coins eagerly, but she did not ask him how he came by them.

Half an hour later, Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass, having finished their supper, were sitting before the fire, on which the girl had thrown the last shovelful of coals. In the earlier part of the night, she had been sparing of them; but when Tom came home rich, she made a bright blaze, and enjoyed the comforting warmth. Tom sat on the only chair, and she on the ground, with her arm thrown over his knee. She was happy and comfortable, having had a good supper, and seeing the certainty of being able to buy food for many days to come. Then she told him of Mr. Merrywhistle's visit, but did not succeed in raising in him any grateful feeling. All that he saw was an attempt on the part of Mr. Merrywhistle to take Blade-o'-Grass away from him, and he was proportionately grateful to that gentleman.

'I'd 'ave punched 'is 'ead, if I'd been 'ere,' was Tom's commentary.

'No, Tom, you wouldn't,' said Blade-o'-Grass earnestly. 'He only come to try to do me some good, and he's give me money lots o' times.'

'He didn't give you any to-night,' grumbled Tom.

'He wanted to, but I wouldn't take it; I couldn't take it'

'Blessed if I don't think you're growin' soft, old woman! Wouldn't take his tin!'

'Somethin' come over me, Tom; I don't know what. But he'll make it up to me another time.'

There was a soft dreaminess in her tone, as she lay looking into the fire with her head upon Tom's knee, that disarmed him. He took a good drink of gin-and-water, and caressed her face with his hand. Just then the candle went out. Blade-o'-Grass placed her warm cheek upon Tom's hand. They sat so in silence for some time. Tender fancies were in the fire even for Blade-o'-Grass. As she gazed she smiled happily, as she had done in her sleep. What did she see there? Good God! a baby's face! So like herself, yet so much brighter, purer, that thrills of ineffable happiness and exquisite pain quivered through her. Eyes that looked at hers in wonder; laughing mouth waiting to be kissed. It raised its little hands to her, and held out its pretty arms; and she made a yearning movement towards it, and pressed her lips to Tom's fingers, and kissed them softly, again and again, while the tears ran down her face.

'O, Tom!' she whispered, ''ow I love you!'

What a rock for her to lean upon! What a harbour for her to take shelter in!

She fell into a doze presently, and woke in terror.

'What's the matter, old gal?' asked Tom, himself nodding.

And then she gasped, between her sobs, that she dreamt it was born with a tiger in its inside!

Hark! What was that? Heavy steps coming up-stairs. No shuffling; measured, slow, and certain, as though they were bullets being lifted from stair to stair. Tom started to his feet. Nearer and nearer came the sounds.

'Give me the money, Bladergrass; give me the money, or you might get into trouble too!' He tore the money out of her pocket; when he came in he had given it to her to keep house with. Then he cried, 'The purse! Where's the purse? Throw it out on the tiles--put it on the fire!'

'I 'aven't got it, Tom,' answered Blade-o'-Grass hurriedly, her knees knocking together with fright. 'What's up?'

'The peelers! Don't you 'ear 'em? Curse the light! why did it go out? If they see the purse, I'm done for!'

They groped about in the dark, but could not find it For a moment the steps halted outside the door. Then it opened, and the strong light from the policemen's bull's-eye lamps was thrown upon the crouching forms of Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass.

'You're up late, Tom,' said one of the policemen.

'Yes,' said Tom doggedly, and with a pale face; 'I was jist goin' to bed.' The policeman nodded carelessly, and kept his eye upon Tom, while his comrade searched about the room.

'Got any money, Tom?'

'What's that to you?'

'Come, come; take it easy, my lad. You haven't been long out, you know.'

'And what o' that?' exclaimed Tom, beginning to gather courage, for the policeman's search was almost at an end, and nothing was found. 'You can't take me up for not bein' long out.'

'But we can for this,' said the second policeman, lifting a purse from the mantelshelf. 'Is this yours, sir?'

A man, who had been lingering by the door, came forward and looked at the purse by the light of the lamp. 'Yes, it is mine.'

'And is this the party?'--throwing the light full upon Tom Beadle's face. He bore it boldly; he knew well enough that the game was up.

'I can't say; the purse was snatched out of my hand suddenly, and I didn't see the face of the thief. I followed him, as I told you, and saw him run down this alley.'

'And a nice hunt we've had! Been in a dozen houses, and only came to the right one at last. How much was in the purse, sir, did you say?'

'Twenty-three shillings--a half-sovereign, and the rest in silver.'

'Now, Tom, turn out your pockets.'

Tom did so without hesitation. A half-sovereign and twelve shillings were placed on the table.

'Just the money, with a shilling short. What have you been having for supper, Tom?'

'Trotters.'

'Ay; and what was in the bottle?'

'Gin, of course.'

'Trotters, fourpence; gin, eightpence. That's how the other shilling's gone, sir. Come along, Tom; this'll be a longer job than the last.'

As Tom nodded sullenly, Blade-o'-Grass, who had listened to the conversation with a face like the face of death, sank to the ground in a swoon. The policemen's hands were on Tom, and he struggled to get from them.

'Come, come, my lad,' said one, shaking him roughly; 'that's no good, you know. Best go quietly.'

'I want to go quietly,' cried Tom, with a great swelling in his throat that almost choked his words; 'but don't you see she's fainted? Let me go to her for a minute. I hope I may drop down dead if I try to escape!'

They loosened their hold, and he knelt by Blade-o'-Grass, and sprinkled her face with water. She opened her eyes, and threw her arms round his neck.

'O, Tom!' she cried; 'I thought--thought----'

'Now, my girl,' said the policeman, raising her to her feet in a not unkindly manner; 'it's no use making a bother. Tom's got to go, you know. It isn't his first job.'

'Good-bye, old gal,' said Tom tenderly; 'they can't prove anythin'. They can't lag me for pickin' up a empty purse in the street; and as for the money, you know 'ow long I've 'ad that, don't you?'

She nodded vacantly.

'That's well trumped-up, Tom,' said the policeman; 'but I don't think it'll wash.'

Tom kissed Blade-o'-Grass, and marched out with his captors. When their steps had died away, Blade-o'-Grass shivered, and sank down before the fire, but saw no pictures in it now to bring happy smiles to her face.

HELP THE POOR.

Merry peals of bells herald the advent of a bright and happy day. Care is sent to the right-about by those upon whom it does not press too heavily; and strangers, as they pass each other in the streets, are occasionally seen to smile amiably and cheerfully--a circumstance sufficiently rare in anxious suspicious London to be recorded and made a note of. But the great city would be filled with churls indeed, if, on one day during the year, the heart was not allowed to have free play. The atmosphere is brisk and dear, and the sun shines through a white and frosty sky. Although the glories of spring and summer are slumbering in the earth, nature is at its best; and, best thing of all to be able to say, human nature is more at its best than at any other time of the year. The houses are sweet and fresh, and smiles are on the faces and in the hearts of the dwellers therein. Men shake hands more heartily than is their usual custom, and voices have a merry ring in them, which it does one good to hear. It is an absolute fact, that many men and women today present themselves to each other unmasked. Natural kindliness is in the enjoyment of a pretty fair monopoly, and charity and goodwill are preached in all the churches. One minister ends an eloquent exordium with 'God help the poor!' and the majority of his congregation whisper devoutly, 'Be it so!'--otherwise, 'Amen!'

In the church where this is said are certain friends of ours whom, I hope, we have grown to respect: Mr. and Mrs. Silver with their flock, and Robert Truefit with his. Mr. Merrywhistle has brought Robert Truefit and the Silvers together, to their mutual satisfaction; and Robert has agreed to spend Christmas-day in Buttercup-square with his family--wife and four young ones. Thus it is that they are all in church together. They make a large party--fourteen in all, for Mr. Merrywhistle is with them--and there is not a sad heart among them.

'If I had been the minister preaching,' says Robert Truefit to Mrs. Silver, as they come out of church, 'I should not have ended my sermon with "God help the poor!"'

'With what then?'

'With "Man, help the poor!"' answers Robert Truefit gravely.

Here Charley and Ruth come forward with a petition. They want permission to take a walk by themselves; they will be home within an hour.

'Very well, my dears,' says Mrs. Silver; 'don't be longer, if you can help it.'

It is Ruth who has suggested the walk, and she has a purpose in view which Charley does not know of as yet. But Charley is happy enough in his ignorance; a walk on such a day with his heart's best treasure by his side is heaven to him. He is inclined to walk eastward, where glimpses of the country may be seen; but she says, 'No, Charley, please; you must come my way.' Perfectly contented is he to go her way, and they walk towards the City.

'You remember the day we went to the Exhibition, Charley?'

What a question to ask him! As if it has not been in his thoughts ever since, as if they have not talked of it, and lingered lovingly over the smallest incidents, dozens and dozens of times! But he answers simply, 'Yes, Ruth.'

'And what occurred when we came back, Charley?'

'The poor girl do you mean, Ruth?'

'Yes, the poor girl--so much like me!'

'I remember.'

'I have never forgotten her, Charley dear! I want to pass by the spot where we met her, and if I see her, I want to give her something. I should dearly like to do so, to-day! Do you remember, Charley?--when we saw her, she had not a bit of bread in the cupboard. Perhaps she has none today.'

'Take my purse, Ruth, and let us share together.'

'I shall tell her, Charley, that it is half from you.'

'Yes, my dear.'

But though they walk past the spot, and, retracing their steps, walk past it again and again, and although Ruth looks wistfully about her, she sees nothing of Blade-o'-Grass. They walk homewards, Charley very thoughtful, Ruth very sad.

'Come, Ruth,' says Charley presently, 'we must not be unhappy to-day. Let us hope that the poor girl is provided for; indeed, it is most reasonable to believe so.'

'I hope so, Charley, with all my heart.'

'What you hope with all your heart, dear Ruth, is sure to be good and true. Is there anything else you hope with all your heart?'

There is a tender significance in his tone, and she glances at him shyly and modestly, but does not answer.

'You can make this happy day even happier than it is, Ruth; you can make it the happiest remembrance of my life if you will say Yes to something!'

Her voice trembles slightly as she asks, 'To what, Charley?'

'Let me tell our dear parents how I love you. Let me ask them to give you to me. Is it Yes, Ruth dear?'

'Yes, dear Charley.' But so softly, so tenderly whispered, that only ears attuned as his were could have heard the words.

Presently,

'And do you love me with all your heart, Ruth?'

'With all my heart, Charley.'

O, happiest of happy days! Ring out, sweet bells! A tenderer music is in your notes than they have ever yet been charged with!

It is twilight, and all the elderly people are in the parlour in Buttercup-square. The children are in another room, engaged in mysterious preparation.

'I think we shall have snow soon,' says Mr. Merrywhistle.

'I'm glad of it,' says Robert Truefit. 'Something seems to me wanting in Christmas, when there is no snow. When it snows, the atmosphere between heaven and earth is bridged by the purity of the happy time.'

Mrs. Silver is pleased by the remark; the firelight's soft glow is on her face. Charley enters, and bends over her chair.

'My dear mother,' he whispers.

She knows in an instant by the tremor in his voice what he is about to say. She draws him to her, so that the firelight falls on his face as well as on hers.

'Is it about Ruth?' she asks softly.

'Yes, yes,' he answers in a tone of eager wonder. 'How did you know?'

She smiles sweetly on him.

'I have known it for a long time, Charley. Have you spoken to her?'

'Yes; and this is the happiest day I have ever known. O, mother, she loves me! She gave me permission to ask you for her.'

Mrs. Silver calls her husband to her side.

'Charley has come to ask for Ruth, my dear.'

'I am glad of it. Where is Ruth?'

'I will bring her,' says Charley, trembling with happiness.

'Did I not tell you, my dear?' Mrs. Silver asks of her husband.

'It is a happy Christmas, indeed,' he answers.

Ruth is glad that it is dark when she enters the room. Mrs. Silver folds the girl in her arms.

'My darling child! And this wonderful news is really true?'

'Yes, my dearest mother,' kissing Mrs. Silver's neck, and crying.

'What are you people conspiring together about?' asks Mr. Merrywhistle, from the window.

'Come here, and join the conspirators,' says Mrs. Silver. 'Our plots will fail, without your assistance and consent.'

Mr. Merrywhistle joins the party by the fire, and Robert Truefit steals quietly out of the room.

'It is eighteen years this Christmas,' says Mrs. Silver, 'since Ruth was given to us. She has been a comfort and a blessing to us, and will continue to be, I am sure.' Ruth sinks on her knees, and hides her face in Mrs. Silver's lap. This true woman lays her hand on Ruth's head, and continues: 'It is time that Ruth should know who is her real benefactor.'

'Nay, my dear madam,' expostulates Mr. Merrywhistle, blushing like a girl.

'My dear friend,' says Mrs. Silver, 'it is necessary. A great change will soon take place in Ruth's life, and your sanction must be given.--Ruth, my dear, look up. Before you were born, this friend--whom we all love and honour--came to me, and asked to be allowed to contribute out of his means towards the support of our next child. You can understand with what joy his offer was accepted. Shortly afterwards, my dear--eighteen years ago this day--you came to us, and completed our happy circle. You see before you your benefactor--your father--to whom you owe everything; for all the expense of your training and education has been borne by him. It is right that you and Charley should know this. And, Charley, as--but for this our dearest friend--the happiness which has fallen upon you could not have been yours, it is of him you must ask for Ruth.'

'Sir--'says Charley, advancing towards Mr. Merrywhistle.

'Not another word,' cries Mr. Merrywhistle, with Ruth in his arms; 'not another word about me, or I'll go and spend my Christmas-eve elsewhere. If, as Mrs. Silver says, my consent is necessary, I give you Ruth with all my heart.'--He kisses Ruth, and says: 'A happy future is before you, children. No need for me to tell you where your chief love and duty lie--no need for me to remind you to whose parental care and good example you owe all your happiness. To me, an old man, without kith or kin, their friendship and love have been priceless; they have brightened my life. It comes upon me now to say, my dear girl and boy, that once--ah, how many years ago!--such a prize as the love which animates you seemed to be within my reach; but it slipped from me, and I am an old man now, waiting to hear my name called. Cling to your love, my dears; keep it in your hearts as a sacred thing; let it show itself daily in your actions towards each other: it will sweeten your winter when you are as old as I am, and everything shall be as bright and fresh to you then as in this your spring-time, when all the future before you seems carpeted with flowers. Ruth, my child, God bless you! Charley, I am proud of you! Let your aim be to live a good life.'

Mrs. Silver kisses the good old man, and they sit round the fire undisturbed; for it appears to be understood in the house, that the parlour must not be invaded until permission is given. It is settled that Charley and Ruth shall wait for twelve months; that Charley shall be very saving; that Ruth shall leave her situation, and keep house for the family, so that she shall enter her own home competent to fulfil the duties of a wife. But, indeed, this last clause is scarcely necessary; for all Mrs. Silver's girls have been carefully instructed in those domestic duties, without a knowledge of which no woman can be a proper helpmate to the man to whom she gives her love.

The shadows thicken, and the snow begins to fall There is peace without, and love within. Mrs. Silver, as she watches the soft snowflakes, thinks that it will be just such a night as that on which, eighteen years ago, she and her husband brought Ruth home from Stoney-alley. She recalls every circumstance of her interview with the landlady, and hears again the pitiful story of the motherless babe. Then she looks down upon the pure happy face of Ruth, and her heart is filled with gratitude to God.

And Ruth's twin sister, Blade-o'-Grass?

She was sitting in the same miserable attic from which Tom Beadle was taken to prison. He was not in prison now, having escaped just punishment by (for him) a lucky chance. When Tom was brought before the magistrate, he told his trumped-up story glibly: he had picked up the empty purse in the street, and the money was, the result of his own earnings. When asked how he had earned it, he declined to say; and he advanced an artful argument. The policeman had reckoned up the money which the man who had lost the purse said it contained--twenty-three shillings. Twenty-two shillings were found in Tom's pocket, and the other shilling was spent, according to the policeman's version, in trotters and gin. Not another penny, in addition to the twenty-two shillings, was discovered in the room. Now, said Tom, it wasn't likely that he would be without a penny in his pocket, and the fact that he had just the sum the purse had contained was simply a coincidence. He argued that it would be much clearer against him if a few coppers more than the actual money lost had been found. Of course this defence was received with derision by the police, and with discredit by the magistrate. But it happened that the prosecutor was too unwell to attend on the morning that Tom made his appearance in the police court, and he was remanded for a week. Before the week passed by, the prosecutor died, and Tom was set free. Blade-o'-Grass was overjoyed; it was like a reprieve from death to her. But the police were angry at Tom's escape, and kept so sharp a watch on him, that he found it more than ever difficult to live. I am not pleading Tom's cause, nor bespeaking compassion for him; I am simply relating certain facts in connection with him. When Christmas came, things were at their very worst. They had no Christmas dinner, and Tom was prowling about in search of prey.

On the night before Christmas Blade-o'-Grass listened to the merry bells with somewhat of

bitterness in her soul. Everything about her was so dreary, the prospect of obtaining food was so faint, that the sound of the bells came to her ears mockingly. What she would have done but for her one comfort and joy, it is difficult to say.

Her one comfort and joy! Yes, she had a baby now, as pretty a little thing as ever was seen. All her thought, all her anxiety, was for her child. Blade-o'-Grass possessed the same tenderness of nature that had been so developed in Ruth as to make her a pride of womanhood. How proud Blade-o'-Grass was of her baby! How she wondered, and cried, and laughed over it! As she uncovered its pretty dimpled face, and gazed at it in worship, all the bitterness of her soul at the merry sound of the bells faded away, and for a little while she was happy. She talked to the babe, and, bidding it listen to the bells, imitated the glad sound with her voice, until the child's face was rippled with smiles. But the hard realities of her position were too pressing for her to be able to forget them for more than a few minutes. Tom had not been home since the morning, and she had had but little food during the day. Not for herself did she care; but her baby must be fed. If she did not eat and drink, how could she give milk to her child? 'I'll go and arks Jimmy Wirtue for somethin',' she thought; and so that her appeal to the old man might be fortunate, she cunningly took her baby out with her. Jimmy was playing All-Fours with Jack, who, having come into another fortune, was dissipating it recklessly as usual for the benefit of his remorseless foe.

'What do you want? What's that bundle in your arms?' growled Jimmy, as Blade-o'-Grass peeped into his parlour.

'Ifs my baby,' said Blade-o'-Grass; 'I've come to show it to you.'

'And what business have you with a babby?' exclaimed Jimmy, in an excited manner. 'Ain't you ashamed of yourself? Take it away; I don't want any babbies 'ere.'

But Blade-o'-Grass pleaded her cause so meekly and patiently, and with so much feeling, that Jimmy was bound to listen and sympathise, hard as he was.

'Lookee 'ere,' he said harshly, holding up his finger, as she stood looking at him entreatingly: 'it's now nigh on eighteen year ago since Mrs. Manning----you remember Mrs. Manning?'

'O, yes,' sighed Blade-o'-Grass.

'It's now nigh on eighteen year ago since she come round a-beggin' for you; and now *you* come round a-beggin' for your babby.'

'I can't 'elp it,' said Blade-o'-Grass; 'don't speak to me unkindly; I am weak and 'ungry.'

'Why, you was only a babby yourself then----what's the matter?'

Blade-o'-Grass was swaying forward, and would have fallen if he had not caught her. His tone was so harsh, that the poor girl's heart was fainting within her at the prospect of being sent away empty-handed. Jimmy assisted her into his chair; and without considering that he was about to upset Jack, who was sitting on the box, opened it, and produced a bottle of spirits. He gave her some in a cup, and she revived. Then, grumblingly, he took a sixpence out of a dirty bag, and gave it to her, saying:

'There! And don't you come botherin' me agin!'

How grateful she was! She made him kiss baby, and left him with that soft touch upon his lips. He stood still for a few moments with his fingers to his lips, wondering somewhat; but he recovered himself very soon, and glaring at Jack, took swift revenge in All-Fours for his softness of heart, and ruined that shadowy creation for the hundredth time.

When Blade-o'-Grass quitted Jimmy's shop, she felt as if she would have liked to sing, she was so blithe and happy. She spent the whole sixpence, and treated herself to half a pint of stout. 'This is for you, pet!' she said to her baby, as she drank. She drank only half of it; the other half she saved for Tom. But although she waited up, and listened to the bells--gratefully now--until long past midnight, Tom did not come home. And when she rose on Christmas morning, he was still absent. She wandered out to look for him, but could not find him; and then hurried back, hoping that he might have come in her absence. As the day wore on, she grew more and more anxious, and tormented herself with fears and fancies as to what could have happened to him. So she passed her Christmas-day. In the afternoon she fell asleep, with her baby in her arms. At first she dreamt of all kinds of terrors, and lived over again, in her dreams, many of the miseries of her past life; but after a time her sleep became more peaceful, and her mind wandered back to the time when, a child of three years of age, she sat on the stones in the dirty yard, looking in silent delight at the Blades of Grass springing from the ground.

When she awoke it was dark. She went to the window, shivering; it was snowing fast. All the food was gone, and she was hungry again. What should she do? Suddenly a terrible fear smote her. Baby was very quiet. She looked at the sleeping child's white face by the white light of the snow, and placed her ears to the pretty mouth. Thank God! she felt the child's warm breath. But it would wake up presently, and she had no milk to give. The child's lips and fingers were wandering now to the mother's bosom. She could not stand this agony of hunger and darkness and solitude any longer; she must go into the streets.

Out into the streets, where the snow was falling heavily, she went. She looked wistfully about for Tom, but saw no signs of him. Into the wider thoroughfares she wandered. How white they were! how pure! how peaceful! A virgin world had taken the place of the old; a newborn world seemed to lie before her, with its pure white page ready for the finger of God to write upon. She wandered on and on, until she came to a square. She knew it immediately--Buttercup-square. Why, here it was that Mr. Merrywhistle lived, and he had made her promise that she would come to him when she wanted a friend. 'When I don't know which way to turn, I'll come to you,' she had said. Well, she didn't know which way to turn. She walked slowly towards a house, through the shutters of which she could see pleasant gleams of light. It was Mrs. Silver's house, and she paused before it, and thought to herself, 'I'll wait 'ere till I see 'im.' And so, pressing her babe to her bosom, she waited, and listened to the music of happy voices that floated from the house into the peaceful square. Did any heavenly-directed influence impel her steps hitherward? And what shall follow for poor Blade-o'-Grass? I do not know, for this is Christmas eighteen hundred and seventy-one, and I cannot see into the future; but as I prepare to lay down my pen, I seem to hear the words that Robert Truefit uttered this morning--'Man, help the poor!'

THE END.

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GOLDEN GRAIN.

By B. L. FARJEON,

AUTHOR OF 'BLADE-O'-GRASS,' 'BREAD-AND-CHEESE AND KISSES,' ETC.

I.

THROUGH COUNTRY ROADS TO SOME GREEN PLEASANT SPOT.

This Christmas I fulfill a purpose which has been in my mind for more than a year. Until now my days and nights have been so much occupied that I have not been able to commence my task. But you will see, by the time you reach the end of these pages--if you have patience to go through them--that I am enjoying a little leisure. The task that I have set myself to perform is both sad and pleasant, and no more fitting time than Christmas could be found for its accomplishment.

Not that it is Christmas at this present moment of writing. But the good season will be here in a month; and when the mistletoe and holly are hanging in cot and mansion, and the hearts of men are beating in harmony, as if one pulse of love and goodwill animated them, I hope, with God's blessing, that my little book will be completed, ready for those who care to read what I have written. It may be that certain persons who appear in these pages will be familiar to some of my readers. I hope they will not be the less welcome on that account. To me the story of their lives is fraught with deep and abiding interest.

How sweet the days are!--ay, although it is winter. Happiness comes from within. Grateful hearts can give light and colour to the gloomiest hours. But the hours for me are not gloomy, and no effort on my part is required to make them bright. This is the sweetest part of my life, both in itself and in the promise that it holds out. Three days ago I was married. My wife is working in the room in which I am writing. I call her to me.

'Rachel!'

She comes to my side. I hold her hand in mine. I look into her face, which is inclined towards me. She cannot see me; she is blind. But she smiles as I gaze at her. She knows the tender thought which impelled me to call her to my side.

I am a clergyman, and my name is Andrew Meadow. My duties lie in one of the most crowded and populous parts of the City, and the stipend I received (for I no longer receive it) in return for my labours was small. Far be it from my intention to make a merit of the fact, but it is necessary that I should mention it. Although I have at times felt myself cruelly hampered for want of means, my stipend was sufficient for my personal wants, and I have even been able now and then to spare a little: but very little. In the clerical, as in many other professions, the payment to the workers is most unequally apportioned; it is almost the rule that those who work the hardest

receive the least. So far as I myself am concerned, I have no complaint to make; but I feel that it is an anomaly that some of those who work in the Church should receive so much that they leave great fortunes behind them, while others receive so little as to be scarcely able to maintain their families. The priests of Him who advised the wealthy to sell all they had, and give to the poor, should have neither more nor less than enough. If they do not recognise in their practical life, and by practical example, that the cause they labour in is the cause of humanity, they are in a measure unfaithful to their trust.

I have no recollection of my father; but I have learned to honour his memory. My mother lived until I was eight years of age. She was a simple good woman--sweetly girlish in her manner to the last--and although she is dust, I have not lost her. She dwells in my heart. There is always to my consciousness a strong affinity between good women; in point of feature, voice, or manner, one reminds you of another; and' I often see in the face of my wife a likeness to that of my mother. I read these last words to my wife; her face lights up with a new happiness, and she says:

'I am glad; very, very glad!'

My wife knows and approves of the task I am engaged upon.

'It will do good, Andrew,' she says; 'I am sure it will.'

In my heart of hearts I hope so. If ever so little good results from these words of mine, if but a seed is sown, if but a little sympathy is roused to action which otherwise would have lain dormant, I shall be amply repaid.

My wife, like myself, is an orphan; unlike myself, she never knew father or mother. But she had, and has, those who stand to her in that relation. In the house of these dear souls I first met her.

Their name is Silver. The maternal instinct is implanted in the breast of every good woman, and it was a great grief to the Silvers that their union was a barren one; but they turned their sorrow to good use. Childless themselves, they, to the full extent of their means, adopted a family of children, and trained them in such a manner as to make their lives a blessing to them and to those around them. I cannot hope to give you an idea of the perfect goodness of the lives of these two dear friends, to whom my present and future happiness is due. I thank God that I know them, and that they account me their friend. Could the example which they have set in their small way and with their small means be followed out on a larger scale, in other places and localities than those in which I labour, a blessing would fall upon the land, and humanity itself would be ennobled. These children, when Mr. and Mrs. Silver adopted them, were babes, unconscious of the perils which lay before them, and only those were selected who had no parents. The time chosen for their adoption was within a week or two of Christmas. They were found in the most miserable courts and alleys in the metropolis; they were surrounded by ignorance, poverty, dirt, and crime. God knows into what form of shame they might have developed, had they been left to grow up in accordance with their surroundings. But a happier fate is theirs. Under the influence of a sweet and wise benevolence they have grown into good and useful men and women, of whom their country may be justly proud.

I made the acquaintance of the Silvers almost as soon as I had entered upon my duties; but circumstances did not bring us together, and I was not very intimate with them until some time afterwards. I had heard much of their goodness, for they are loved in the neighbourhood; every man and woman has a good word for them.

One memorable day in August, more than four years ago now, I received a note from Mrs. Silver, who lived in Buttercup-square, asking me as a great favour to visit her in the evening, if I had the time to spare. I was glad of the opportunity of seeing something of a household of which I had heard so much good, and from that evening our actual friendship commenced. There were present Mr. and Mrs. Silver, and two of their adopted children, Mary and Rachel. They received me cordially, and I felt that I was among friends. I saw that Rachel was blind, and it touched me deeply, at that time and always afterwards, to witness their tender thoughtfulness for the dear girl's calamity. Not, I truly believe, that it is a calamity to her. She has been so wisely trained, and has such strong inherent gratitude for the love which is shed upon her, for the blessings by which she is surrounded, that a repining thought never enters her mind. The effect of her grateful nature is shown in the purity of her face, in the modesty of her every movement. Were I a sculptor, it would be my earnest wish to take her face as a model for Purity, and were I talented enough to be faithful in the reproduction, I am sure that my fame would be made.

'These are only two of our children,' said Mrs. Silver, after I had shaken hands all round; 'we have three more--Ruth and Charley, who took into their heads to fall in love with each other, and are married; and Richard, who is in Canada, and from whom we have received a letter to-day. Ruth has a baby, and she and her husband will be here in half-an-hour.'

'Not the baby, mother!' said Mary.

'No, dear, not the baby. She is only three months old, Mr. Meadow.'

'But such a wise little dear!' added Mary. 'I do believe she begins to understand already.'

Then Mrs. Silver went on to tell me that Mary, the eldest girl--woman now, indeed, twenty-four years of age--held a responsible position in a government telegraph-office; that Charley was a compositor; that Richard was a watchmaker; and that Rachel was as useful as any of them, for she did all the needlework of the house. Rachel was working a black-silk watch-guard for Richard, and it surprised me to see how nimble her fingers were. She was listening intently to every word that passed, and when I first spoke, she paused in her work to pay attention to my voice.

'I want you to know exactly all about us,' said Mrs. Silver, 'and to interest you in us, for I have made up my mind--pray excuse me for it--that you are necessary to our plans. In a word, I wish to enlist you.'

Rachel did a singular thing here--something which made a great impression upon me. She left the room, and returned with a small piece of bread dipped in salt. She held the plate towards me.

'Pray eat this piece of bread, Mr. Meadow,' she said.

I took the bread, and ate it.

'Now, mother,' said Rachel, with a satisfied expression, 'Mr. Meadow is enlisted.'

'Yes,' I said, addressing Mrs. Silver; 'I am one of your soldiers.'

'Ah,' rejoined Mrs. Silver; 'but I want you to be my captain.'

At that moment there was a knock at the street-door.

'That's Mr. Merrywhistle,' cried Rachel, running into the passage, and they all turned their faces to the door to welcome a friend.

'Rachel knows every knock and every step,' observed Mrs. Silver; 'she will know you by your step the next time you visit us.'

I had heard of Mr. Merrywhistle as a large-hearted charitable man, and I was pleased to come into closer acquaintanceship with him. He entered, with his arm around Rachel's waist. An old man with white hair and a kind eye.

Mrs. Silver was the first to speak. 'We have enlisted our curate, Mr. Merrywhistle.'

'I knew,' he said, as he shook hands with me, 'that he had only to be spoken to. I am truly pleased to see you here. Well, children'--turning to the girls--'what is the news?'

The important news was Richard's letter from Canada. Mr. Merrywhistle's face brightened when he heard of it. It was not to be read, however, until Ruth and Charley came in. They arrived earlier than was expected, both of them in a glow of excitement. It was evident that they also had important news to communicate. Ruth, after the first affectionate greetings, went to Rachel's side, and for the rest of the evening the maid and the wife were never apart. A special affection seemed to exist between them. Now that the whole family was assembled, I thought I had never seen a more beautiful group--especially beautiful because the ties that bound them together were made fast by love and esteem. I knew to whom this was due, and I looked towards Mr. and Mrs. Silver with increased respect and admiration.

The first inquiries were about Ruth's baby. The young mother's enthusiasm in answering the inquiries, and in detailing the wonderful doings of her treasure during the last twenty-four hours, warmed my heart; and when, after a long and almost breathless narration, Ruth exclaimed, 'And I really think the darling has a tooth coming!' I thought I had never heard anything more delicious. As for Mr. Merrywhistle, he rubbed his hands with delight, and took Ruth's hands in his, and rubbed those also, and exclaimed, 'Wonderful, wonderful! Really I never did!' a score of times at least. Flushed with pride and pleasure, Ruth as she spoke nodded at the others, now wisely, now merrily, now tenderly, with looks which said, 'Of all happy mothers, I am the happiest!' Never in my life had I seen so exquisite a home picture.

'And now, Charley,' said Ruth, when she had exhausted her budget, although she could have gone through the whole of it again with perfect satisfaction, as if it were something entirely new, 'and now, Charley, tell them.'

What Charley had to tell was simply that he was to be made overseer of the printing establishment in which he was employed. There was an honest ring in his voice as he spoke of his good fortune, and I was convinced that it had been earned by merit.

'That is good news, indeed,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, with his hand on Charley's shoulder. 'Charley, by the time you are thirty, you will be a master printer. Bravo! Bravo!

Mrs. Silver kissed him, without saying a word, and as he drew her face down to his and returned the kiss, and her gray hair mingled with his brown curly locks, he whispered something in her ear which brought a happy sigh from her.

Then came the reading of Richard's letter. Mr. Silver took it from his pocket and opened it,

and there was a general rustle of expectation in the room and a closer drawing together of chairs. He looked around him with a wistful air; the movement reminded him of a time when those who were now men and women grown were children. To this purpose he spoke, in a soft tone, before he commenced to read Richard's letter:

'You remind me, children, you remind me! It brings many happy evenings to my mind. Do you remember *Paul and Virginia* and the *Vicar of Wakefield?*'

This challenge loosened their tongues, and for five minutes they were busy recalling refreshing reminiscences. When memories of times that were sweet and pleasant come to us, they come wrapt in a cloud of solemn tenderness, and the voices of these children were pensive as they spoke.

Behind the year whose seasons we are now enjoying is an arch of overhanging leaves and boughs, receding, as it were, and growing fainter in colour as old age steals upon us. Within this arch of green leaves and boughs live the memories of our past. As, with a wistful yearning to the days that were so sweet, we turn towards the arch, which spans from heaven to earth, it opens, as by the touch of a magic wand, and we see the tender trees that made our young lives green. They are fair and good, and their leaves and branches are dew-laden, though we of whom they are a part are walking to the grave. Some sadness is there always in the mind as we recall these memories, but only to those who believe not in the future, who see no hope in it, do they bring pain and distress.

'When our children were in jackets and pinafores,' said Mrs. Silver to me, 'my husband used to read to them every evening, and the hour was always looked forward to with delight.'

'One night,' said Charley, with a sly look at his wife, 'when we were in the middle of *Paul and Virginia*, and left off where Paul was carrying Virginia in his arms, Ruth said, "Charley, you are like Paul!" "But Where's my Virginia?" I asked. "*I'll* be Virginia!" Ruth cried; "and you can carry me about where you like." That's the way it came about, sir.'

Of course there was much laughter at this reminiscence, to the truth of which they all vouched, and Ruth, with a saucy toss of her head, said,

'Ah, but there's no doubt that I was too little then to know my own mind.'

'I don't know that, Ruth,' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, chuckling; 'I don't know that. It's my opinion you determined to marry Charley long before you were out of short clothes.'

After this innocent fashion they made merry.

'Dear me, dear me, children!' cried Mr. Silver, with assumed petulance. 'How much longer am I to wait with Richard's letter in my hand?'

'Read it now, father,' said Mrs. Silver; and there was a general hush of expectancy.

The letter was a long one, and in it were recounted all the writer's experiences in the land of his adoption. It was written hopefully and confidently, and yet with modesty, and was filled with expressions of love for the dear ones at home. 'Everything before me is bright, and I have no doubt of the future. Not a day passes that I am not assured that I was right in coming, and the conviction that I have those in the old country who love me, and whom I love with all my heart and soul, strengthens me in a wonderful manner. I can see you all as I write, and my heart overflows towards you. Yes, I was right in coming. The old country is over-crowded; there are too many people in it, and every man that goes away gives elbow-room to some one else. When I see the comfortable way in which poor people live here, and compare it with the way they live at home--and above all, when I think of the comfortable future there is before them if they like to be steady--I find myself wishing that hundreds and hundreds of those I used to see in rags, selling matches, begging, and going in and out of the gin-shops, could be sent to this country, where there is room for so many millions. I daresay some of them would tum out bad; but the majority of them, when they saw that by a little steadiness they could make sure of good clothes and good food, would be certain to turn out good. I am making myself well acquainted with the history of this wonderful country, and I mean to try hard to get along in it. You can have no idea what a wonderful place it is; what opportunities there are in it; what room there is in it. Why, you could put our right-little tight-little island in an out-of-the-way corner of it, and the space wouldn't be missed! If I make my fortune here--and I believe I shall--I shall know how to use it, with the example I have had before me all my life. I hope to have the opportunity of doing more good here than I should have been able to do at home, and depend upon it I will, if I have it in my power, for I want to repay my dear mother and father for all their goodness to me. Want to repay you! No, my dearest parents, I do not want to do that; I never could do it, if I tried ever so hard. O, if I could put my arms now round my dear mother's neck, and kiss her as I used to do! But I can kiss her picture and all your pictures. Here's Mary and Ruth and Rachel--I feel inclined to cry as they pass through my hands--and Charley--How are you, Charley?--here you are, all of you, with mother and father, lying before me as I write. Upon my word, I fancy you almost know that I'm speaking to you. God bless you, my dears!... I've got ideas, and there's room to work them out in this new country. And one day, when Mary writes to me that she is going to get married, I shall be able to say, perhaps, to my dear sister, "Here is a purse from runaway Richard to help you and

your husband along in the battle of life." For it is a battle, isn't it, dears? And I mean to fight it, and win. Yes, and win! You'll see if I don't!'

In this way the letter ran on--eagerly, impetuously, lovingly--and there was not a dry eye in the room when Mr. Silver read the last words, 'Ever your own faithful and loving Son and Brother, RICHARD. God bless you all, again and again! Now I shall go to bed, and dream of you.'

I am particular in narrating this incident of the reading of Richard's letter, for Richard, although he will not appear in person in these pages, plays an important part in them on one momentous occasion, as you will see.

The reading being concluded, eager tongues related anecdotes of Richard; and, 'Do you remember, mother, when Richard----?' and, 'Do you remember, Rachel, when we were at Hampstead-heath, and Richard----?' so-and-so and so-and-so. And then, when there was silence, Ruth said pensively, 'I wish Richard could see baby!'

And thus, in various shapes of love, the thoughts of all travelled over the waters to the absent one. I can fancy that the very breezes that waft thitherward, and thence to the mother-land, are sweetened by the loving thoughts which float upon them from one shore to another.

'Mr. Meadow will forgive us,' said Mrs. Silver, 'for detaining him with these family details. We are apt to be selfish in our joys.'

I assured her that I regarded it as a privilege to be admitted to these family confidences, and that I hoped it would not be the last occasion I should share them.

'I hope not, dear sir,' she replied. 'Mary, give me my desk.'

Mary brought the desk, and took her purse from her pocket.

'I have two contributions, mother. A gentleman came to our office to-day, and when he read the paper they allowed me to put up, he gave me five shillings. Jane Plunkett, too, who has only been in the office three weeks, gave me ninepence.'

'I collected four shillings and twopence,' said Charley, 'among the men and boys in the office. Some of the boys gave a halfpenny each; and my master has promised half-a-sovereign.'

'This partly explains our business,' said Mrs. Silver to me; 'and the reason for my asking you to come this evening. We have been collecting subscriptions for the purpose of taking a number of the poorest children in the parish into the country for a day. Richard sent us two pounds a little while ago to give away, and the idea struck us that it could not be better devoted than to such a purpose. So we commenced a fund with his subscription, and we shall write him a full description of the holiday, telling him that it was he who initiated it. Indeed we call it Richard's Day. Nothing could please him better. You, who go so much among the poor, know what numbers of poor children there are who have never seen the country, and to whom the sight of flowers and green fields will be like gentle rain to drooping blades of grass.'

I noticed here that Mr. Merrywhistle started; but he offered no explanation of his sudden movement.

'Whosoever,' I said, 'shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, shall in no wise lose his reward.'

'Thank you, dear sir,' was Mrs. Silver's earnest rejoinder. 'Our reward will be the brightening faces and the innocent delight of these poor little waifs. We have been very successful in our collection, and I think we shall have sufficient money to take a hundred and twenty children. My idea is, that we shall engage vans, and drive as much as possible through country roads to some green pleasant spot, where the children can play, and have dinner and tea. I must tell you that it is only the poorest of the poor who will be chosen, and that in the matter of shoes and stockings there may be here and there a deficiency. But we will endeavour that they shall all have clean faces. Will you join us, and take the command of our ragged army?'

I consented to join them with pleasure, but said that I must be regarded more in the light of a soldier than of a captain. 'We can divide the command,' I said. 'Have you any place where the children can assemble before starting?'

'That is one of my difficulties,' said Mrs. Silver. 'Some of these children will be sure to come not over clean, and I want to make them so before they get into the vans. I have plenty of help in the shape of hands, but I want the room.'

'I can wash some,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, in perfect sincerity. The good old man was like a child in his simplicity.

'I think we women will do it better,' replied Mrs. Silver gaily; 'but we will find you plenty to do.'

'To be sure,' mused Mr. Merrywhistle, 'there are the buns and the fruit----' And lost himself in the contemplation of these duties.

I then told Mrs. Silver that I could obtain the use of a large warehouse, which had been for some time unoccupied, and that she might depend upon my fullest assistance in the arrangement of the details. Their pleasure was unbounded, and I myself felt happier and more truly thankful than I had felt for a long time past. I left the house with Mr. Merrywhistle, and he beguiled the way with stories of the doings of these his dearest friends. He was in the heart of an enthusiastic speech when a poor woman, carrying a child, brushed past us; her head was bent down to the child, and she was murmuring some restful words.

'Dear me!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, suddenly stopping. 'You will excuse me, my dear sir. Goodnight! Good-night!'

Without waiting for a reply, he shook hands warmly with me, and hurried after the woman. They turned the corner of the street almost at the same moment.

I walked home by myself, and thought of the pleasant evening I had spent. The last words I had heard in the house of the Silvers were from Rachel's lips.

'Good-night,' she had said, with her hand in mine. 'I am so glad you came!'

But she was not more glad than I.

II.

THANK GOD FOR A GOOD BREAKFAST!

It is not necessary, nor is it within the limit of these pages, to narrate how the details necessary to make the day in the country a success were got through. Sufficient for my purpose to say that everything was satisfactorily arranged and completed on the evening before the appointed day. The number of applications was very great; ten times as many as we were able to take begged to be allowed to go. Mothers entreated; children looked imploringly into our faces. There were many heartaches, I am sure; but none suffered greater pain than we, the committee, upon whom devolved the duty of making the selection. But we gave pleasure to many; and for the others---- Would there were more workers! Each can do a little, with time or purse, and that little may prove to be so much! Remember what the strongest and most beautiful trees were, once

upon a time. So may a good life be developed even from such a seedling as this.

There was one anxiety which nature alone could allay, if it were kind: the weather. Many a heart beat with mingled hope and fear that night before the day, and many a child's prayer was thought and whispered that the sun would shine its best in the morning. Nature *was* kind, and the sun broke beautifully bright. How we congratulated ourselves, with smiling faces, as we all assembled at seven o'clock in the large warehouse I had borrowed for the occasion! The door was to be opened for the children at half-past seven.

I have mentioned the committee. Let me tell you who they were. All Mrs. Silver's family, of course. Mary and Charley had obtained a holiday, and Ruth was there with her baby, whom the fond mother every now and then consulted with bewitching gravity, and to whom she whispered, in the delicious tones that only a mother's voice can convey, all sorts of confidences about the party. I include in Mrs. Silver's family Mr. Merrywhistle, for he was truly one of them. But Mr. Merrywhistle was a member of the selecting committee for only one day; he had been summarily dismissed and deprived of power, because he found it impossible to say No to a single application. 'My rock ahead, sir,' he whispered to me confidentially, when we reproached him. 'I never *can* get that word out! I *mean* it often, but there's an imp in my throat that invariably changes it into Yes. I ought to know better at my age.' And he shook his head in grave reproof of himself. As Mrs. Silver had warned him, however, we gave him plenty to do. He was unanimously elected chief of the commissariat, and he made himself delightfully busy in the purchase of buns and fruit and lemonade. We were not aware that he was unfit even for this task, until we discovered that he had provided twice as many buns as were necessary. When his blunder was pointed out to him by Mrs. Silver on the ground, he gazed disconsolately at the heap of uneaten buns. 'Dear me!' he said mournfully, 'what is to be done with them? I suppose they must be divided among the children. You see, my dear madam, I am not to be trusted--not to be trusted!' But I am sure I detected a sly twinkle in his eye as he condemned his own shortcomings. In addition to the persons I have mentioned, there were two other members of the committee--to wit, Mr. Robert Truefit and Mr. James (or Jimmy) Virtue; as singular a contrast in individuals as can well be imagined. Robert Truefit I hold in high esteem. He is a fine, and I take pleasure in thinking a fair, representative of the sterling English working-man, with a higher intelligence than is possessed by the majority of his class. He is a married man, with a large and increasing family, and his earnings will probably average a trifle under two pounds a week. With these earnings he supports and 'brings up' his family in a manner which commands admiration. His children are likely to be a credit to the State; it is such as he who form the sound bone and muscle of a great nation. Jimmy Virtue is of a lower grade. Outwardly a cynic, one who sneers at goodness, but who has, to my knowledge, occasionally been guilty of an act of charity. He kept a leaving-shop in one of the worst thoroughfares in the locality where my duties lie. Everything about him outwardly was unprepossessing; the wrinkles in his face seemed to snarl at you; he had a glass eye, and he was ill-dressed and ostensibly ill-mannered to those in a better position than himself.

Such was Jimmy Virtue, of whom you will find, as you proceed, some exciting record. You may reasonably ask. How came such a man on your committee? Both Robert Truefit and Mr. Merrywhistle were his friends, and took pleasure in his society. This surprised me at first, but not afterwards. I found that, to read his character properly, it was necessary to read between the lines. Having lived amongst misery-mongers all his life, he was well acquainted with the class from which our children were to be chosen; and, as it proved, his services were most useful to us.

A word about Rachel in connection with the selection. Instances occurred where opinion was divided as to the suitability of candidates; it was our natural desire to choose those who were most deserving, and it was impossible to take them haphazard, as they presented themselves. Here was a mother with two children, pleading, entreating, imploring that they might be taken. Jimmy Virtue shook his head. Robert Truefit, with a quiet motion, also gave an adverse vote. We--the Silvers and I--were in favour of the applicants, but we felt that, the two dissentients were more fitted to judge than we. It seemed that there was something worse than usual against the mother, whose face grew almost wickedly sullen as she observed signs of a refusal in Truefit and Virtue.

'Let Rachel decide,' said Mrs. Silver.

We all experienced a feeling of relief at this suggestion. The woman and the children went aside with Rachel, and kept together for fully twenty minutes, while we continued the business of the hour. I, furtively watching the group in the corner of the large room, saw Rachel sit down and take the two miserable children by the hand. Then the woman went towards Rachel, and gradually the sullen expression in her face softened; and shortly afterwards she was on her knees by the side of the blind maid, listening and speaking with tears in her eyes. Not a word reached me; but when the interview was ended, Rachel rose and walked towards us with a child on each side of her. Behind her was the mother, hiding her face, as if ashamed of her tears. As Rachel stood before us, looking upwards, with her face of purity and goodness, clasping the ragged children to her, a light seemed to fall upon her in my eyes--a light which touched with merciful glance the figure of the wretched mother in the rear.

'I am to decide?' said Rachel, gently and earnestly.

'Yes, my dear.'

'Then we will take these little ones with us. They will be very good.'

'Very well, my dear.'

And their names were put down and instructions given to the weeping mother. The woman showed no gratitude to us; but as she turned to go, with a lingering look at Rachel, the blind girl held out her hand. The woman seized it, kissed it, and muttered, 'God love yer, miss!' We were all satisfied with Rachel's decision. Even Jimmy Virtue shut his useful eye and glared out of his glass one, that being, as I understood the action, the only mode he could find of taking a clear view of the difficulty.

Among those who were chosen were no fewer than seven children, maimed and deformed; one could not walk; another used crutches, and proved to be one of the most active of the whole party, much to our surprise, for when he applied, he appeared to be very lame indeed. One little fellow presented himself without a guardian; he was about six years of age, and had the largest and roundest eyes I ever saw in a child. To all our questions about his parents he gave no answer; he only stared at us.

'What is your name?'

He found his tongue. 'Jacky Brown.'

'And what do you want?'

'I wants to 'ave a ride and see a lot o' trees.'

'Who told you to come to us?'

'Old Rookey.'

'And what did Old Rookey tell you to say?'

'Old Rookey ses, he ses. You go, Jacky, and arks 'em to take yer to 'ave a ride and see the trees. And Old Rookey ses, he ses, Don't you come away, Jacky, till they puts your name down.'

Who Old Rookey was we were unable to discover. Jimmy Virtue recognised the child, and told us his mother was in prison, and that he didn't know how the little fellow lived. There was something so interesting about Jacky, that we promised to take him. We wrote instructions on a piece of paper, and gave it to him, telling him to give it to Old Rookey.

'You must come very clean, Jacky.'

'I'll tell Old Rookey,' he said. 'He knows wot's wot.'

Long before half-past seven o'clock on the holiday morning the children and their friends began to arrive. The committee of selection had given them to understand that they were to have breakfast before they came. At the back of the warehouse was a recess screened off by sacks hung over a line, in which were ample supplies of water, soap, and towels; and the girls were ready to do the washing, with their sleeves tucked up and aprons on to save their dresses. The process was this: we, the men, stood at the door and received the visitors, taking their names and otherwise identifying them, so that no deceit should be practised. Each child, as he established his right of entrance, was passed into the room, where, if he were not clean and tidy, he was made so, as far as possible, by the women. Some of them, I must admit, required washing badly; but when the work was done, and the children stood in lines along the benches, their bright eager faces and restless limbs formed a picture which dwelt vividly in my mind for a long time afterwards. Jacky Brown was very punctual, and, contrary to our expectation, very clean. We looked for some person answering to the description we had formed of Old Rookey, but we were not successful in finding him. Jacky had something to say to us.

'Old Rookey ses, he ses, you'll open yer eyes when yer sees me.'

And Jacky pointed to his well-polished face and held out his clean hands. We thought we would improve the occasion.

'We are very pleased with you, Jacky. It's much nicer to be clean than dirty, isn't it?'

But Jacky was dubious.

'It gets inter yer eyes, and 'urts,' he said.

Soap was evidently a disagreeable novelty to him.

Mrs. Silver and the girls were putting on their bonnets and getting ready for the start, when a serious innovation in our programme occurred. The guilty person was one of the most esteemed members of our own body.

'Children,' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, suddenly stepping in front of them, 'have you had breakfast?'

A mighty shout arose of 'No!' but whether those who gave evidence were witnesses of truth I dare not venture to say.

'Then you shall have some,' cried Mr. Merrywhistle, with a triumphant look at us; but there was conscious guilt in his gaze.

The 'Hoorays!' that were sent forth in voices shrill and gruff formed a fine pæan certainly, but scarcely recompensed us at the moment for the loss of time. But it all turned out splendidly. Mr. Merrywhistle had planned his artifice skilfully, and, in less than seven minutes, buns and hot milk in mugs were in the hands of every member of our ragged crew. The moment we found we were compromised, we rushed to assist, and (although we were sure we were wrong in encouraging the traitor) we shook hands heartily with Mr. Merrywhistle, whose beaming face would have been sufficient excuse for fifty such innovations. I am not certain that, when the children were served, Ruth and Rachel did not take the good old fellow behind the screen of sacks where the washing had been done, and kiss him; for he came forth from that recess with an arm round the waist of each of the girls, and with his face beaming more brightly than ever.

In the middle of breakfast the vans rattled up to the door; they were decorated with bright ribbons and flags, and the drivers had flowers in their coats; the very horses wore rosettes. There were five vans, and they presented so gay an appearance that the street was filled with sight-gazers. Immediately the vans drew up--which they did smartly, as if they knew what they were about, and that this was a day of days--the children paused from their eating to give vent to another cheer, and another, and another. Their faces flushed, their little hands trembled, their restless limbs shifted and danced, and took part in the general animation. As for ourselves---- Well, we paused also, and smiled at each other, and Ruth held baby's face to Charley to kiss.

'A fine sermon this, sir,' said Robert Truefit to me.

'Indeed, indeed,' I assented. 'Better than any that tongue can preach.'

There was no need to tell the children to hurry with their meal; they were too eager to be on the road.

'Now, children, have you finished?'

'Yes, sir! Yes, marm! Yes, miss!'

'Then thank God for a good breakfast!'

The simple thanksgiving was uttered by all with earnest meaning. Then out they trooped to the vans, the sight-gazers in the street waving their arms and hats at us. The deformed children were placed in advantageous positions, so that they could see the roads through which we were to drive, and were given into the charge of other children, who promised to take care of them; Jacky Brown had a seat on the box; we took our places on the vans; the drivers looked seriously at their reins; the horses shook their heads; and all was ready. If I had the space at my command, and were gifted with the power, what scenes I could describe here of mothers, sisters, friends, who showed their gratitude to us in various ways as we prepared to start! Not all of them as low as by their outward presence you would judge them to be. Written history--notwithstanding that we pin our faith to it, that we pride ourselves upon it, that we strive to shape our ends according to its teaching--is to unwritten history, in its value of example, as a molehill to a mountain; even the written history of great national conflicts, which strew the cornfields with dead and dying, upon whom we throw that sham halo called Glory, as compared with the unwritten history of courts and alleys, which we push out of sight with cruel carelessness.

III.

THEY LISTENED WITH ALMOST BREATHLESS ATTENTION TO EVERY WORD THAT FELL FROM HER LIPS.

And so, with our mud-larks and street arabs, we rode out of the busy city, away from the squalid walls in the shadow of which the bad lessons which lead naturally to bad lives are graven on the hearts of the helpless young. It was the end of August, and the corn was being cut. The children sniffed the sweet-smelling air, and asked one another if it wasn't prime. Every turn of the road through which we gaily trotted opened new wonders to our ragged crew; and we were kept busy answering the torrent of questions that were poured upon us. What's that? A field of clover. Three cheers for the clover. Fields of barley, wheat, oats, all were cheered for lustily.

What's them fellers diggin' up? Potatoes. Hurrah for the taters! Hallo! here's a bank of lavender, filling the air with fragrance. Most of the children were noisy in their expressions of delight; but a few sat still, staring in solemn wonder. The golden corn which the scythe had not yet touched--how it bowed and waved and whispered in the breeze that lightly swept across it! How few of the uncultured children could be made to understand that bread--to them so scarce and precious--was made from these golden wavelets! A windmill! Another! The huge fans sailed slowly round. 'Here,' we said, 'the corn is ground to flour.' 'Wonder what makes the flour so white!' whispered a mudlark to his mate; ''t ought to be yaller.' Now we were driving along a narrow lane, between hedges; the sounds of music came from our rear. I stood up and looked. Some twenty or thirty yards behind the last van was a spring-cart, with a band of musicians in it. What cheers the children gave for 'the musicianers'! Their cup of happiness was full to the brim. I caught Mr. Merrywhistle's eye: it fell guiltily beneath my gaze; but as I smiled with grateful approval at him, he brightened up, and rubbed his hands joyously. Every popular air that the musicians played was taken up by a full chorus of voices. Here and there, along the country roads, housewives and children came out to look at us. There was a greeting for all of them from our noisy youngsters, and they greeted us in return. One woman threw a shower of apples into the vans, and received in return the acknowledgment, 'Bravo, missis! You're a good sort, you are!' At half-past ten we reached our destination--a very pretty spot, with a wood adjacent, and a meadow to play in. Everything had been judiciously arranged, and, marshalling the children, we acquainted them with the programme. They were free for two hours to do as they pleased. They might play their games where they liked in forest or meadow. The band would play in the meadow. But a promise was to be exacted from them. They were to be kind to every living creature they came across; they were to kill nothing. Would they promise? 'Yes, sir; yes, marm; yes, miss! We won't 'urt nothink!' Very well, then. In two hours the horn would sound, three times. Like this. Listen. The musician who played the horn gave the signal. When they heard that again they would know that dinner was ready; they were not to go too far away, else they would not hear it, and would lose their dinner. 'No fear, master!' they shouted. 'Let's give three cheers,' one of them cried. 'And look 'ere! The boys fust, and the gals arterwards.' So the cheers were given as directed, and the boys laughed heartily at the girls' piping voices. 'Now, then, you all understand---- But stop! what is this?' Here was Mr. Merrywhistle again, with another of his triumphantly-guilty looks, introducing new features into the programme. Two of the biggest boys were carrying a trunk towards us, and when it was opened, out came balls, and traps and bats, and rounder-sticks, and kites, and battledores and shuttlecocks, and skipping-ropes. The shout that arose as these things were given out was mightier than any that had preceded it, as the boys and girls, like wild birds released from prison, rushed off with their treasures.

'I suppose,' said Mrs. Silver, with the kindest of looks towards Mr. Merrywhistle, 'there is no reclaiming you.'

'I'm too old, I'm too old,' he replied deprecatingly. 'I hope you don't mind.'

Mind! Why, he had done just the very things that we had forgotten, and the very best things too, to keep the youngsters out of mischief. We had plenty to do. Here and there was a solitary one, who knew nobody in all that wild band, wandering by himself, and casting wistful glances at the other children who were playing. Here was a little fellow who had lost his brother, crying lustily. Here was a shy timid girl, absolutely without a friend. All these human strays--strays even among the forlorn crew of youngsters who were tasting a pure enjoyment for the first time in their lives--we collected together and formed into bands, instructing them how to play, and taking part in their games until they were sufficiently familiarised with each other to get along without help. The children who were unable to run about we arranged comfortably together in a place where they had a clear view of the sports. Rachel, by tacit consent, took this group under her care; and not long afterwards I saw her seated in the midst of them, and heard her telling them, in admirable language and with admirable tact, the best of those fairy stories which delight our childhood's days. Blind as Rachel was, she could see deeper into these children's hearts than we. They listened with almost breathless attention to every word that fell from her lips--and every word was sweet--and saw the scenes she painted, and learnt the lessons she taught. Among all our children there was no happier group than this over which she presided; and many whose limbs were straight and strong approached the deformed group, and listened in delight and wonder. During the whole of that day I noticed how the most forlorn and friendless of the children congregated about Rachel. Perhaps they saw in her blindness something akin to their own condition, and eyes that might have been mournful grew soft and tender beneath the influence of her sightlessness and kindly help. One of the most favourite pastimes of the day was dancing to the music of the band. Such dancing! Girls went round and round in the waltz with a solemn enjoyment in their faces most wonderful to witness; boys, more demonstrative, executed amazing steps, and flung their arms and their legs about in an extraordinary manner. There were two champion dancers--boys of about twelve years of age--whose capers and comicalities attracted large audiences. These boys, by some means had secreted about their persons two immense pairs of 'nigger' shoes, which were now tied on to their feet. They danced, they sang, they asked conundrums of each other with amusing seriousness; and I was privately and gravely informed that they intended to become negro minstrels, and were saving up to buy a banjo. Dinner-time came, and the horn was blown. Such a scampering never was seen, and dull eyes lightened, and bright eyes grew brighter, at the sight of the well-stocked tables. If it were necessary, I could vulgarise this description by mention of certain peculiarities--forms of expression and such-like--which existed among our guests; but it is not necessary. No one's enjoyment was marred, and every youngster at our tables was perfectly happy. The children

stood while I said grace. I said but a very few words, and that the brevity of the grace was appreciated was evidenced by a remark I overheard. 'That's proper! I thort the parson-chap was goin' to pray for a hour.' The children ate very heartily, and here and there, with the younger ones, we had to exercise a salutary check. But the older boys and girls were beyond our control. 'Tuck away, Sal!' cried one. 'It'll be all over to-morrer!' When the children--dinner being finished--were, at play again, we had a little leisure. Mrs. Silver, seated on a bench, looked around upon her family and friends, and said, with a satisfied smile,

'I really am tired, my dears.'

IV.

FOR MERCY'S SAKE, TELL ME! WHOSE VOICE WAS IT I HEARD JUST NOW?

I also was tired. I had been up very late three nights during the week, and on the night previous to this day I had had only four hours' sleep. Glad of the opportunity to enjoy a little quietude, I strolled from where the children and my friends were congregated, and walked towards the rise of a hill on the other side of which was a wooded knoll, where I supposed I should be quite alone. There it was my intention to stretch myself, and rest for fully half an hour by my watch.

The day had continued gloriously fine, and there was no sign of change. I had much to think about. An event of great importance in my private history was soon to take place, and I knew it, and was only waiting for the time. It made me sad to think that when that time came I should probably lose a friend--not an ordinary friend, but one to whom I owed my education and my present position. It will find record in its proper place, however, and needs no further reference here. I had mounted the hill, and was descending towards the clump of trees, when I saw, at a little distance, three persons sitting on the ground. One of them I knew. It was Mr. Merrywhistle, and he was attending to the wants of a very poorly-dressed girl, who was eating her dinner, which it was evident Mr. Merrywhistle had brought to her from the tables. There was a large quantity of wild flowers by the girl's side, which I judged she had gathered during the day, and in the midst of these flowers sat a child between two and three years of age, towards whom the girl

directed many a look of full-hearted love. The face of the child fixed my attention; it was a dull, pale, mournful face, and there was an expression of weariness in the eyes which hurt me to see.

To detect Mr. Merrywhistle in an act of kindness did not surprise me; and yet I wondered how it was that he was here, in a certain sense clandestinely, with this poor girl, who had the look of the London streets upon her. Not wishing, however, to disturb the group, I walked slowly in the opposite direction; the conformation of the hill favoured me, so that I was very soon hidden from their sight, although really I was but a very few yards from them. I threw myself upon the ground, my thoughts dwelling upon the scene of which I had been an unseen witness. It struck me as strange that Mr. Merrywhistle and this poor girl were evidently well acquainted with one another; their familiar bearing convinced me of that. Then by what singular chance was it, or was it by chance at all, that they had met here in this sweet spot, so far away from her natural haunts? For there was no mistaking the type to which this poor girl belonged; it can be seen, multiplied and multiplying, in all our crowded cities, but not in country places such as this in which we held our holiday. Could this be the same girl and child, I asked myself, whom Mr. Merrywhistle followed when he left me so abruptly on the night we walked together from Mrs. Silver's house? But presently my thoughts wandered to more refreshing themes. The many beautiful pictures of sweet charity and unselfishness I had witnessed this day came before me again, and I thanked God that my country held such noble specimens of true womanhood as Mrs. Silver, Mary, Ruth, and Rachel. And then, knowing full well the history of these girls, I contrasted their present lives with that of the poor girl in Mr. Merrywhistle's company. In the midst of my musings, and while I was contemplating the picture (to which my thoughts had wandered) of Rachel standing before us, as she had stood three days ago, with a child on each side of her, and the weeping mother behind--as I was contemplating this picture, and weaving idealisms about it, the sound of a harsh voice reached me, and dissolved my fancies. I recognised the voice immediately--it belonged to Jimmy Virtue, and it came from the direction where Mr. Merrywhistle and the poor girl were. Not quite trusting Jimmy Virtue, as I did not at that time, I rose to my feet, and walked towards the group, the disposition of which was now completely changed. The girl was standing in a half-frightened, half-defiant attitude, pressing her child to her breast; in the eager haste with which she had snatched the child from the ground, she had clutched some wild-flowers, and these were trailing to her feet; Jimmy Virtue, with head inclined, was holding up an angry finger; and Mr. Merrywhistle, with an expression of pain and distress on his features, seemed by his attitude to be mediating between them. The girl was the first to see me, and she turned to fly, as if every human face she saw were a new terror to her, or as if in me she recognised a man to be avoided. I hastened to her side, and laid my hand on her arm. With a convulsive shiver, but without a word and without resistance, she bowed her head to her baby's neck, and cowered to the ground, like a frightened animal. And there she crouched, a poor forlorn thing, ragged, defiant, panting, fearing, with the world sitting in judgment upon her.

* * * * *

Bear with me a little while. The memories connected with this poor girl fill my heart to overflowing. They belong not only to her and her mournful history; she is but one of many who are allowed to drift as the careless days glide by. If you do not enter into my feelings, bear with me, I pray.

And I must not flinch. To be true unto others, you must be true to yourself. My conscience, no less than my heart, approves of the course I pursued with reference to certain passages in this girl's career. Many who hold a high place in the world's esteem will differ from me, I know; some, who look with self-righteous eyes upon certain bad features in the lower social life of the people, and whose belief inclines them to touch not lest they be defiled, will condemn me because I did not, from the very first, attempt to turn this girl's heart with prayer, believing themselves in its full efficacy for all forms of trouble. But let them consider that this girl-woman was already grown to strength; veined in her veins were hurtful fibres which once might have been easily removed, but which, by force of surrounding circumstance, were now so deeply rooted in her nature that they could only be weakened by patience, forbearance, tender handling, and some exercise of wise benevolence. Here was a mind to be dealt with utterly ignorant of those teachings, the following out of which renders life healthful and pleasant to contemplate; but here at the same time was a hungry stomach to be dealt with--a hungry stomach continually crying out, continually craving, which no words of prayer could satisfy. And I, a clergyman, who preach God's word in full belief and believe fully in His mercy and goodness, say to those who condemn for this reason, that words of prayer--otherwise lip-worship, and outward observances according to set forms--are, alone and in themselves, valueless and unacceptable in the eyes of God. Self-accusation, self-abasement, pleadings for mercy, unaccompanied by good deeds, go for naught. A merciful action, a kindly impulse practically acted upon--these are the prayers which are acceptable in His eyes.

* * * * *

I looked around for an explanation.

'Ah,' exclaimed Jimmy Virtue, threateningly, ''ere's the parson! He'll tell you whether you're right or wrong.'

A proof that I, the parson, had been set up by Jimmy Virtue as a man to be feared. It was natural that the poor girl should shrink from my touch. Mr. Merrywhistle drew me aside.

'It is all my fault,' he said, in a tone of great emotion. 'I smuggled her here.'

'How did she come?' I asked. 'She was not in any of the vans.'

'I smuggled her in the cart that brought the provisions, and I bade the driver not to come too close to us, for fear poor Blade-o'-Grass should be discovered and sent back.'

'Poor who?'

'Blade-o'-Grass. That's the only name she has. It came into my mind the first night I saw you in Mrs. Silver's house. Mrs. Silver, you remember, was telling you the plan of this holiday, and was saying that you, who go so much among the poor, knew that there were numbers of poor children who had never seen the country, and that the sight of flowers and green fields would be to them like gentle rain to drooping blades of grass.'

'I remember well.'

'I don't know if Mrs. Silver used the expression purposely, but I thought immediately of this poor girl, whom everybody round about Stoney-alley, where she lives, knows as Blade-o'-Grass, and I thought what a fine thing it would be for her if I could smuggle her here with her baby, so that she might enjoy a day in the country, which she never set eyes on until now. She danced for joy, sir--yes, sir, she did!--when I asked her if she would like to come. And she has enjoyed herself so much, and has kept out of the way according to my instructions. See, Mr. Meadow, she has been gathering wildflowers, and has been talking and singing to her baby in a way it has made me glad to hear. Poor girl! poor girl! I have known her from a child, and, if you will forgive me for saying it, I think I almost love her. Although she has always stood in her own light--always, always! It was wrong of me to bring her here, but I did it for the best I have been told often I was doing wrong when I have foolishly thought I was doing good.'

'You have done no wrong,' I said emphatically, 'in bringing that poor girl here. I honour you for it. And now tell me what has occurred to spoil her pleasure, and what is the cause of Mr. Virtue's anger.'

'Why, you see, Mr. Meadow, that Jimmy Virtue, of whose rough manners you must not take any notice--you must not judge harshly of him because of them--has taken a liking to the girl.'

'Well?'

'He has been kind to her, I feel certain, though you'll never get him to acknowledge it--indeed, he'll tell you fibs to your face without ever a blush--and he has been trying for a long time to persuade her to come and live with him. She has persistently refused, and now he is angry with her. He is an old man and a lonely man, and he feels it perhaps; but, anyhow, it is as much for her good as his that he makes the offer. He says he will look upon her as a daughter, and it would be better for her than her present lot.'

'Why does she refuse?'

Mr. Merrywhistle hesitated.

'Tell me all,' I said, 'plainly and without disguise.'

'Well, Mr. Meadow, nothing on earth can induce her to leave Tom Beadle.'

'Who is he? What is he?'

'He is a thief, and the father of her child.'

Mr. Merrywhistle's voice trembled from sadness as he spoke these words. I understood it all now. To my grief, I knew what would be the answer to my next question; but it must be asked and answered.

'Is she married?'

'No.'

We were but a few paces from Jimmy Virtue and Blade-o'-Grass, and our conversation had been carried on in a low tone. I turned towards them. Jimmy Virtue, in a heat, was wiping his glass eye. Blade-o'-Grass had not stirred from her crouching attitude. She might have been carved in stone, so motionless had she remained, and to discover any signs of life in her, you would have had to put your head down to her beating heart So she cowered among the wildflowers, with sweet breezes about her, with beautiful clouds above her.

'Now, parson,' said Jimmy Virtue, in a menacing tone, 'per'aps you'll tell that gal whether she's right or wrong!'

'I must first know,' I said, striving to induce gentleness in him by speaking gently myself, 'what it is I am to give an opinion upon.'

'I know that. Mind you, I ain't overfond o' parsons, as a rule, and I ain't overfond o' words, unless there's a reason for 'em. You see that gal there--she's a pretty article to look at, ain't she? Judge for yourself; you can tell pretty well what she is by 'er clothes and 'er babby, though she does 'ide 'er face. She's not so bad as you might make 'er out to be, that I must say; for I ain't a-goin' to take advantage of 'er. But you may make 'er out precious bad, what with one thing and another, and not be far wrong arter all. She's got no 'ome to speak of; she's got no clothes to speak of; she's got no babby that she's got a right to. Well, I orfer that gal a 'ome in my leavin'-shop. I say to 'er, You can come and live along o' me, and I'll look arter you like a daughter; and I would, for I'm a man o' my word, though my word don't amount to much. Now what does she say, that gal, as couldn't lay 'er 'and on a 'arf-a-crown as she's got a right to, if it was to save 'er life--what does she say to my orfer? She says. No, and says as good as I'll see you further fust! Now, tell 'er whether she's right or wrong--tell 'er once and for all. You're a parson, and she'll believe you, per'aps.'

I beckoned him away, for I knew that his harsh tones no less than his words hurt the girl.

'Our mutual friend, Mr. Merrywhistle,' I said----

'That's right; our muchel friend, Mr. Merrywhistle. Though he's too soft-'earted, mind you! I've told 'im so a 'underd times.'

----'Has made me acquainted with some part of this poor girl's story. Don't speak so loudly and so angrily. She hears every word you say.'

'I know that,' he growled. 'She's got the cunnin' of a fox.'

'And, after all, she has a right to choose for herself; you can have no real claim upon her.'

'She ain't got no right,' he said vehemently, 'to choose for 'erself, and if I ain't got no claim on 'er, I'd like to know who 'as! I've knowed 'er from the time as she was a babby. She growed up almost under my eyes. She's played on my doorstep when she was a little 'un, and 'as been shoved off it many and many a time. I knowed 'er mother--I knowed 'er father, the mean thief! as run away afore she was born. No claim! Ain't that no claim, I'd like to know? And don't I know what she'll come to if she goes on much longer as she's a-goin' on now? It's a-comin' to the end, I tell you, and I want to stop it! Why, Tom Beadle, the man as she's a'----I put my finger to my lips, out of compassion for the poor girl----'the man as she ain't married to, was took up this mornin' by the peelers afore my very eyes'---- I caught his wrist, and pointing to Blade-o'-Grass, stopped his further speech. A moan came from the girl's lips, a shiver passed over her form, like a despairing wave. She struggled to her feet, and throwing her hair from her eyes, looked distractedly about

her.

'O, why did I come?' she cried.

'Why did I come? Which is the road to London?'

And she ran a few steps wildly, but I ran after her and stopped her. She struggled to escape from me.

'Let me go!' she beseeched.

'Let me go! I want to git to London! I must git there at once! O Tom! Tom!'

'You would not get there tonight,' I said; 'it is eighteen miles away. You would never be able to walk so far with your baby. You must wait and go with us; we shall start in an hour.'

She shrank from my grasp and moaned upon the ground, and pressed her child closer to her bosom, with sighs and sobs and broken words of desolation.

'O baby! baby! baby! Tom's took up agin! What shall we do? O, what shall we do?'

Something like a vapour passed over my mind as the wail of this desolate girl fell upon my ear. I seemed to 'recognise in its tones something akin to the fond accents of a happier mother than she. I did not like to think of the resemblance, and I tried to shake off the impression that had stolen upon me; but it remained with me. It was in vain that I attempted to console Blade-o'-Grass; she paid no heed to my words. I was a stranger to her then.

'Your news is true?' I said to Jimmy Virtue.

'As I was comin' to the room this mornin',' he replied, 'I saw Tom Beadle with the peeler's grip on 'im, and the peeler told me he was wanted agin.'

'What for?'

'The old thing--pickin' pockets.'

This was a sad episode in our holiday-making. I could not leave Blade-o'-Grass alone. In her despair, in her belief that the hands and hearts of all were against her, she would be certain to take the first opportunity of escaping from us, and would thus bring further trouble on herself. I looked towards Mr. Merrywhistle; his face was turned from me. I called to him, and he came. I had a thought which I resolved to act upon. I desired him to keep by the side of Blade-o'-Grass until I returned, and I went at once in search of Rachel. The musicians were doing their best, merrily, and the children were dancing and playing joyously.

'This is a very happy day,' said Mrs. Silver, as I approached her; 'see how they are enjoying themselves, poor things. It will be a great remembrance for them.'

Her tone changed when she saw the anxiety in my face; she laid her hand upon my arm.

'You are in trouble.'

'Yes,' I said; 'but make your mind easy. It is nothing at all connected with our children. I will tell you about it by and by. Where is Rachel?'

'There, helping to get tea ready. You must come and have a cup, Mr. Meadow. 'It will refresh you.'

I said that I would, and I asked if she would spare Rachel for a little while. Yes, she answered, with a solicitous look. I smiled at her to reassure her. As I walked towards Rachel, I passed Ruth; she was suckling her baby. A white kerchief covered her bosom and her baby's face, and she raised a corner of it to whisper some endearing words to her treasure. Again the vapour passed over my mind. I trembled as I detected the resemblance in her voice to the voice of the hapless mother I had just left. But I was now close to Rachel. She smiled at me, knowing my step. I remember that that was the first occasion on which I called her by her Christian name.

'Rachel, I want you to help me. Mrs. Silver says she can spare you.'

Rachel took off her apron, and gave me her hand, and I led her to where Blade-o'-Grass was lying. As briefly as I could I told her all, and I asked her to comfort Blade-o'-Grass.

'Indeed, indeed, I will try, Mr. Meadow!' she said earnestly.

'We must not lose her; she must go back to London with us. In her present state of mind she believes every one to be against her. But she will trust you, Rachel, because----'

'Because I am blind,' she said sweetly. 'I will strive to do my best.' She paused a moment, and added, 'Is it not a good thing, Mr. Meadow, that I cannot see?'

I could not answer her; my emotion stopped my utterance. I left her with Blade-o'-Grass, and

Mr. Merrywhistle and I stood apart from them.

'Give me your hand, my dear,' Rachel said. Blade-o'-Grass made no movement 'My dear, I am blind!'

Involuntarily, as if the claim were sisterly, and could not be denied, the hand of Blade-o'-Grass was held out to Rachel, and Rachel clasped it, and sat down by her side. What passed during the next few moments I did not hear; but I saw that Rachel was speaking to Blade-o'-Grass, and presently Blade-o'-Grass's baby was in the blind girl's arms, and the mother was looking wonderingly into her face. I acknowledged the wisdom of Rachel's act; by that tie she held Blade-o'-Grass to her. But up to this time Blade-o'-Grass had not spoken; Rachel had not won a word from her lips.

'Let us join our friends,' said Mr. Merrywhistle; 'we can leave them safely together now.'

'One moment,' I answered; 'I am waiting for something.'

What I was waiting for came presently. Rachel was fondling the child's hand, and holding it to her lips, when Blade-o'-Grass spoke. A look of terror flashed into Rachel's face. I was by her side in an instant, my hand in hers. She clung to it, and raised herself to her feet.

'Tell me,' she whispered, in a tone of suffering; 'for mercy's sake, tell me! Whose voice was it I heard just now?'

'It was Blade-o'-Grass that spoke,' I replied; 'the unhappy girl I told you of. She is younger than you are, my dear, and you hold her child in your arms. Comfort her, Rachel; she needs comfort sorely!'

'I have heard her voice before,' said Rachel, with sobs, 'and it reminds me--O, it reminds me of one I love so dearly, so dearly!'

'The greater reason, my dear, that you should aid her in her affliction. Her heart is bleeding, Rachel. Do not alarm her unnecessarily--she suspects everybody but you; she is looking towards us now, with struggling doubt in her face. Be strong, for pity's sake!'

She needed no other encouragement; I left them together, and when the time for our departure to London arrived, they were still sitting side by side. An expression of solemn pity rested on Rachel's face. She kissed Blade-o'-Grass and the child before they parted, and asked Blade-o'-Grass to kiss her. The poor girl did so, with grateful tears. Then I gave Blade-o'-Grass into the charge of Mr. Merrywhistle, and led Rachel to her friends. But only to Ruth did she cling; she clasped her arms round her sister's neck, and sobbed quietly on her shoulder.

'Why, Rachel!' exclaimed Ruth. 'Rachel, my dearest!'

'Let me be, Ruth dear!' sobbed Rachel. 'Let me be! Do not say anything to me. I shall be better presently.'

It was no easy matter getting our children together. We had to call them by name, and count them; it was an anxious task, and it occupied a longer time than we anticipated. And in the end there was one missing--Jacky Brown. None of the boys or girls could tell us where he was, and we were fully a quarter of an hour hunting for him. We were in great trouble, but at length we discovered him, with such a dirty face! sitting under one of the largest trees in the wood.

'Come, come, Jacky,' Mrs. Silver said, 'this isn't good of you. Didn't you hear the horn?'

'Yes, I 'eerd the 'orn, but I ain't a-comin',' was his confident reply.

'O Jacky, Jacky!' she remonstrated.

'I ain't a-goin' 'ome any more. I'm a-goin' to stop under this tree as long as ever I live, and I don't want to move.'

We absolutely had to use a little force with him, and while we carried the little fellow to the vans, he cried again and again that he didn't want to go home any more. References to Old Rookey had no effect upon him; he wanted to live among the trees always, and he was passionately grieved because he could not have his way. The children sang all along the road to London; and I was glad to see that the majority of them had bunches of wild-flowers in their hands. And thus the day ended happily--for all but one.

'We shall sleep well to-night,' said Mrs. Silver, with a satisfied sigh.

I did not, although I was thoroughly tired out.

V.

YOU'RE A PARSON, SIR, AND I PUT IT TO YOU. WHAT DO *YOU* SAY TO PARTING MOTHER AND CHILD?

It was not alone because Mr. Merrywhistle urged me that I took an interest in Blade-o'-Grass. I was impelled to do so by certain feelings of my own with reference to the poor girl. I became nervously desirous to learn her history, and I questioned Mr. Merrywhistle, He could tell me nothing, however, but the usual tale attached to such unhappy human waifs--a tale which I had heard, with slightly-varying forms of detail, many times before. I desired to learn something more definite--something which I scarcely dared to confess, even to myself, working as I was in the dark, and with only a vague impression or a morbid fancy for a basis. But then came the thought that Rachel shared the impression with me, and I continued my inquiries.

'Jimmy Virtue knows more about Blade-o'-Grass than I do,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, 'It was through him I first became acquainted with her.'

Jimmy Virtue was not very communicative; it was not in his nature to take easily to new friends.

'But you yourself,' I urged, 'spoke of her mother and father as if you knew them intimately.'

'Did I?' he replied. 'Ah! I ain't over-particular what I say sometimes, so you must put it down to that. You see, they were not long in this alley afore the father cut away, and the mother--well, she died! So what should I know of 'em? The mother was buried afore the kids was three weeks old.'

'The children!' I exclaimed, my heart beating fast at this discovery. 'Then the poor mother had twins?'

'Yes, there was two on 'em; as if one warn't enough, and more than enough! And then a woman--Mrs. Manning her name was--comes round a-beggin' for the babbies, and a nice row she kicked up about it. Arksed me what I'd lend on 'em--as if babbies warn't as cheap as dirt, and a deal sight more troublesome!'

'These twins, Mr. Virtue--were they both girls?'

'Yes, they was both gals, I 'eerd.'

'What became of the other child?'

I asked eagerly.

'What other?' demanded Jimmy Virtue surlily. 'I didn't know no other. Blade-o'-Grass was the only one left.'

And this was all the information I could elicit from him. I inquired of other old residents in Stoney-alley, but not one of them remembered anything worth hearing. I returned to Mr. Merrywhistle, and after narrating to him the fruitless result of my inquiries, I asked abruptly if he knew anything concerning the circumstances attending the birth of Ruth. The old man changed colour, and his manner became very nervous.

'I can see your drift,' he said in a troubled voice. 'In your mind, Ruth and Blade-o'-Grass are associated, as if some undiscovered tie exists between them. I once shared your suspicion. I saw in Blade-o'-Grass a likeness to Ruth, and I mentioned it to Mrs. Silver. But when Mrs. Silver adopted Ruth, the babe was orphaned indeed. Both father and mother were dead, and Ruth was the only child. It is impossible, therefore, that the likeness between Ruth and Blade-o'-Grass can be anything but accidental. Do not say anything of this to Ruth or Mrs. Silver; it would grieve them. Look at Ruth and Blade-o'-Grass; see them as they are, and think what a gulf separates them.'

A gulf indeed! But still I was not satisfied.

I found it much easier to learn the fullest particulars concerning Tom Beadle. Plainly and simply, he was a thief, and had been in prison a dozen times at least. The day following our holiday-making he was brought up at the police-court on a common charge of pickpocketing. Blade-o'-Grass begged me to intercede for him with the magistrate; but it was impossible for me to do so, as I knew nothing concerning him but what was bad. 'He loves me, sir, does Tom,' she pleaded; 'and I love 'im!' And said it as if it were a sufficient reason for his not being punished. It was impossible to reason with her on the matter; all that concerned herself and Tom Beadle she could look at from only one point of view. Whether he worked or whether he stole, nearly every farthing he obtained was spent in food. Blade-o'-Grass's standpoint was that she and Tom and the baby must have bread, and that if they could not get it one way they must get it another. Tom Beadle did work sometimes as a costermonger; but the difficulties in his way were very serious because of his antecedents, and he rebelled against these difficulties sullenly and savagely, and bruised his soul against them. He was no casuist, and made no attempt to excuse himself. He was simply a man at war with society, a man whose keen intellect had been sharpened and perfected in bad soil. As I write of him now, I can see him slouching along in his patched clothes, with defiance in his mind. Watchful eyes have been upon him almost from his birth; they are upon him now, whichever way he turns, and he knows it, and has grown up in the knowledge. Respectability turns its back upon him--naturally, for he is its enemy. Even benevolence shrinks from him, for the spirit of cunning and ingratitude lurks in his every motion. I paint him as I knew him, in the plainest of colours. He had one redeeming trait in his character; he loved Blade-o'-Grass, after his fashion, with as much sincerity as good men love good women. His love for her had come to him naturally, as other worse qualities in his nature had come. By Blade-o'-Grass he was loved, as she had truly said, but with that deeper love of which only a woman's nature is capable. Hers was capable of the highest form of gratitude, of the highest form of love. She was faithful to Tom Beadle, and she loved her child with as perfect, ay, and as pure a love as can animate the breast of the most delicate lady in the land. Overshadowing these bright streaks of light was a darker line. When she was a mere babe, afterwards when she was a child, afterwards when she was a woman, she frequently suffered the pangs of hunger; she often knew what it was to want a crust of bread. From these sufferings came the singular and mournful idea that she had within her a ravenous creature which she called a tiger, and which, when she was hungry, tore at her entrails for food. This tiger had been the terror of her life, and it was with her an agonising belief that she had endowed her child with the tiger curse: I can find no other term of expression. From this belief nothing could drive her. Talk to her of its folly, of its impossibility, and you talked to stone. Her one unfailing answer was, 'Ah, I know; you can't. I feel it, and my baby feels it also.' I learnt the story of this tiger from her own lips. I found her waiting for me one morning at the corner of the street in which I lived. It was while Tom Beadle was undergoing his term of imprisonment. I stopped and spoke to her, and she asked might she say something to me. Yes, I answered, I could spare her a few minutes; and I led the way to my rooms.

'It was Mr. Wirtue as told me to come to you, sir,' she said; 'he ain't so 'ard on me as he was.'

'I am glad you are friends again,' I said. 'Will you have some bread-and-butter?'

'Yes, if you please, sir.'

I cut some bread-and-butter for her and her child, and I dissolved some preserved milk in warm water for her. She watched with keen interest the process of making this milk, and when she tasted it said, with a touch of humour of which she was quite unconscious:

'They won't want no more mothers by and by, sir, what with sich milk as this, and feedin'-bottles, and p'ramberlaters!'

While she was eating and giving her child to eat, she reverted to Jimmy Virtue.

'You see, sir, he was mad with me 'cause I wouldn't give up Tom; but I couldn't do that, sir, arter all we've gone through. We growed up together, sir. If you knowed all Tom's done for me, you'd wonder 'ow anybody could 'ave the 'eart to arks me to give 'im up. Tom 'as stuck to me through thick and thin, and I'll stick to 'im as long as ever I live! I've 'eerd talk of sich things as 'eart-strings. Well, sir, my 'eartstrings 'd break if I was to lose 'im. Leave Tom! Give 'im up *now!* No, sir; it wouldn't be natural, and what ain't natural can't be good.'

Blade-o'-Grass cut straight into the core of many difficulties with her unconsciously-uttered truisms. When she and her child had eaten all I had set before them, she opened the business she had come upon. Then it was that I heard the history of the tiger.

'It's inside o' me, sir; I was born with it. When I was little, there was a talk o' cuttin' me open, and takin' the tiger out; but they didn't do it, sir. Per'aps it'd been better for me if they 'ad.'

I attempted to reason her out of her fancy; but I soon saw how useless were my arguments. She shook her head with sad determination, and smiled piteously.

'It don't stand to reason as you can understand it, sir. *You* ain't got a tiger in *your* inside! I 'ave, and it goes a-tearin' up and down inside o' me, eatin' me up, sir, till I'm fit to drop down dead. It was beginnin' this mornin', sir, afore I seed you.'

'Did you have any breakfast, my poor girl?'

'Not much, sir; a slice o' bread and some water 'tween me and baby. You see, sir, Tom's not 'ere, and I've 'ad some bad days lately.'

'You don't feel the tiger now?'

'No, sir; it's gone to sleep.'

I sighed.

'I wish,' she continued, 'I could take somethin' as 'd kill it! I tried to ketch it once--yes, sir, I did; but it was no go. I 'adn't 'ad nothink to eat for a long time, and it was goin' on awful. Then, when I got some grub, I thought if I put it down on the table, and set it afore me with my mouth open, per'aps the tiger 'd see it, and come up and fetch it. I was almost frightened out o' my life as I waited for it; for I've never seed it, sir, and I don't know what it's like. But it wouldn't come; it knows its book, the tiger does! I waited till I was that faint that I could 'ardly move, and I was forced to send the grub down to it. I never tried that move agin, sir.'

I told her I was sorry to hear that she had been unfortunate lately. She nodded her head with an air of weary resignation.

'It can't be 'elped, sir, I s'ppose. A good many societies 'as sprung up, and they're agin me, I think. O, yes, sir, we know all about 'em. It warn't very long ago that I was walkin' a long way from 'ome, with some matches in my 'and; I thort I'd try my luck where nobody knowed me. A gentleman stopped and spoke to me. "You're beggin'," he said. I didn't deny it, but I didn't say nothin', for fear o' the peelers. "It's no use your comin' 'ere," he said; "we've got a society in this neighbourhood, and we don't give nothink to the poor. Go and work." Then he went on to tell me--as if I cared to 'eer 'im! but he was one as liked to 'eer 'isself talk--that it was sich as me as was the cause of everythink that's bad. Well, sir, that made me open my eyes, and I couldn't 'elp arksing 'im if it was bad for me to try and git a bit o' bread for my baby; but he got into sich a passion that I was glad to git away from 'im. Another gentleman persuaded me to go to a orfice where they looked arter the likes o' me. I went, and when they 'eerd me out, they said they'd make inquiries into my case. Well, sir, they did make inquiries, and it come to the old thing that I've 'eerd over and over and over agin. They said they'd do somethink for me if I'd leave Tom; but when they spoke agin 'im I stood up for 'im, and they got angry, and said as I was no good. Then another party as I went to said they'd take my child--which I 'ad no business to 'ave, they said--if I liked, and that they'd give me ten shillin's to set me up in a stock of somethink to sell for my livin'. Part with my child!' exclaimed Blade-o'-Grass, snatching the little one to her lap, and looking around with fierce fear, as if enemies were present ready to tear her treasure from her. 'Sell my 'eart for ten shillin's! You're a parson, sir, and I put it to you. What do *you* say to partin' mother and child?'

What could I say? I was dumb. It was best to be so upon such straightforward questions propounded by a girl who, in her position and with her feelings, could understand and would recognise no logic but the logic of natural laws; it was best to be silent if I wished to do good, and I did wish it honestly, sincerely. The more I saw of Blade-o'-Grass, the more she interested me; the more she interested me, the more she pained me. I saw before me a problem, hard as a rock, sensitive as a flower--a problem which no roundabout legislation can solve in the future, or touch in the present. Other developments will to a certainty start up in time to come--other developments, and worse in all likelihood, because a more cultivated intelligence may be engaged in justifying what now ignorance is held to be some slight excuse for.

'Then, sir,' continued Blade-o'-Grass, driving her hard nails home, 'if I was one o' them

unnatural mothers as don't care for their children, and took the orfer--'ow about the ten shillin's to set me up in a stock o' somethin' to sell? What do the peelers say to a gal as tries to sell anythin' in the streets? Why, there ain't a inch o' flagstone as she's got a right to set 'er foot on! And as for the kerb, as don't belong properly to nobody, and's not wanted for them as walks or them as rides, why, a gal daren't stand on it to save 'er life! And that's the way it goes, sir; that's the way it goes! But I beg your pardon, sir. I'm wanderin' away from what I come for, and I'm a-takin' up your time.'

'Go on, my poor girl,' I said; 'let me know what I can do for you.'

'It ain't for me, sir; it's for my baby.'

'What can I do for her, the poor little thing?' I asked, pinching the child's cheek, who showed no pleasure, however, at my caress; there dwelt in her face an expression of mournfulness which was native to her, and which nothing could remove. 'What can I do for her?'

'Pray for 'er!' implored Blade-o'-Grass, with all her soul in her eyes, from which the tears were streaming.

I started slightly, and waited for further explanation. Blade-o'-Grass regarded me earnestly before she spoke again.

'You see, sir, she was born with a tiger inside of 'er, the same as I was; it ain't 'er fault, the dear, it's mine. It breaks my 'eart to think as she'll grow up like me, and that the tiger'll never leave 'er. I talked to Mr. Wirtue about it yesterday, and he says to me, "Why don't you go to the parson, and arks 'im to *pray* the tiger out 'er?" And so I've come, sir. You'd 'ardly believe what I'd do if it was set me to do, if I could get the tiger away from my dear. I'd be chopped up, sir, I would! Mr. Wirtue says prayer'll do anythink, and that if I didn't believe 'im, I was to arks you if it won't I can't pray myself; I don't know 'ow to. So I've come to you to arks you to pray the tiger out of my baby!'

I scarcely remember in what terms I replied. I know, however, that I sent Blade-o'-Grass away somewhat consoled, saying that she would teach her baby to bless me every day of her life if my prayers were successful.

VI.

FOR THESE AND SUCH AS THESE.

And now it becomes necessary that I should say something concerning my private history. I have made mention of a friend to whom I owed my education and position, and whose friendship it saddened me to think I should probably soon lose. It is of this friend, in connection with myself, that I am about to speak.

His name was Fairhaven. He was a great speculator, and his ventures had been so successful that he had become famous in the stock and money markets. At this time he was nearly seve nty years of age, unmarried, and he had no family connection in which he took the slightest interest, none, indeed, which he would recognise. Although I was indebted to him in the manner I have stated, I did not see him, and did not even know his name, until I had arrived at manhood and had chosen my career. All that I knew was that he was very wealthy, and it was by almost the merest accident that I discovered his name and real position. I made this discovery at a critical time. A season of great distress had set in in my parish, and I became acquainted with much misery, which, for want of means, I was unable to alleviate. I yearned for money. Where could I obtain it? I thought of Mr. Fairhaven. I said to myself, 'He has been good to me, and he is a wealthy man, and might be willing to assist me. Surely he would not miss a little of his money, and I could do so much good with it!' I must explain that I had before this time endeavoured to ascertain the name of the gentleman who had befriended me when I was left an orphan, but I was told by his agents that it was his wish to remain unknown. I respected that wish, and did not prosecute my inquiries. Even now that I had accidentally discovered his name, I should not for my own sake have pressed myself upon him; but for the sake of those suffering ones whom I was unable to relieve for want of money, I determined to do so. When I presented myself to him, he regarded me attentively, and with some symptoms of agitation. I said I hoped he was not displeased with me for coming to him. No, he answered, he was not displeased; and he made me so welcome that I ventured to thank him for his past goodness to me. Then I made my appeal to him, and after some consideration he placed at my disposal the sum of a hundred pounds, intimating that the same amount would be paid to me every year, to spend according to my own

discretion among the poor of my parish. I was overjoyed at this good result of my courage, and I thanked him cordially for his liberality. Up to this time I had received the money regularly, and had been enabled to do much good with it. I visited him occasionally to inform him how his money was expended, and even in the midst of his vaster operations, I think he was glad to hear of the good which sprang from the seed he placed in my hands to sow among my poor. After a time he asked me to visit him more frequently, saying that he was a lonely man, and that my visits were an agreeable relief to him. I owed him too deep a debt of gratitude to refuse, and I saw him as often as the duties of my position would allow. As our intimacy ripened, I learned, from chance words which escaped from him now and then, that he was not satisfied with the groove in which I was working. Knowing that we were not in the slightest way related to each other, I was naturally curious to learn why he took so deep an interest in me; but when I approached the subject he stopped me somewhat sternly, and desired me to speak of other matters. The impression I had gained that he was dissatisfied with my career became strengthened in every succeeding interview. And one night he made me a startling proposition.

I have a clear remembrance of that night and all the details connected with it. We were conversing in the pleasant garden of his house, which was situated on the bank of the river Thames. From where we sat we commanded a clear view of the river. The tide was ebbing, and the river's water was flowing towards the sea. The heavens were bright, and the fragrant air was whispering among the leaves. The water was murmuring with a sweet sibillation as it flowed towards a mightier power, and the stars were flashing in its depths.

On that night Mr. Fairhaven said that he wished he had known me earlier in life; he would have chosen for me a different career; but it was not too late now. 'I am a childless man,' he said, 'and I have grown to love you.' He proposed that I should resign my office, and come and live with him as his heir; had I been his son he could not have expressed himself more affectionately towards me. He took me entirely into his confidence, and endeavoured to win my sympathy in his career. He showed me how he had risen to wealth--nay, he showed me by his books and by other evidence the wealth itself which he had accumulated. I was amazed at its extent. I had no idea that he was so rich. As a proof of the sincerity of his offer, he said he would settle a large sum of money on me immediately, and that the bulk of his fortune should be mine when he was dead. There were certain conditions attached to his proposal. I was to bear his name when he died, and I was to pledge myself on my honour to live fully up to my means, and to take what he considered to be the proper position in society of a man who possessed so large a fortune. 'Money has its duties,' he said--'duties which I perhaps have neglected, but which it shall be your pleasant task to perform.' In a word, I was to become a man of fashion, and I was to do whatever was necessary in the world of fashion to make the name of Fairhaven notable. He laid great stress upon this latter stipulation, and I understood that his money was not to be mine to do as I pleased with in any other way.

I listened to his proposal in silence. For a short while I was overwhelmed by the offer and by the generosity which prompted it. But even as I listened I felt that I could not accept it. The prospect he held out to me did not dazzle me. To my mind, the mere possession of a large amount of money has no attraction, and confers no distinction; to possess it and to spend it in the way Mr. Fairhaven had set down appeared to my understanding a dreary task, and was distinctly inimical to the views I had formed of life and its duties. Besides, I had grown to love my labours; I was bound by the tenderest links of love and humanity to the people among whom I moved. Look where I would, I saw no higher lot in life than that which I had chosen, and--a selfish reason perhaps--I was happy in my choice.

I answered Mr. Fairhaven to this effect, and was about to refuse his offer absolutely, when he stopped me. I saw by his face that he anticipated what I was about to say. He did not want my answer then, he said; he wished me to take a certain time for reflection--a time extending over two years, and to expire on the anniversary of my thirty-third birthday. He asked me to study the matter well during this interval, and in the consideration of it to throw aside all false sentiment and eccentricity. He proposed to gain admission for me into certain circles, where I could see in full operation the machinery of the life he wished me to adopt; and he added--not as a threat, but simply as part of a resolution he had formed--that if, at the expiration of the allotted time, I did not accept his proposal, I must never expect to receive one shilling of his money. The time passed. At the expense of my duties I made leisure to move in the society in which he wished me to move; I studied its machinery; I made myself acquainted with its inner life, with its aims, desires, ambitions, results; as far as opportunity served, I probed its depths, and my resolution to decline Mr. Fairhaven's offer was strengthened. It is not for me here to state the reasons which led to the conclusion I formed. They sprang from my heart and my conscience; they were and are part of myself, which I could no more tear from myself than I could resist the course of time.

I visited Mr. Fairhaven on the appointed day, and acquainted him with my decision. I spoke in words and tone as gentle as I could command; for I bore in mind the great debt I owed him, and the exceeding generosity of his offer. He looked at me with eyes of doubt and surprise as I spoke, and turned from me when I finished. When he spoke it was in a hard cold tone.

'And that is your positive decision?' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'There is nothing hidden behind it----or stay! Perhaps you have not had sufficient time for

reflection. Let the matter rest for a little while longer.'

I told him that, if I had twenty years for reflection, my answer would be the same.

'You are aware,' he said, 'that you are inflicting a great disappointment upon me?

'I cannot but be aware of it, sir,' I replied, 'and it pains me exceedingly to know it.'

'You said a little while ago,' he said, referring to words I had used, 'that when I took you into my confidence, I endeavoured to win your sympathy in my career. Did I win it?'

'No, sir.'

'Why?'

I determined to speak frankly.

'It seemed to me that you had amassed money simply for its own sake, and not for the sake of the good uses to which it may be applied. According to my thinking, money is only sweet when it is well-earned and well-spent.'

I saw that he pondered over these words.

'Your life,' he said, 'must contain special attractions, that you are so wedded to it. You have made friends, doubtless.'

'Many, sir, thank God! Friends to whom I am deeply attached.'

'Tell me of them, and let me ascertain for myself the superior inducements of the life you lead to the life which you reject.'

I considered for a few moments, I thought of Mrs. Silver and her happy home and family; but connected with them in my mind were the less wholesome figures of Tom Beadle, Blade-o'-Grass, and Jimmy Virtue. As a foil to these, however, were the figures of Mr. Merrywhistle and Robert Truefit and his family. I resolved to show this picture in a complete form, as presenting a fair variety of those among whom my life was passed. As I mentioned the names of these persons and described them, Mr. Fairhaven wrote them on a leaf in his pocket-book. I laid the greatest stress upon the figures of Mrs. Silver and her family, and I endeavoured to show this part of the picture in bright colours. But I was honest throughout, and I spoke plainly of Tom Beadle, Blade-o'-Grass, and Jimmy Virtue. When the picture was completed, Mr. Fairhaven read the names aloud, and exclaimed angrily:

'A pretty circle of portraits truly! The principal of them thieves and gutter children! Andrew

Meadow, it is incomprehensible to me. But your mind is set upon them evidently. Can anything I say move you from your resolution?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Then here we part,' he said sternly and bitterly. 'As you cannot be moved from your resolution, I cannot be moved from mine. Not one shilling of my money shall you ever receive. I have striven hard for your good, and you reject me for these and such as these!'

He tapped the list scornfully, and rose. I understood from his action that I was dismissed. I knew it would be useless to attempt to soften him; he was a man of inflexible resolution.

'You need not trouble yourself,' he said, 'to call upon me again, unless I send for you. Goodnight.'

'Before I go, sir,' I said, very sad at heart, 'let me say how truly grateful I am to you for your past kindness to me. I shall hold you in my heart and mind with thankfulness and gratitude until my dying day.'

Then I walked sadly out of the peaceful garden towards the City, where lay my labour of love.

Two matters must be mentioned before I close this chapter.

The first is that before I acquainted Mr. Fairhaven with the decision I had arrived at, I endeavoured again to ascertain from what motive he had educated and befriended me when I was left an orphan. He refused distinctly to give me any explanation.

The next is that the hundred pounds a year he had hitherto given me to spend among my poor was stopped from that day. This grieved me exceedingly. I think I had never fully understood the power of money until then.

VII.

HEALTHY BODY MAKES HEALTHY MIND.

It was but natural that the loss of so good a friend as Mr. Fairhaven should have had an effect upon my spirits, and I felt it the more deeply because he had parted from me in anger. I did not for one moment doubt that I had decided rightly, but it would have been a happiness to me to have retained Mr. Fairhaven's friendship. I found myself brooding over it and growing melancholy. I sorely felt the need of sympathy, or at least of that consolation which one derives from unbosoming himself to his friends. Mrs. Silver saw my distress of mind, and with delicate tact led me to confide in her. I told her the story--the temptation, the trial, the result--and I asked her if I had done right. Only she and Rachel were present when I commenced to tell my story; and Rachel, divining by my first words that I was about to impart a confidence to Mrs. Silver, rose to leave the room; but I desired her to stay, and she resumed her seat and continued her work.

'Have I done right, dear friend?' I asked of Mrs. Silver when I had concluded.

I saw that she was much affected. 'Between friends such as we had grown to be but few words were needed. I was bending anxiously towards her as I asked the question. She took my hand and kissed me.

'I am old enough to be your mother,' she said; 'it gladdens me to know that we are friends.'

I was inexpressibly consoled and comforted. I looked towards Rachel. Her bosom was heaving, and a tender radiance was in her face. My heart leaped up as I saw. Immediately I turned to her she knew that I was gazing at her, and she rose hurriedly and left the room. Mrs. Silver looked at me with solemn tenderness and followed her blind child. From that moment a new tie seemed to be established between us, and I came and went as one of the family.

As regards private social life, I know of no happier phase of it than that which allows you to have only a few intimate friends, and which does not compel you to fritter away your hours among a host of acquaintances who have no heart-regard for you--paying a cold visit here, a cold visit there, glad when they are over; receiving these conventional visits in return, and uttering

commonplaces the while which are devoid of meaning and have no suspicion of earnestness. Where you have within hail a few friends between whom and yourself a sincere esteem exists, room is given for earnest feeling to flower; the true heart-glow is felt, and you give and receive smiles which are not artificial, and speak and hear words which are good and glad utterances. In time the ties which bind you and your friends grow as strong as ties of blood-kindred, and when a face is missed from the circle, you mourn for it with genuine grief and affection.

Such a phase of social life existed with the Silvers and their friends, of whom Robert Truefit was not the least esteemed. Wherever he was, the conversation was always animated. He was a man who thought for himself, and was not willing to be led unless his reason approved. Under any circumstances, Robert Truefit would not have been satisfied with going through the world blindfold. In no sense of the word an agitator, he was always ready to express his opinion, and you might depend that that opinion would be the result of a fairly-exercised judgment. He was contented with his position as an ordinary workman, but this does not imply that he was without ambition. He simply recognised that it is folly to knock your head against stones. In a new country, such as America, Canada, or any of the Australasian colonies, he would have risen by sheer force of character; but in England, with the ties that he had gathered about him, the chances were against him. I am anxious that the character of Robert Truefit should not be misunderstood. He was in no wise discontented with the groove in which he laboured. He was a good husband and a good father. Fond of an argument he certainly was; but he was not that kind of man who justifies himself by a proverb. He chafed at injustice to others, and he often expressed indignation at the neglect of public morality which, he contended, characterised the government of the country. 'They look after the trees,' he said, 'and neglect the flowers. It is a cant saying that you cannot make people moral by Act of Parliament. Keep dinning a thing in the people's ears, and, whether it be true or false, it will come to be believed in as something not to be controverted. They will believe that a bread pill will prolong life indefinitely, if it be advertised sufficiently. I say you can make people moral by Act of Parliament. You can make them clean and you can compel them to be decent, and those qualities go a very long way towards morality.'

We were all together one evening, talking of the good prospect that lay before Charley, who, firmly established as the overseer of a large printing establishment, was saving money with the view of setting up for himself in business, 'one of these fine days,' as he said. Ruth was busy upon something marvellous in the shape of a frock for baby, and much serious conversation was indulged in by the females on the subject of trimmings. Said Ruth,

'Charley, when baby grows up she shall write a book, and you shall print it.'

'Why,' exclaimed Charley, 'you don't want baby to be a bluestocking, do you, Ruth?

'She will be clever enough for anything,' said Ruth confidently. 'There, mother, don't you think she will look beautiful in this?' And Ruth held up the frock for inspection.

'I begin to think,' said Charley, 'that I am ambitious. Are you?' he asked of Robert Truefit.

'I can't afford to be,' answered Robert Truefit, with a smile. 'In my position, and with my responsibilities, ambition would lead to discontent--discontent to unhappiness. I have seven pairs of feet to provide boots and shoes for, and you can guess what that means.'

I had heard and read a great deal of the extravagance and improvidence of the working-man, and looking upon Robert Truefit as a fair sample of the better class--better because right-minded and intelligent--I asked him if he was saving money for a rainy day, as the saying is.

'The only rainy day,' he said, 'for which I have been able to provide in the shape of money, is the day on which I shall die. Then my wife, if she is alive and if the company in which my life is insured is not dishonest, will receive two hundred pounds. Every year I pay the insurance a weight is taken from my heart; not so much because I am able to pay it, as because my children are a year nearer to the time when they will be able to work for their mother and assist her, should anything happen to me.' He gave me a bright look. 'I am endeavouring to train my young ones properly, and in that way perhaps I may say that I am saving up for a rainy day. But I see that you are anxious for further particulars. If you will give me a hint in what direction to let my tongue run, I shall be glad to oblige you.'

'Well,' I suggested; 'concerning income and expenditure.'

'I can give you a plain experience on those heads,' he said frankly, 'because I am, after a certain fashion, methodical, much more so than many of my mates. I put down my earnings every week in a little memorandum-book, and on the opposite side I put down the way in which my earnings are spent. This is a good lesson for my youngsters, who learn the value of system in the practical matters of life. You know, sir, that I have five children--two girls and three boys. The youngest is eleven months old, the eldest is ten years of age on his next birthday. Now, last year, from the first day to the last, I earned ninety-nine pounds ten shillings, and every farthing of my earnings, with the exception of thirty-eight shillings, which was spent in junketing, went in the necessaries of life and in paying my policy.'

'What were your out-door pleasures?'

'Once during the year we took the children to the Crystal Palace. We went once to the theatre

to see a pantomime; and my eldest youngsters begged so hard to be taken to the Brighton Aquarium on one of the Bank holidays, that I could not resist them; and really I was glad of the opportunity of seeing it myself. We had a capital day, and it did the children good in many ways; it opened the eyes of their minds, I may say. Our rent makes a big hole. We pay seventeen pounds a year, including taxes, for our house, which contains three rooms and a small kitchen or washhouse--quite as little as we can do with. Meat is another big item. Then, I work three miles away from home, and that's an item. In examining the figures, which Jane and I did very carefully when I balanced the account--we have the fear of that rainy day you have mentioned very strong upon us sometimes, I assure you, sir!--we could not find one item which was not properly in its place, and which in our opinion could have been set under the head of extravagance. Yet I know that there are political economists--I call them by the name they give themselves--who would not agree with me. The money spent in amusements I have no doubt they would say I ought to have saved: I deny it. We have a right--every human being has--to a reasonable share of healthful pleasure. "Your meat bill ought to have been a little less," they would also doubtless say: I deny it. We have little enough as it is; more than half the meat we eat is Australian meat--and we like it! The children's bodies must be healthfully nourished if they are to grow into right-minded, reasonable men and women. Healthy body makes healthy mind. Twenty-two shillings a year spent in reading! "Monstrous!" the political economists would exclaim. Why, my newspapers cost me not less than eight shillings a-year, and there's a weekly publication, and an occasional oddment for the children; and is my wife, or am I, not to read a work of fiction occasionally--or are these things not for such as we? It is they who are monstrous who set up such monstrous cries. So they would go through my book, and prove that out of my earnings of ninety-nine pounds ten shillings I ought to have saved a handsome sum. I have observed that it is only among the ranks of the well-to-do that you find your political economists. They argue from the wrong end--they themselves, mind you, being seated the while on a snug and comfortable elevation; they cast up lines of figures, and judge the life of an individual by means of a monster called Aggregate--which Aggregate, I take it, is, applied to such a purpose, the most absurd and unjust standpoint that mind of man could have invented.'

VIII.

THIS 'ERE FREE AND 'LIGHTENED COUNTRY OF OUR'N'S CRAMMED FULL O' TEMPLES O' LIBERTY.

The withdrawal of Mr. Fairhaven's hundred pounds a year compelled me to relinquish many plans I had formed. It was a sore blow to me, and I had to pinch and save in order to carry out promises I had made to some of my poor people. From the Silvers I received not only sympathy, but help in the shape of money, without which I am sure I could not have got along. Between Rachel and myself a confidence of a peculiar and affectionate nature was gradually established. I spoke to her freely of my troubles, and confided in her, and asked counsel of her. By what mysterious means it was that she--blind from her birth, and with no such knowledge of the world as comes from actual contact with it--could have gained the wise insight into character which she possessed, it is beyond my power to say. Perhaps it was because she did not doubt, and believed in the capacity for goodness in others.

A long time had now passed since the children's holiday in the country, and yet the incident of Rachel's distress on that day at the sound of Blade-o'-Grass's voice had never been referred to in any of our conversations. Truth to tell, I hesitated to open a subject which had caused so much pain to the blind maid; but I never lost sight of it. I was often on the verge of speaking about it, but I checked the impulse. One day, however, I referred to it, almost without thought.

'I knew,' said Rachel, 'that you would speak to me about it at some time or other, and I have thought it strange that you have not done so before now. I think it was out of consideration for me.' I did not answer. 'But you have had it in your mind?'

'Yes, Rachel, I have never forgotten it.'

'Nor I.' She clasped her hands upon her lap, and said quietly, 'Seeing that you were silent, I should have mentioned it myself, if I could have mustered sufficient courage; but I was too much afraid. Are we to speak of it now?'

'As you think fit, Rachel.'

'It will be best, perhaps. Mr. Meadow,' she said earnestly, 'it is not wrong for two persons to have a secret, If the keeping of it harms no one, and if the disclosure would bring pain to their

friends?'

'Surely not in such a case, Rachel.'

'I am so glad to know it! Will you, then, let what we say to each other upon this subject remain a secret between us, unless you should think it will serve a good end one day to refer to it, or disclose it?'

'Yes, Rachel. This shall be a confidence between us.'

'That is good; it is a confidence between us.' She placed her hand upon mine for a moment, as if that action sealed the confidence. 'Mr. Meadow, I told you that I had heard the poor girl's voice before that day. It was when Ruth and Charley were courting. We had spent a happy day at the Exhibition with Charley, and we were walking home, when I heard some one utter words which ring in my ears now. It was Ruth's voice, but it was not Ruth who spoke. The words were: "For God's sake, Tom, bring home some money, for there's not a bit of bread in the cupboard!" Without stopping to think, I cried out to Ruth, and asked her if it was she who spoke. I told her what I had heard, and that the voice was like hers; and Ruth went to the poor girl, and gave her money.'

'It was Blade-o'-Grass you heard, Rachel. The man who finds food for her is named Tom.'

'I never spoke of it afterwards; I did not dare to, for my thoughts. Mr. Meadow, what is Blade-o'-Grass like? Describe her to me.'

I described the poor outcast as faithfully as it was possible for me to do. Rachel was silent for a little while; she was looking at the portrait.

'What colour is her hair, Mr. Meadow?'

'Dark-brown.'

'The same colour as Ruth's!' she exclaimed, in a tone of distress. 'And her eyes?'

'Dark-brown, also.'

'So are Ruth's.'

She twined her fingers nervously.

'She has a very pretty dimple, Rachel.'

Rachel uttered a sob of thankfulness.

'Ruth has no dimple,' she said gratefully.

I reflected seriously before I spoke. Such implicit faith did I have in Rachel's instincts that, without a shadow of direct evidence, indeed with all evidence against it, I was tempted still to believe that there was kinship between Ruth and Blade-o'-Grass. Yet what good purpose could possibly be served in tracing it? Would it not be bringing pain and shame to Ruth's door?----' No, no!' I cried, in my thoughts, 'pain doubtless, but not shame! Ruth has been too purely brought up for shame to touch her. She would stretch forth a sympathising hand to Blade-o'-Grass. With a loving heart and with loving words she would influence her for good: love would prevail where friendship failed. Blade-o'-Grass might by that influence be brought to see in their proper light the relations that existed between Tom Beadle the thief and herself, and might----'

Ah, me! ah, me! I paused here, in grief, too sorrowful to carry out the thread of my reflections. I had had but few interviews, with Blade-o'-Grass; but when, feeling my duty press heavily upon me, I had approached the subject which most grieved her friends, I had found her deaf and implacable to my words. She placed her back against the rock of natural affection, and every argument used against Tom Beadle struck her with a feather's weight. To break the tie seemed to me to be impossible. There remained, then, but one right thing to be done. To sanctify it by the sacrament of marriage, and thus fasten the hold which the thief had upon her. Let no man come between them then! This girl, in whom there was so much latent good, would be linked for life to a thief. His infamous life would be hers, his lot would be hers, and nothing should separate them but death!

At the date of my present conversation with Rachel, I had not seen Blade-o'-Grass for many weeks, and I knew that Tom Beadle was out of prison and at work again in his bad way. I determined to seek her out that very night. I had promised to visit Jimmy Virtue in company with Robert Truefit. Jimmy had expressed a wish to see us, and he would most likely be able to tell me where I could find Blade-o'-Grass. These thoughts occupied but a very few moments in passing through my mind; and I turned again to Rachel.

'When I heard poor Blade-o'-Grass,' I said to her, 'speak to her baby, her voice sounded strangely familiar to me. Yet it seems scarcely possible that what you and I have in our minds with reference to her should be more than fancy.'

But Rachel gently shook her head, and we diverged to other subjects.

Robert Truefit and I met by appointment, and walked together to Jimmy Virtue's leaving-shop. Jimmy Virtue was in his parlour, and upon our entrance he hastily gathered up an old pack of cards, with which he had been playing. The deal table was bare of cloth, and was smeared over with chalk figures representing many thousands of pounds.

'Hallo!' exclaimed Jimmy Virtue; 'there you are! I've been 'avin' a game of All-fours with Jack.'

I looked around for Jack, but saw no signs of him. There was but one tallow-candle burning in the room, and that was stuck in a ginger-beer bottle and was guttering down.

'I'll be with you in a minute,' said Jimmy Virtue; 'I've got a bundle to tie up in the shop.'

'This is a miserable place to live in,' I said to Robert Truefit when Jimmy Virtue had left the room. 'Who is Jack?'

'A shadow,' replied Robert Truefit; 'a shadow of Jimmy's creation, with whom he plays at cards in his loneliness, and cheats out of fabulous sums--money, Jack, and all being things of air. Look at the chalk-score on the table; Jimmy has won more than three thousand pounds of Jack. Is not truth stranger than fiction, Mr. Meadow? Jack sits there.'

Robert Truefit pointed to a chest upon which the imaginary Jack was supposed to sit while he was being robbed. So dimly-lighted was the room that I could easily have fancied a shadow was really sitting on the chest, gazing with lack-lustre eyes upon another shadow in Jimmy Virtue's chair, where Jimmy Virtue was not. A mournful picture of a desolate life, I thought.

Jimmy Virtue appeared to have forgotten us, for Robert Truefit and I had been ten minutes together, and were not disturbed.

'Is he attending to customers?' I asked.

'There's no customer in the shop,' said Robert Truefit, peeping in. He went into the shop, and I followed him. Jimmy Virtue was standing at the street-door, muttering to himself.

'That's the second time I've seed 'im 'ere,' he muttered, 'the second time this week; but it's been too dark to ketch a good sight of 'is face. Now, what does he come 'angin' about 'ere for?'

He was watching the figure of a man who was standing in that part of Stoney-alley where the deepest shadows lay.

'Do you know him, Jimmy?' asked Robert Truefit.

'He's a 'Postle,' replied Jimmy Virtue.

'An Apostle,' explained Robert Truefit to me. I wondered, not knowing what meaning might be attached to the word.

'He calls 'isself a Delegate, but I calls 'im a 'Postle--a 'Postle o' Liberty. I'd like to ketch a good sight of that there 'Postle's face. Pff! What's this a-runnin' in my 'ead?'

He glared around with his one useful eye, as if shadows were jostling him on every side; and in a thoughtful mood he accompanied us to the parlour. There he opened the chest which formed Jack's resting-place, and diving to the bottom brought up a small wooden box. Without a word he opened the box, and turned out the contents. 'There's a rum lot o' things 'ere,' he said, after a long pause, during which he had been examining the articles, each of which was wrapped in paper, upon which there was writing. 'All gold and silver things that's never been called for. I didn't like to part with 'em. 'Ere's a bit o' coral, 'xactly like a foot and leg; this garter round the leg is gold. I lent fourteenpence on it to a cove as 'ad seen better days--so he told me. Them better days must ha' been a precious long time afore I set eyes on 'im! 'Ere's a bit o' jade with a band o' silver on it. That come from Chiney. 'Ere's a woman's likeness on a broach--enamel, it is a pretty face! 'tain't so pretty now, I'll be bound! I've 'ad this for thirty year. 'Ere's a----ah, 'ere it is!' He lighted upon something he had been seeking for. 'What do you call this, now?' he asked.

'I should call it a wedding-ring,' said Robert Truefit.

'So should I. I ain't 'ad many things like what's in this box brought to me to lend money on. Peddicuts, and gownds, and old boots is more in my line.'

He replaced all the things in the wooden box with the exception of the wedding-ring, which he put in his pocket.

'Now, then, Jimmy,' said Robert Truefit, 'tell us what you wanted to see us about.'

'Well, you know that place they calls Paul's-buildin's. It's been empty ever so long, and there's a large 'all in it.'

'I know it, Jimmy.'

'Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. The 'all's been taken for twelve bob a week by some fellers as 'as formed theirselves into a society called the Workin'-man's League--a society as is goin' to stick up for workin'man's rights and all that sort o' thing. And what do you think they've painted on the door. Bob? Why, The Temple o' Liberty! And this feller as comes 'angin' round 'ere to-night calls 'isself a Delegate. *I* calls 'im a 'Postle. It sounds better, don't it? 'Im and 'is mates meets three times a week at the Temple o' Liberty to take in members at tuppence a 'ead, and to collar subscriptions. Lord! they'd collar anythink, sich fellers as them! They do a pretty good stroke o' business altogether, I should say.'

'If Jimmy's not mistaken,' observed Robert Truefit to me, 'these are some of the men who live by the trade. But what makes you so interested in this one particular man, Jimmy?'

'I'd rather not say jist now, Bob. But I did ketch jist a glimpse of 'is face, and if I'm right, I've seed it afore. Per'aps I *am* right; per'aps I ain't. Any'ow this ain't the time to speak, 'cordin' to my judgment, till I'm more settled about it. There's a big meetin' next week at the Temple o' Liberty, and there'll be some tall speechifyin', I daresay. I'll 'ave a good look at that there 'Postle's face then. Will you go, Bob? and you, sir? This is a sort o' thing as ought to be looked into. If I was a workin'-man like Bob, I shouldn't be satisfied without I 'ad a finger in the pie--though there's nothin' good to be got out of it, mind you, unless you're a 'Postle! And if I was a parson, I'd think it my duty to 'eer what they've got to say for theirselves.'

We promised to accompany Jimmy Virtue to the meeting; and then I asked him if he knew where Blade-o'-Grass lived. He went into Stoney-alley with us, closing has shop-door, and pointed out the house.

'She's got a room on the third floor,' he said; 'she went into it last week. They about like birds, them gals do; it seems as they can't rest nowhere. But they allus comes back to the old spot! She was born about 'ere, and it's my opinion she'll die about 'ere. What are you goin' to do, Bob?

'I shall stop here until Mr. Meadow's visit is paid. Nay, sir,' he said, seeing that I was about to attempt to dissuade him, 'I shall wait for you. Our roads home are same, and perhaps you will allow me to walk part of the way with you.'

'I shall go,' said Jimmy Virtue, 'and smoke a pipe outside The True Briton's Delight. I've got the lonelies on me to-night, and Jack's not allus the best o' company; gits stupid like, and 's got no go in 'im. You'll see me there as you pass.'

I walked up the dark stairs until I came to the third floor, and knocked at the door of the only room in which there was a light. Blade-o'-Grass came to the door, and opened it. She curtseyed when she saw me, and asked me to come in. There was some anxiety in her face, but this was no new phase in her. I asked after the child.

'It's that as troubles me, sir,' she said. 'Come and look at it.'

The child was lying on the bed, with its eyes closed. Blade-o'-Grass touched her, and she opened her eyes; but there was no sign of recognition in her face, and no smile or look of gladness as the mother leaned over her. The expression was one of settled mournfulness; it

appeared to me as if neither pain nor joy could affect it.

'She's been like this, sir,' whispered Blade-o'-Grass, 'for nigh on a week, and I don't know what to make of it. She lays there for hours without movin' and without speakin'. She don't complain a bit; but it can't be right, can it, sir? Speak to me, my life! Speak to me!'

But the child made no response to these and other endearing words; a mournful lethargy had fallen upon her, and she lay like one in a trance.

'She takes her food?'

'Yes, sir, but not much; she don't seem to care for it. She don't arks for none.'

'Has any doctor been to see her?'

'I've got no money, sir.'

I knew of a doctor of fair repute who was popular among the poor, and whose charge was eighteenpence a visit, with medicine included. I gave Blade-o'-Grass three shillings, and told her it would pay for two visits. She thanked me with tears in her eyes, and said that she would run for the doctor immediately I was gone.

'I wish to say a few words to you first, my dear; I will not detain you long.'

She placed a chair for me, and stood before me.

'Where is Tom?' I asked.

'I don't know, sir; I ain't seed 'im all day.'

'It is about him I wish to speak, Blade-o'-Grass.'

She looked distressed; but I was not to be discouraged.

'Is it not possible,' I continued, 'for him to get a living in any other way than the way he does?'

''Ow do I know, sir? I think Tom 'd do anythink to earn a pound a week. A pound a week! 'Ow 'appy we should be then! But 'ow's he to do it, sir? Tell us the way, sir.'

'Nay,' I said, 'he must find the way himself----'

She interrupted me impatiently. 'If I didn't know as you was a good friend to me, sir, I should think as you was mockin' of me, like the others. Don't you say it all over agin, sir!' she entreated, with a nervous movement of the hands. 'It makes me sick and mad-like! I've 'eerd it a 'underd times afore, and every time I arks which way we're to turn, I'm told that we've got to find out the way for ourselves.'

She looked towards her child, and I saw that she was anxious to go for the doctor. It would have been cruel to continue the theme then; but I could not leave her without carrying out my intention. I asked her if she had ever been to church.

'Once,' she answered.

'Only once!' I said sadly. 'That's all, sir; I never went agin. I stood near the door while the bells was ringin'. I like to 'eer them bells; they rest me like, and it was them as drawed me on. A lot o' fine people was comin' along the streets all round, and goin' in while I stood there. Some on 'em looked 'appy, 'specially the gals as was about the same age as me; but some on 'em looked orfle glum, as if they knowed they was bad uns, and was goin' to be preached to!--beggin' your pardon, sir. Some of the ladies was dressed beautiful, and more nor one on 'em 'eld their gownds away from me as they parsed, for fear I should 'ave spoiled 'em by touchin' 'em. One lady in lavender silk pulled 'er two little gals away because they was close to me, and looked at me as much as to say that I'd got no business to be there. No more I 'ad, sir, I know. I remember them things, sir. All the people got in, and the bells stopped, and then I thought 'ow I should like to go in too. It took a deal o' courage to push open the door, and my 'eart was in my mouth when I did it; but that was nothin' to what come arterwards. When I was inside, I thort I should ha' dropped down with fright, a lot on 'em stared at me so 'ard-like; and what with that and the place bein' so grand, I turned all over like a jelly. Then a big man comes up to me, lookin' very stern and solemn. I thort he was a-goin' to give me in charge, and I was goin' to cry out and beg 'im not to, when he clapped 'is 'and on my mouth, and put me somewhere where I couldn't see nothink, and where I could only 'eer a drummin' in my ears like a lot o' flies, except when the people was a-singin'. But I was frightened all the while, and when the doors was throwed open, I run out as fast as I could, for fear somethin' 'd be done to me. I never went no more; it seemed to me as if I'd no right to go.'

'Do you know where my church is, child?'

'No, sir.'

I wrote the address on a piece of paper, and gave it to her.

'I can't read, sir,' she said, with a flush in her cheeks.

I begged her pardon, and told her the name of the church, and the street it was in. 'If you will come there, my dear, next Sabbath, I shall be glad to see you. And don't think you have no right there! You have as much right as the best-dressed lady in the church.'

She thanked me, and said she would come because I had been good to her.

'And bring Tom,' I said.

She shook her head. 'I don't think Tom'll come, sir.'

'Not for your sake?' I asked.

'Tom'll do almost anythink for me,' she said, tears gathering in her eyes.

'Do you know,' I said very gently, 'that living as you are living now with Tom gives great pain to your friends?'

She bit her lips rebelliously, and put on her dogged look.

'And that it is wrong in the sight of God?'

There was no softening of the dogged look; it hardened rather.

'And,' I continued, 'there is so simple and so good a way of atoning for this wrong--a way that will bring Tom nearer to you, that will bind him closer to you. If, as you say, Tom will do anything for you, ask him to marry you.'

The dogged look vanished; joy, wonder, took its place.

'Marry me!' she exclaimed softly. 'O Tom, if you would! if you would, Tom!'

'Is there any doubt of it?'

'I never arksed 'im, sir! I never arksed 'im!'

'Well, dear child, ask him now, and let me know.'

'Won't it cost money, sir? she asked anxiously.

'But little; and that little I will find.'

She held out her hands to me in thankfulness. She had learned to trust me.

'I'll arks Tom, sir. Though, mind!' she said, out of the noble chivalry of her nature; 'nothink that Tom can do can bring me nearer to 'im, or make 'im stick closer to me! But I'll do it, sir, because you think it's good, and because I think, too, it might be righter so.' She turned with a newborn joy in her face, and knelt by the bed, and as I went out of the room, I heard her whisper to her child, 'Baby! baby! me and Tom's goin' to git married! Ain't you glad, baby?'

Robert Truefit was waiting for me in Stoney-alley.

'I am glad you have come at this moment,' he said, as we walked out of the alley. 'You see those two men before us? One is Tom Beadle, and the other is the Delegate who roused Jimmy so strangely to-night.'

'They are not walking together; they do not seem to be acquainted.'

'No; but supposing this one to be an Apostle of Liberty, and that one a thief, it is well that they should be strangers.'

Their destination, however, was the same. They both paused before the door of The True Briton's Delight, and both entered the building, which was a triumph of architecture, with its gay decorations and pillars. The light that came from this bad palace was dazzling.

'A bright coffin,' observed Robert Truefit, 'for virtue and morality.'

Jimmy Virtue was leaning against one of the lamp-posts opposite the public-house, smoking his pipe.

'I've been thinkin', Bob,' he said, with reflective puffs, 'as I've been standin' watchin' the people go in and out, that this 'ere free and 'lightened country of our'n's crammed full o' Temples o' Liberty.'

'Crammed full of them!' exclaimed Robert Truefit, humouring his friend. 'Why, what kind of places, Jimmy?'

Jimmy Virtue extended his pipe in the direction of the True Briton's Delight.

'Them kind o' places,' he said.

Robert Truefit laughed. 'And where on earth, Jimmy, in those temples is liberty to be found?'

'At the bottom o' pewter pots,' replied Jimmy Virtue, with a flourish of his pipe. 'And the persevering way the free and 'lightened Briton searches for it in them pewter pots is a 'stonishing thing. Bob--a very 'stonishing thing!'

IX.

OPEN YOUR EYES, BABY! SPEAK TO ME! LOOK AT MOTHER, MY LIFE!

I looked in vain from my pulpit on the following Sabbath for Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass, but they were not in church. I had introduced into my discourse on that day certain words applicable to the beauty and holiness of the marriage tie--words which I had designed especially for those two humblest members of my congregation, and which I had hoped they would have understood and appreciated. It pained me not to see them, and I was sure that some special circumstance had prevented Blade-o'-Grass at least from attending. I had promised to take a cup of tea with Ruth and her husband after the evening service, and if anything could have made me forget for the time the sorrow which oppressed me, it would have been the peaceful happiness which pervaded their bright and modest home. But the image of Blade-o'-Grass was too strongly fixed in my mind to be forgotten, and in the course of the evening my fancy placed that image by the side of Ruth, as the latter, with all a mother's love in her face, sat rocking the cradle with her foot. It was a terrible contrast, and I strove to banish the fancy; but it refused to leave my mind's eye. Let me, I thought, strive at all events to give it a more pleasing colouring. Ruth was dressed in a brown-stuff gown, and she had a piece of pink ribbon round her neck; she wore dainty white collar and cuffs, and her hair was done up in a simple knot. Merely to look at her as she sat rocking the cradle in which her baby was sleeping created that Home feeling to which all the humanising influences of life are due. In my fancy now I gave Blade-o'-Grass such a dress and such cuffs and collar; I placed the piece of ribbon round her neck, and arranged her hair in similar fashion; and then I placed her by the side of Ruth. It was wonderful; they were of the same height, and the colour of their hair and eyes was the same. But the look of peaceful happiness which dwelt in the face of Ruth was wanting in the face of Blade-o'-Grass. I gave the poor girl this; I banished the anxiety and sorrow from her face, and the likeness was perfect. As I gazed upon the picture, half-real, half-ideal, the sound of Ruth singing softly to her baby stole upon my ear, and the little tricks and turns of the voice which Nature varies in her myriad children with such marvellous skill as to make each distinctive in itself, or assimilative only where ties of blood exist, brought to me the voice of Blade-o'-Grass speaking to *her* child. I started to my feet to dispel the illusion, and bade Ruth and Charley good-night, for fear I might be tempted to disturb their happiness by even a mention of my thought.

It was a wintry night, and the snow was falling. I had other visits to make in pursuance of my duties, and it was quite eleven o'clock by the time I had completed my rounds. At that hour I was crossing the wonderful piece of road which connects the Mansion House with the Royal Exchange, and I bustled along briskly to keep myself warm. I was in the open space in front of the Royal Exchange, and I was walking towards Leadenhall-street, when a woman hurriedly approached me from that direction. She came almost abruptly to my side, and, with a reckless movement of her body, in which every limb seemed to take its part, was about to accost me, when, as I turned my face towards hers, she uttered a suppressed cry of terror, and flew round the corner which leads to Threadneedle-street. I had not seen the woman's face, but the cry told me who she was. Shocked and surprised I ran after her, and, in her endeavour to escape me, the poor wandering soul fell upon the ground at the foot of the statue of one of America's greatest philanthropists. Even in that moment of trouble, the coincidence struck me as singular, and in the fleeting glance of admiration I cast upon the statue the thought flashed upon me that it would have been more charitable, and would have shown more true benevolence, had the vast sums the philanthropist gave to the poor of London been expended less after the fashion of a commercial speculation. That the merciful intentions of the testator--whose kind heart must have been filled with pity for the unmerited sufferings of the poor, and with a desire to relieve them--have been made to miss their mark by the manner in which the trust has been administered, there is, in my mind, not a shadow of a doubt.

'Blade-o'-Grass!' I exclaimed pityingly, and I stooped to raise the writhing form at my feet.

But she shrank from me and repulsed me with her hands; and bade me, in a desperate voice, to go, for the Lord's sake! and leave her to herself.

'Nay, dear child,' I said, 'I cannot leave you. Tell me what brings you out on such a night as this.'

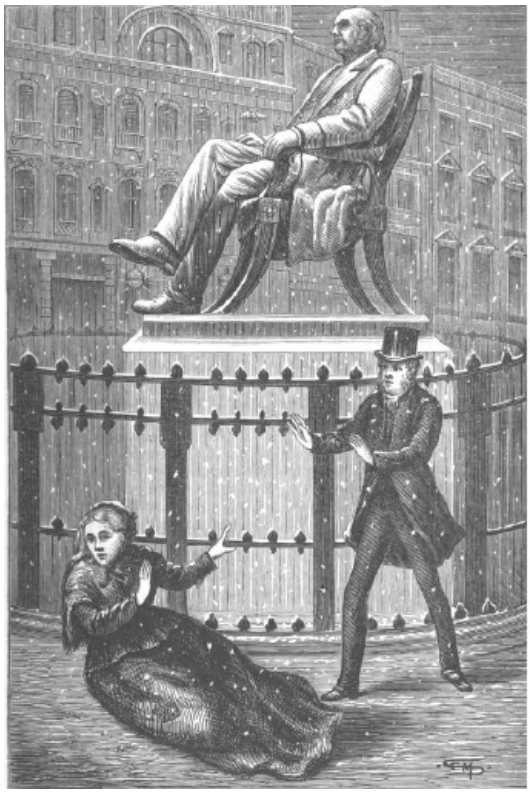
'Don't arks me!' she cried, with a wild movement of her hands. 'O, my God! don't arks me. O, if I could die this minute, and take my child with me! O, if we could die together, the pair on us!'

She looked up to the dreary sky with a face as white as the falling snow. Never in my life had I witnessed such passion, such utter prostration of soul, and my heart bled for her--and bled the more as I observed her scanty clothing and the miserable coverings she wore on her feet. And then there came to me again the fancies I had raised concerning Blade-o'-Grass but a couple of hours ago in Ruth's cheerful room. The reality was before me, in all its naked truth. What a reality! Stone-deaf, blind, dumb, and utterly senseless to stern preaching and mild exhortation; to the torrent of words which comfortably-good creatures listen to from lip-philanthropists who, by some strange mental jugglery, really believe that they are doing good; to the raising of voices calling upon the fallen to turn and repent; to statistics which prove so much and do so little. Only to be affected, only to be sensibly touched, only to be altered for the better by the angelic wand of practical benevolence, which sees, pities, and at once wisely relieves. I knew and recognised that it was from no fault of hers that this poor girl had fallen so low. *Had* fallen! no; she was born fallen, and had been kept so. There was no road open for her to traverse which would lead to pleasanter paths. Gardens and fair places she had seen, doubtless, and her soul must have yearned to them with sickening desire, but they were on far-off hills, and the gates that led to them were shut for such as she. As she lay before me now, looking upward to the sky, no fair places shone for her. Every principle of goodness, the exercise of which brings us present peace and future bliss, seemed to point at her in bitter mockery. The reward that waits on worthy endeavour--how could she hope to win it? The blessing that attends on a pure life--how could she hope to gain it? Despair and desolation surrounded and encompassed her. What words I used to comfort her, I do not remember; but I know that two quarters of the hour had chimed from the solemn bells--doubly solemn in my ears at this momentous time, and in hers also, for when they struck we both paused to listen--before she grew calmer and could speak with coherence; and then only was I able to draw from her lips an explanation of her terrible distress.

Her child was perilously ill. She had spent the money I gave her for the doctor, as I had directed. She thought her dear was a little better after the first visit, but the doctor had told her yesterday the child must have nourishing food, or he could give no hopes for it. What kind of nourishing food? she had asked. A little port wine, arrowroot, and jelly, was the answer. She repeated these last words bitterly. 'Threepence-ha'penny was all that we 'ad in the place, and there warn't a blessed thing in the room that we could ha' raised fourpence upon. What was I to do? I went on so about it to Tom that he said last night, "Keep up your pluck, old gal; I'll go and make a rise."' Nerved to daring deeds, as I understood, and determined to get money somehow, Tom Beadle left Blade-o'-Grass with a kiss; 'and I've never set eyes on 'im since!' There was but one inference--the usual one--to be drawn from his absence; he had been taken up again by the police. In the mean time the condition of the child was growing more perilous every hour. 'She never complained once, sir; if she'd ha' cried it'd ha' been a relief to me I think, but she never opened 'er lips, the pretty dear; and there she's been a-layin' all the day, with 'er eyes wide open, *lookin' at somethin' as I couldn't see!* When it got dark, sir, I 'adn't a farthin' in my pocket, and there wasn't a bit o' bread nor a drop o' milk in the cupboard. And all the while I kep' on thinkin' that my dear was a dyin', and that if I could get 'er a little jelly or a cup of arrerroot, she would git better. It drove me a'most mad, sir, but I tried to keep up my 'eart by thinkin' that Tom per'aps 'd come in directly, and make it all right. I 'ad a little bit o' candle left, and I lighted it, so that I might watch my dear's face; but it only lasted about a hour and then it went out. I laid down by my dear's side, and took 'er in my arms to warm 'er; she never spoke or moved, sir; 'er 'eart beat, that was all. I felt 'er eyes with my fingers, and they was still wide open. I began to git frightened. What was it my dear was a-starin' at, and could she see it even in the dark? Well, sir, I laid so for a long time, until I fell asleep. 'Ow long I slep', sir, I can't tell, but when I woke up, my dear was moanin'--not cryin', sir, but moanin'. I tried to coax 'er to speak to me, but she didn't seem to know that 'er poor mother was by 'er side, and she never answered a word, but went on moanin'. O, sir! as I laid there in the dark listenin' to my dear, I thought I should ha' gone out of my mind! And then 'er poor 'ands--they're nothink but skin and bone, sir!--begun to wander about, and it seemed to me that she was searchin' and arksin' for somethin' to eat. What *could* I do, sir? what could I do? I run out to Mr. Wirtue's, but 'is place was shut; per'aps he'd ha' given me somethink, but I couldn't find 'im. Then I went back to my dear, and stood in the dark, fightin' with myself, and with sich thoughts comin' over me as made me 'ot and cold. I daren't tell you what they was, sir--I 'ardly know myself, but I feel that to be dead's better than them! And in the middle of it all, my dear's voice changed, and I knew that the tiger was tearin' at 'er. It was tearin' at me, too, and, with the fear of my dear's death starin' me in the face, I run out of the 'ouse. I didn't know where I was goin'. I wanted money--food for my dear! I think I was mad! And that's the way I met you. It's God truth, sir, every word of it!'

This was the story that, with sobs and gasps and many pauses for passion which she could not control, Blade-o'-Grass told me. I breathed a prayer of thankfulness that I was by her side in this awful crisis of her life. I felt that practical relief must be given at once. To leave her to her own

resources in such a moment of terrible desperation would have weighed on my soul like a sin which could never be washed away. I looked around upon the bleak night; not a footfall was to be heard. The snow was turning to sleet; the streets were deserted; every door was closed.



As I was considering what was best to be done, the bells began to chime again. It was twelve o'clock, and the Sabbath was at an end. From far and near the iron tongues, in solemn muffled tones, proclaimed the commencement of a new week's toil. For a few moments the air was filled with sound, and it would scarcely have surprised me to feel that the sleeping millions were suddenly aroused--to hear the din, the roar, the rattle of the roads--to see the anxious faces flashing all around me, and the streets peopled with the throngs that struggle this way and that, and contribute to the sum of the busy world. But with the last faint echo of the bells the fancy vanished; the night was more lonely and desolate than before, and Blade-o'-Grass was turning from me in despair.

'Come with me,' I said.

'Let me be!' she cried hoarsely. 'My child's starvin', and I'm goin' to get food for it--some'ow--or die in the streets!'

'I am going to help you. I am going to get food for you and your child.'

She grasped my hand with a convulsive movement, and sobs of hysterical joy escaped from her. But weakness and the revulsion of feeling overcame her, and she would have fallen to the ground again but for my support. By good fortune I heard the wheels of a cab.

'Can you keep up for a moment or two?' I whispered to her hurriedly. 'Take hold of these rails; they will support you. That's right--that's right! Do not stir till I return. I may be able to stop that cab, and it will take us to my place, where we can get food. Think of your child, and gather strength.'

I left her clinging to the rails and I ran after the cab, and hailed it. The driver drove on, shaking his head. But I ran by the side of the horse and entreated him so earnestly that he stopped. He said he was wet to the skin and tired out, and that he wanted to tumble into bed. But when he heard my rapidly-told story, and that the life of a little child might be saved or sacrificed by him, he hesitated not a moment.

Blade-o'-Grass was somewhat better and stronger when I returned to her, and we drove quickly to my lodgings. There I armed myself with candles, with what food there was in my cupboard, and with a little brandy which I fortunately had by me. Back to Stoney-alley we drove swiftly. On the road I urged Blade-o'-Grass to eat. She could not, she said; it would choke her if she tried.

'I can't go down this alley, sir,' the driver said, pulling up; 'it's too narrow.'

We alighted, and I paid the man his fare. He fumbled the money in his hand; hesitated; looked doubtfully at it.

'I hope you will think it enough,' I said. It was all the money I had about me.

With a rough tenderness he answered, 'I beg your pardon, sir; but I'd like to----' and he held sixpence towards Blade-o'-Grass.

'I will give it to her,' I said. 'God bless you!'

I shook hands with him, and he jumped on his box and rattled away, whistling his loudest.

We walked through the dark alley, unlighted by a single lamp, into the house, and up the dark stairs. The house contained many inhabitants, and we heard their breathing as we shuffled quietly along. When we reached Blade-o'-Grass's room, she paused at the door and listened.

'My dear's not moanin' now,' she whispered gladly. 'Per'aps she's asleep. We're a-comin', my dear, we're a-comin'! We've got somethin' nice to eat!'

By the time I lit a candle, I saw that Blade-o'-Grass had crept to the bed and was bending over her dear. She raised the child tenderly in her arms. I mixed a little brandy-and-water in a broken cup and approached them.

''Ad we better wake 'er? asked Blade-o'-Grass. I nodded. 'Baby! baby!' she cried.

She looked at me for a moment with a struggling fear in her eyes.

'Baby, my dear! 'Ere's somethin' nice for you! We're goin' to send the tiger to sleep; it sha'n't 'urt you any more. Baby! She don't answer me! For gracious God's sake, sir, come 'ere! Quick! Baby! my love, my 'eart! Mother's a-callin' to you. Open your eyes! Speak to me! Look at mother, my life!'

The fear in her eyes grew stronger, spread over her face and turned it deathly white. With a wild shudder she tore the child from the bed, and pressing her to her breast, turned to me with a look so agonising and despairing as blanched my face to the whiteness of hers.

'What's this!' she muttered piteously. 'For the good Lord's sake, tell me what is this?' She passed her hand over her child with swift and fierce tenderness, and with a scream that must have made terrible the dreams of the sleepers, cried, 'The tiger! the tiger! The tiger's killed my child! O, my 'eart, my life!' and fell to the ground, clasping her dear closer to her heart, and rocked to and fro in an agony of passionate ungovernable grief.

Alas! alas! The child, on whose face I had never seen a smile, had died during the mother's absence, and the tiger that had been the curse of her life would never more disturb her. Never more! Never more!

X.

NO, NO! BORN IN LOVE! IN LOVE!

I was busy writing on the following morning when Mr. Merrywhistle called upon me.

'You look tired,' he said.

I told him that I had been up all night with Blade-o'-Grass, and that her child was dead. He being her nearest and most faithful friend, I related to him the circumstance of my meeting Blade-o'-Grass on the previous night, and all that followed. The good old man shed tears, and was sincerely grieved.

'Can I do anything?' he asked.

'You can do a great deal,' I answered. 'There is the burial of the child.'

'I will see to that,' he interrupted; 'and the poor child shall be buried decently.'

This was a weight off my mind, for I knew by his words and his manner that he intended to defray the charges of the funeral out of his own purse; mine unfortunately was empty. I pressed his hand.

'Heaven forgive me for saying it,' he said, wiping the tears from his eyes, 'but it is a happier fate for the poor little thing to die, than to live as her mother has lived.'

Then, I told him, there was the mother herself to look after.

'I should not have remained with her so long, for I needed rest; but it was impossible for me to leave her. If she were left to herself and her thoughts, I am afraid that something bad would happen. Jimmy Virtue is with her now, and will remain until I send some one to relieve him, or go myself.'

'Jimmy is a good fellow,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, rising, 'but he's as poor as a church mouse, and must attend to his business. I will see to the poor girl, and when I am absent I will get some woman in the house to look after her. There, there! make your mind easy till tomorrow, and go to bed early tonight.'

I felt much relieved, and I rose the next morning thoroughly refreshed in mind and body. As early in the day as I could I walked towards Stoney-alley. On my way I met Mr. Merrywhistle. I asked him after Blade-o'-Grass. He shook his head gravely, and said,

'I was anxious to see you about her. It is with her just as you described. If she were left to herself she would do something desperate.'

'Has Tom Beadle come home?'

'No, and I have heard nothing of him. His presence might arouse her from the awful melancholy which has fast hold of her. It is dreadful to see. She has not spoken a word since you left, and it is with the greatest difficult that the woman I have employed has induced her to touch food; I am sure she has not eaten sufficient to keep life in her. She sits by her dead child, looking at it with a blank look in her eyes that almost freezes my blood to see. Sometimes she turns her head, and gazes into one particular corner of the room, with a gaze so fixed and steadfast that I have half expected--I am very nervous, my dear sir--to see something start out of the wall.'

'She told me on the night I met her by the Royal Exchange, that her baby lay all the day with her eyes wide open, staring at something she couldn't see. She laid great stress on the words. Perhaps she is trying to discover what it was the poor child was gazing at.'

'I have been thinking, my dear sir----'

'Yes,' I said, gently, for he had paused.

----'That if you were to speak to her, not simply as a friend who is interested in her bodily welfare, but as a minister----'

'I understand you. Such thought was in my own mind. I have not forgotten my duty, believe me.'

Upon entering the room where the dead and the living lay, I saw at a glance that Mr. Merrywhistle had indeed well discharged his duty. It was cleaner and tidier than I had yet seen it. One or two humble and necessary pieces of furniture had been added, and on the window there was a clean white muslin blind, edged with black ribbon. The dead child was on the bed, with a white sheet over it, and Blade-o'-Grass was lying on the ground, with her hand beneath the sheet embracing the body. I motioned the woman in attendance from the room; she went softly, and I closed the door behind me. As I stood with the handle in my hand, I heard a knock. I opened the door, and saw one of the lodgers--a tail, gaunt woman, with a decided moustache--with a yellow basin in her hand. She dropped a curtsey.

'I've brought a little mutton broth for Blade-o'-Grass,' she said. 'Mind! It's 'ot!'

I thanked her, and taking the basin from her laid it aside. Then closing the door again, I approached Blade-o'-Grass, and placed my hand on her shoulder. She gazed at me with no sign of recognition, and turned her face again towards her child. I bent over the clay tenderly. The child looked well in death. Never in its life had its face worn so peaceful an expression. I sat on a chair beside the hapless mother, and spoke to her of that other and better life into which her child had entered; I spoke to her of the goodness of the all-beneficent God, of the comprehensive love which He, who watches over all His children, bears to the meanest of them. But my words touched her not; she made no movement in response to them, but sat motionless, with hopeless eyes fixed upon the child. I did not dare attempt to arouse her attention by sternness. Every word that came from my lips seemed to me to be dissolved into gentle utterance by the intense mother's love, which closed the door upon all outward sympathy. And still I continued,

'Think,' I said, in my most earnest tones, 'think but for a moment Cast your thoughts from your own misery and your own unhappiness, and let them dwell wholly and solely upon your child.'

A gleam that faintly expressed scornful wonder passed into her eyes. I hailed even that faint sign with gladness.

'The mother's love that dwells so strongly in your breast, is it as sweet as it should be, is it as

perfect as it should be, if it blind you to the happier lot that lies before your child, and make you regardless of it? Love in its perfect form is shown in unselfishness. Are you unselfish in your grief? While your child lived you found your happiness and your consolation in her. But was she happy? Carry your thoughts to the many times that you saw her in pain, that she suffered hunger, that she cried because of the tiger that tormented her----'

A shiver passed over the form of Blade-o'-Grass; her stony gaze relaxed, and I saw that I had aroused her attention.

'----And think if a happier lot lies before her, as it does, if even now the power is given to her, by the wisdom and the goodness of God, to comprehend and be grateful for the love which has filled your heart from her birth--think but for a moment, if this be so, As It Is! whether you should not rather rejoice than mourn? By doing this you would show love in its most perfect form of unselfishness. All her pain is gone, all her sufferings have passed away, and the tiger is stilled for ever. Yes, this child, born in sin,'----

'No, no!' cried Blade-o'-Grass, in a piercing tone of anguish, springing to her feet, and pleading for her lost child in the strong agony of her soul. 'Born in love! In love--in love!'

'Born in love,' I said sadly, 'and yet in sin'----

'I didn't know,' she sobbed, sinking again to the foot of the bed. ''Ow could I know; and 'ow could baby know? O, don't be 'ard on baby! O, my 'eart, my life! O, baby, baby!'

The mere utterance of the word so overwhelmed her, that for a time she was blind and deaf to all around her. Dark clouds encompassed her; she was conscious of nothing but the overpowering grief which was born of love; all else was blotted out from her comprehension. She and her dead baby were alone, distinct from every thing in nature. Divine sympathy for her touched her not; human love for her touched her not She did not ask for them; she did not know the good that lay in them. All that she desired, all that she yearned for, was her baby, and with that dear soul of her soul and heart of her heart in her arms, she would be content to wander into the Oblivion where peace was, where no gnawing hunger was, where no unkind looks were, where no pain was. In that Oblivion only one thing could live--her love for her baby.

I waited until she was calmer, and could heed my words.

'Your child is purified by its death. In the better life that lies beyond this, all her troubles, all her unconscious shame, all her sufferings are washed away and forgotten. Ah, my dear! think of it and be grateful for the Divine compassion that has brought peace to her suffering soul. She waits for you in the better land to reward you for your love; and until the Divine Hand is laid upon you, and calls upon you to join her there, let it be your consolation to know that she has been spared the misery that has fallen to your lot.'

She echoed wonderingly, with overflowing eyes,

'The better land that lays beyond this! She waits for me in the better land! Tell me.'

Then, in words as plain as I could find, I spoke to her of those Divine truths, of that Divine hope, without a belief in which our lives would be dark indeed.

'And the tiger!' she cried. 'Is the tiger with her? For the Lord's sake don't tell me that the tiger is with her there!'

These and other questions I had to answer to her satisfaction, and gradually, gradually the expression of stony despair left her features, and into her eyes there stole a softened look of hope and belief.

'She will see me there!' she sobbed. 'My dear will see me there, and will smile upon me! I shall 'old 'er in my arms! O, my dear, my dear!'

She knelt with me by the side of the lifeless clay, and repeated after me her first prayer, dwelling upon the words slowly and wistfully. Another voice joined ours in the prayer: Mr. Merrywhistle's; and she, recognising it, stretched out her hand to that faithfullest of friends. Side by side we knelt in silence when the prayer was done, and no sound was heard in the room but the quiet sobs of the bereaved mother. After a time she turned to me, and, in broken, grateful words, said that I had done her good. Yes, we had comforted her; thank God we had comforted her! With what fervent gratitude did I bless the gracious God for giving us the power of comforting that poor bruised heart!

Other comfort was given to her also. The Silvers had been told of the death, and Mrs. Silver and Rachel came and sat with Blade-o'-Grass. At first she shrank from Mrs. Silver, but no person could long resist the gentle tenderness of that good woman.

'She is truly your friend,' I said.

'I know it, I know it,' whispered Blade-o'-Grass humbly; 'but I'm not--not good enough.'

I repeated these words to Mrs. Silver, and with a beautiful smile she embraced the poor girl

and kissed her.

'Will you not kiss me, my child?' Mrs. Silver asked.

The sobs that came from Blade-o'-Grass came from a heart overcharged with gratitude. But she was most at home with Rachel, and the two girls sat by the bed, while Mrs. Silver busied herself about the room. She stopped until the evening, and when she and Rachel were preparing to go, I saw an imploring look in Blade-o'-Grass's eyes. I stepped to her side.

'What is it you want, my dear?' She made no reply, but she looked at Rachel most wistfully and yearningly. I saw the thought and the wish that she was too humble to express.

'Let Rachel stop with her tonight,' I said to Mrs. Silver.

For one moment only did Mrs. Silver hesitate; her child had never slept away from her home.

'Rachel, my dear,' she said, 'will you stop to-night with Blade-o'-Grass?'

'O yes!' answered Rachel with cheerful willingness; 'I shall be glad to stop.'

With a gasp of joy Blade-o'-Grass caught Rachel's hand, and fondled it and kissed it again and again. Rachel released her hand, and placed her arm round Blade-o'-Grass's neck. The head of Blade-o'-Grass drooped to her breast, but Rachel's was lifted in simple trustfulness and love. We left to Mr. Merrywhistle the task of seeing to Rachel's comfort for the night.

'I shall be here very early in the morning,' said Mrs. Silver, as she kissed her child. She kissed Blade-o'-Grass again also, and went out of the room with Mr. Merrywhistle. I lingered behind for a moment or two. With Rachel's hand in mine I could not help saying to her,

'You gladden my heart, my dear.'

She flushed slightly, and trembled.

'I am glad you are pleased with me, Mr. Meadow. Good-night.'

'Good-night, my dear.'

We left Mr. Merrywhistle in Stoney-alley; he expressed his intention of sleeping in the house, and I saw Mrs. Silver home.

'How shall I thank you, dear madam,' I said as I stood with her in Buttercup-square, 'for the confidence you place in me?'

'Do you know what I have been thinking of as we walked along, Mr. Meadow?'

'No.'

'That it was a fortunate day for me when I wrote to ask you to assist us in our children's holiday. If it had pleased God to have given me a son of my own, I should have wished him to resemble you.'

I cannot resist writing these words here, for they were very pleasant to me.

The funeral took place on the Thursday. Rachel, Mrs. Silver, and Mr. Merrywhistle accompanied Blade-o'-Grass to the last resting-place of her child. The women brought some winter flowers with them. If anything could have soothed the heart of Blade-o'-Grass on that occasion, it was the sight of these flowers, as well as the tender consideration which lay in the act. Before the lid of the coffin was nailed down, Blade-o'-Grass, with trembling hands and white lips, placed some of these flowers in her dead child's hands; her tears rained upon them as she stooped and kissed the lifeless clay. She did not raise her head for many moments, and I heard her whisper to her dear to be sure and wait for her in the better land. I led her from the coffin, and bade her take heart.

'I do, sir, I do!' she sobbed. 'I remember every word you said.

Stoney-alley and the narrow streets through which we wended our way to the wider thoroughfares were thronged with poor people, and many a 'Lord love you!' came from their lips, and women pressed forward and asked Rachel, whose arm was round the weeping mother's waist, to shake hands with them. When we arrived at the churchyard, we found Jimmy Virtue waiting by the side of the grave. The simple service was soon ended, and the clay of the poor child was left to peace and God.

XI.

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE LIVED ON AN ISLAND----

There was a considerable stir in the immediate neighbourhood of the Temple of Liberty on the night of the great meeting. Paul's-buildings, now newly christened, was situated in a dimly-lighted narrow street, and had in its time played many parts. It had been a lecture-hall, a warehouse for old clothes, a dancing academy, a refuge for 'fat women' and 'living skeletons,' a home for the tamest of wild beasts; and it had brought misfortune upon all who had flown to it. It was a moot point whether the social regenerators who had christened it the Temple of Liberty would fare better than their predecessors.

On the night in question, little knots of men hung about the portico, in which dangled a dejected oil-lamp, the despondent light in which showed the way to liberty. The ostensible purpose for which the meeting was to be held was to pass resolutions condemnatory of a miscarriage of justice in one instance, and of a too-violent carrying out of the law in another; but it was generally understood that other and more important matters connected with the position of the working man were to be brought forward. There was no charge for admission, but before the proceedings commenced, the Secretary--whom we discovered to be the Delegate or 'Postle' whose appearance in Stoney-alley had caused so much mental disturbance to Jimmy Virtue--announced that the smallest subscription in aid of the defrayal of expenses would be thankfully received. 'Those who cannot afford more,' he said, 'can give their ha'penny or their penny in aid of the good cause. We know how the poor man is ground down, and the smallest subscription is in our eyes equal to the largest. In the same way,' he added, with a touch of cunning, 'as the poorest man should be equal to the richest in the eyes of justice!' 'Equaller!' cried an unreasoning demagogue, smelling strongly of beer, as he handed in a penny with a flourish, and with the air of one who, with that copper donation, was giving the deathblow to a bloated aristocracy.

'What's that Secretary 'Postle's name?' muttered Jimmy Virtue as he looked at a small handbill of the proceedings. 'Mark Mallard! H'm! Mark Mallard.' And then turned his attention to a study of Mark Mallard's face, which seemed, indeed, to be the principal reason for Jimmy Virtue's presence on the occasion.

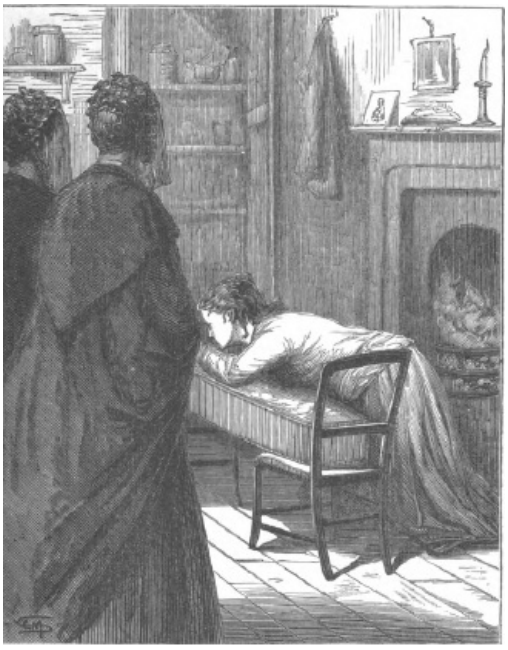
'You are strangely interested in that secretary, Jimmy,' observed Robert Truefit.

'You let me alone,' replied Jimmy Virtue; 'I'm a puzzlin' out somethin'. I've got my considerin' cap on.'

And as he was evidently engaged in an intricate mental process, we did not disturb him.

The Temple of Liberty held probably nearly two hundred persons, and it was quite full. We three were among the earliest arrivals, and occupied the front seat directly facing the platform. I noticed that there was a large number of decently-clad working men present, some with earnest faces, who had evidently come with the intention of arguing matters out in a certain sense fairly. Many members of the new Working-man's League were also present, and these were prepared to support their officers through thick and thin. The chief of these officers and the principal speaker among them was the Secretary, Mark Mallard, who was voted to the chair. He was a common-looking man between fifty and sixty years of age, and his face bore strong marks of a life's discontent of mind; a man, thought I, who would be envious of his neighbour's ox, but too indolent to work for that which he envied. The unfavourable opinion I formed of him became strengthened as I studied the signs in his face: he was evidently an unfit man to be a leader in any good cause. But he could speak in a fairly-fluent style and with a certain rough readiness which found favour with many among his audience. He was not eloquent, but ready-tongued, and from long practice, as I judged, knew how to make such use of his materials as would best please the kind of assemblage he was addressing now. He first proceeded to give a brief account of the establishment in the neighbourhood of the new Working-man's League, a branch, he said, of a greater institution which was to set everything right for the working man--and by the working man he meant the poor man. Throughout the whole of the proceedings he placed idle poverty and honest labour on one pedestal, and sought to prove--and did prove to many only too ready to believe--how the poor man was ground down, oppressed, and crushed by the 'ruthless' heel of the rich. The Working-man's League would seek to bring about a different state of things; its aim was to give the working man the rights which were unlawfully denied to him in the present condition of things, and to prove that the real power of the nation lay in labour, and not in capital. This, of course, was received with cheers. The orator showed no originality either in his propositions or in his mode of placing them before his hearers; but they were none the less enthusiastically received on that account. Fairly sifted and summed up, his utterances amounted to nothing more than the usual declamation concerning the rich and the poor, and the atrocious injustice of a state of things which allows one man to have more money in his purse than another. The old platitudes which cling to the vexed subject came trippingly off his tongue. If, he said, the real power of the country lay in labour and not in capital, then labour should govern the country; but to show the unfairness of things, and the howl that the moneyocracy raised at the slightest attempt to set things right, let them bring to mind how, if a working man tried to get into

Parliament, he was hounded down and barked at by the wealthy classes. Well, if the wealthy classes, and he was sorry to say the middle classes also, denied justice to the working man, the time had come for the working man to set up shop for himself. He did not lose sight of the ostensible purpose for which the meeting was called. He detailed two instances of the mal-administration of justice which had gone the round of the papers and had created some noise.



There is nothing that so impresses a meeting composed of ordinary minds, such as this was, as the bringing forward of small facts which have already been commented on among themselves. One instance of the miscarriage of justice was where a gentleman-farmer had flogged a labourer to within an inch of his life, and was punished for the offence by a fine of five pounds inflicted by another gentleman-farmer, before whom, as a magistrate, the case was brought. 'What was five pounds to him?' asked the speaker. 'What's five pounds to the man who has thousands in the bank? Five pounds or three months' imprisonment! Why, the rich farmer pulled out the money with a grin on his face, and was heard to say afterwards that what he'd done was the proper thing to do to such scum--meaning the working man--when they dared to say they were not well enough paid, and couldn't support a family on twelve shillings a week. Twelve shillings a week! That was the sum this agricultural labourer had starved upon--him and his wife and children--for more than twenty years. And he became a union-man, and spoke up for his rights; and his master marked him, and nigh killed him for it. Was that five pounds' fine justice, I should like to know?' The other instance was that of a labouring man who, under more aggravating circumstances, had thrashed a gentleman and beat him severely, and who was put in prison for six months for the offence. 'And while he was in prison,' said the speaker, 'how was his wife to get bread for her children? After this, will any one dare to say that there's not one law for the rich and another for the poor? And shall this state of things be allowed to continue?'

The recapitulation of these familiar illustrations accomplished more than could have been accomplished by volumes of rhetoric, and cries of 'No, no!' came from all parts of the hall.

'The mischief is,' whispered Robert Truefit to me, 'that these instances are true. See how intent Jimmy is upon our worthy chairman.'

After the passing of resolutions condemning the judicial decisions in the strongest terms, other and more daring matter was gone into; and then I saw plainly, what I had hitherto only suspected, that the Working-man's League was in reality a republican club (in the shell), the promoters of which were ready with fiery words to inflame the minds of the ignorant against all recognised authority. One of the great points that Mark Mallard made was, that he, like themselves, was a working man.

'Look at my clothes; look at my hands! They are the same as yours, and I have as little money in my pocket, I daresay, as any of you.'

'Yes,' growled Jimmy Virtue; 'and you're as ready as any on us to be treated to a pint o' beer.'

'Order, order!' cried some.

'Quite as ready to be treated,' said Mark Mallard, with a frown at Jimmy Virtue, which Jimmy received with a sneer; 'and as ready,' he added, brightening up, 'to treat when my turn comes.

We're rowing in the same boat, you and me.' ('I'm 'anged if we are!' growled Jimmy Virtue under his breath.) But Mark Mallard proceeded: 'I'm not being rowed; I'm rowing, as all of you are; and we'll all row together, and show our muscle.'

There was a murmur of approval at this figure of speech; and thus encouraged, the speaker proceeded. The cunning skill with which he mingled familiar matters was enough to mislead any but fairly-balanced minds--royal pensions dating back hundreds of years; manhood suffrage; attempts to interfere with the poor man's beer; justices' justice; the price of meat and coals; one man rolling in his carriage while another starved in rags; bank and other directors who had ruined thousands of poor families living, after exposure, on the fat of the land; the starvation price which capital put upon labour, as instanced in the condition of the agricultural labourers--all these were brought forward and artfully handled to prove into what a deplorable and abominable Slough of Despond the Rights of Man had been trodden by masters and gentlemen.

During the whole time Mark Mallard was speaking, Jimmy Virtue had scarcely once removed his eyes from the man's face; and he had openly expressed his disapproval of the false conclusions drawn by the speaker. At first Mark Mallard had endeavoured to bully Jimmy Virtue into silence, but Jimmy Virtue was the last man in the world to be so bullied, and he expressed his dissent in stronger terms every time the attempt was made. I noticed that Mark Mallard was gradually drawn to observe the close manner in which he was being watched by Jimmy Virtue, and I saw that he grew uneasy and nervous beneath the steady gaze of my eccentric friend. From that time Mark Mallard took no open notice of Jimmy Virtue, but nevertheless looked at him stealthily every now and then. He wound up his most lengthy speech with a peroration in which the Rights of Man and the boast that he, like themselves, was a working man, were the two most conspicuous features; and having resumed his seat amid applause, was wiping his forehead, when Jimmy Virtue rose suddenly, and said in a loud tone that he wanted to ask the Delegate a question or two.

Cries of 'Hear, hear!' and 'No, no!' responded to this announcement; and the latter, on a secret sign from Mark Mallard to his immediate supporters, were swelling into a roar, which would have speedily silenced those who were curious to hear Jimmy Virtue, when Robert Truefit leaped upstanding on to the bench, and cried, in a ringing voice which quelled the tumult,

'Fair play! fair play!'

The appeal, strengthened by the manly manner in which it was made, was taken up and indorsed in different parts of the room. In the midst of this counterbalancing excitement, Robert Truefit leaned down to Jimmy Virtue, and asked hurriedly,

'Jimmy, what is it you are about to do?

'You stick to me. Bob,' replied Jimmy Virtue; 'I know what I'm about You stick to me, and you'll 'ear somethin' as'll interest you. The warmint!' His features were working in an extraordinary manner, and his last two words were intended to apply to Mark Mallard.

'Look here, mates,' cried Robert Truefit, commanding and compelling silence by his earnest voice and action, 'we've been called together to-night to discuss certain matters affecting the working man. How *can* we discuss these matters, and arrive at a proper understanding--and from that point to a proper solution--of the difficulties which surround us, unless we give fair play to those who wish to speak? ('Hear, hear, hear! Well said, mate; go on.') 'I *am* a working man. My name's Robert Truefit, and I'm a working mason in Mr. Turner's yard. Some of you know me, perhaps; I think I see a face or two that I've seen before.' ('You do. Bob, you do. Go it, old fellow! Fair play! fair play!' And a distinct voice from a gray-haired man in a corner of the room, saying, 'There ain't a man in London that's got the real interest of the working man more at heart than Robert Truefit. And he's got a wife and six children as 'd be a credit to the best man as ever trod shoe-leather.' This statement elicited cheers for Robert Truefit, and 'Another for the old woman!' and 'Another for the kids!' which were given heartily. Then a laughable episode occurred by Robert Truefit saying, in correction, 'No, mate; I've only five young ones;' and a voice replying, 'Never mind, old man; you can soon make it up half a dozen!' A great many who had listened listlessly to Mark Mallard's platitudes now shifted on their seats, as if the meeting was beginning to be interesting.)

'This man here,' continued Robert Truefit, 'who wants to ask Mr. Mark Mallard a question or two, is a friend of mine. He's a rum 'un to look at, but he's sound at bottom.' (Cries of 'Let's see him! Let's have a look at him!') 'Wait a bit. *I* don't know what he's going to say any more than you do; but he has told me that he knows what he's about, and I believe him, as I'd believe anything else he says.' ('Hurrah for the rum 'un to look at!') 'And now to those who have made up their minds beforehand not to hear what he has got to say, all I've got to do with them is to direct their attention to the name of this hall, written up over the chairman's head. Look at it. "The Temple of Liberty!" A big name, mates, for such a little room as this, but it will do if it prove to be what it professes to be. Great things have been accomplished in little places before to-night; even now, I've no doubt, busy hands and busy minds are at work in common garrets and kitchens, and the world will be the better for their labours by and by, I hope. Let those who wrote "The Temple of Liberty" at the head of this hall--Mr. Mark Mallard, I presume, is chiefly responsible for it--take it down if we are not to have a fair hearing.' ('Bravo, Bob! You're a sound man, you are!') 'I hope so. I cry "Shame" on those who would deny us a hearing! Why, if there were masters and gentlemen

among us who wanted to be heard, I hope we are manly enough to listen to them. *Beg* for fair play, indeed! Why, it's an Englishman's boast that he makes a clear ring for all who, believing they have right on their side, have the pluck to stand up for themselves and their opinions; and we're not to be told to-night that in this respect we are a nation of liars. Whatever our opinions, however much we may differ about this and that, we're Englishmen, and we're proud of it! Shall we, then, scream out--as we do--for liberty of speech, and deny it to one of ourselves?'

Robert Truefit had done his work well. From all parts of the room the cry arose, 'Get on to the platform, mate!' and in obedience to that request Robert Truefit jumped on to the platform, and assisted Jimmy Virtue to get up after him. They pulled off their caps, and stood side by side, facing the meeting. Immediately the people caught sight of Jimmy Virtue's eccentric face and form, a shout of laughter came from them, which the cause of it received most good-humouredly. But his earnestness of purpose was apparent in the midst of the good-humoured nods with which he responded to the merriment his appearance created. When silence was restored, Jimmy Virtue said:

'I want to ask the honourable Delegate a question or two as you'll see the drift on presently. If he'll 'ave the kindness to step forward----'

'Well, here I am,' said the Chairman, rising; 'and now be quick with your questions, for there's a deal of business to be got through.'

'Some on us want to be sure,' replied Jimmy Virtue, 'that you're the proper person to conduct the business; I'm one o' them as wants to be convinced.' He referred to the handbill. Your name's Mark Mallard.'

'That's my name. What's yours?'

'Jimmy Virtue; and it's the name as I was christened by, and I never 'ad no occasion to take no other. Can the honourable Delegate say as much as that?'

'What do you mean by this fooling?' blustered Mark Mallard. 'What has my name to do with the object of this meeting?'

Some of those present were evidently asking this question of themselves, but when Jimmy Virtue said excitedly, 'You wait a bit, and you'll 'eer somethin' as'll open your eyes!' their curiosity became a check to their impatience.

'Now,' continued Jimmy Virtue, 'you've talked a good deal about the Rights o' Man, and you say you're a workin' man yourself. For my part, I've got a big respect for the Rights o' Man, and I wish with all my 'eart that every man 'ad his rights; though what the world'd do if it was all rights and no wrongs, it's beyond me to answer. But about you're bein' a workin' man, Mr. Delegate. What kind o' workin' man? What's your trade?--that's what I want to know. What's your trade, and where do you work?'

Mark Mallard held out his arms to the meeting in remonstrance, and was about to protest against the introduction of such irrelevant matter, when Jimmy Virtue stopped him.

'No; I bar that! No shirkin'. No runnin' away from what I'm a-coming to. If you're a workin'-man you've got a trade, and you're not one o' the sort this meeting's come to 'eer if you're ashamed of it.' ('Hear, hear, mate!') 'There's a 'underd men 'ere as 'd be willin', if they was asked, to say what their trade is and what shop they work for. And why'd they be ready and willin' to say? Because they ain't got nothink to be ashamed on--that's why!'

But here Mark Mallard called out authoritatively that it was time this nonsense was put a stop to. 'We are not here to discuss personalities,' he said; 'we have higher matters in hand. The condition of the working man has become too serious to be pushed out of sight by one who is evidently no friend to the good cause. As chairman of this meeting----'

'Say Captain,' suggested Robert Truefit quietly.

'Well, as Captain, if it pleases you better----'

'It does,' said Robert Truefit, pushing his way to the front again, 'for it fits the story I'm going to tell.'

'We want no stories,' shouted Mark Mallard; and a few of his followers took up the cry.

'A story,' continued Robert Truefit, not heeding the interruption, 'which concerns the business for which we have been called together, and which concerns I won't say all here, but every honest-minded man I see before me.'

The meeting here was convulsed with laughter. Jimmy Virtue, in his excitement, had taken out his glass eye, and was polishing it vigorously with his red cotton handkerchief, perfectly unconscious that he was doing anything extraordinary.

'Go it, old chap,' cried a number of voices, 'with your one eye!'

'I can see as far,' retorted Jimmy Virtue, 'with my one eye as you can with two. And look 'ere, mates. This' (holding up the piece of glass) 'is the only sham thing I've got about me.'

This hit told well, and when the laughter had subsided there were calls for Robert Truefit's story.

'I won't keep you long, mates, and I'll commence after a good old-fashioned style. Once upon a time there lived on an island a great number of persons of all stations and degrees. Some were born with silver spoons in their mouths, some with iron ladles. Some were poor, some were rich; some idled and lived well; some worked all the working hours of the day and lived hard. These last were like ourselves, working men; and whilst they had much to be grateful for, they had also, no doubt, much to complain of. Many of them were married and had children; others were courting and on their road to wedlock. The wages they earned were about the same as we earn--say, from twenty to forty-five shillings a week--and they found they had as much as they could do to squeeze out a sufficient and reasonable subsistence for their families. This pressed heavily upon them, and they began to murmur at the inequality of things. "We can't enjoy ourselves as we ought," they said to one another; "we can't afford to eat meat every day; we can't afford to go to the theatres; we can't afford a holiday; we can't make any provision for sickness, or for the time when we are too old to work." These complaints they made, and a hundred others, many of which were undoubtedly well-founded from their point of view--and you will agree with me that the point of view which comes home to their own doors is the only point of view from which nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand care to argue, whether they be rich or poor. Some sensible and straightforward workmen among them resolved to agitate their grievances in such a manner as to make things better for their children, if not for themselves. You know, I daresay, what is the meaning of the Constitution: it is a system of fundamental principles for the government of rational and social beings. Well, these men were sensible enough to recognise that the Constitution by which they were governed, and which was accountable for the burdens which pressed heavily upon them, was not a creation, but a growth--a steady gradual growth of many centuries. Let us liken it to an old and deeply-rooted tree, which by undue favour or by force of circumstance had grown crooked--but a tree, nevertheless, from which they drew food and protection. The common sense of these men told them that desolation and misery would fall upon them if by violent and sudden means they strove to *force* the crooked tree straight. The violent straining of the fibres would weaken them, and would so destroy the power of reproduction that the tree would not be able to bear sufficient food for those who lived in the shadow of its branches. And as to planting another, and expecting it to grow up and have healthy limbs in a night----well, you know what a foolish expectation that would have been! "But," they said, "we can sow the seed for another and a healthier tree, and while it grows we will wait, and watch, and assist it to the extent of our wisdom, and we'll work steadily on the while--like men!" There were others who were for more violent means--with as much reason as would exist in the man who, having suffered all his life from an internal hereditary disease, goes abruptly to a physician, and demands a dose of medicine that shall cure him on the spot. But the sensible men were the most powerful body, although possibly not the most numerous, and they worked steadily on, educating their children, and taking advantage of those aids which their own persistence and the natural advancement of the times brought to them. In the midst of this, there comes to the island a ship, and the Captain, convening a meeting of working men, says, "I am one of yourselves, and I know a means of remedying your grievances. Sail under my colours, and the oligarchs who monopolise the fat of the land shall be mown down like chaff. There shall be no waiting! You shall have as much fresh meat every day as you can eat; you shall have good clothes always; you sha'n't know what it is to be pinched; you shall have a man's rights--full measure! And these things shall be accomplished at once." He spoke confidently and boldly, and his words were tempting, and made an impression even upon those whose views were in favour of more temperate action than he advocated. But some among them asked of themselves, "What is it that we are asked to do?" And they thought, after all, that there were worse lots than that they had to bear. Many of their homes were happy, though poor. By their own firesides they enjoyed the greatest blessings of life. They loved their wives; they loved their children. They saw these stems of theirs growing to womanhood and manhood under their loving protection. "If we stagger," they said to themselves, "they will fall and get hurt." And we know,' said Robert Truefit, with intense and heartfelt earnestness, 'we who are husbands and fathers--we know how our own hearts bleed when those who are dear to us suffer! Said these men to themselves, as they looked around upon other communities and other countries, "Here is a community that strove to accomplish by force what we are striving to accomplish by steady and reasonable means. What do we see as the result? Fire, pillage, murder, civil war; food-fields laid waste, homes burnt to the ground, families in mourning, lives wrecked! Shall we bring these things upon ourselves and upon our wives and children?" But still the captain urged his views. "Well, then," said they, turning to him'--and Robert Truefit with a startlingly significant movement turned towards Mark Mallard--'"prove to us at all events that you are honest--prove to us that you are one of ourselves--that the name you go by is your own, and has always been your own. Some of us fear that you have hoisted false colours, and they don't want to sail under them. Prove to us that our fears are unfounded, and then, when we are satisfied as to your honesty and integrity, we will give a more careful attention to the temptations you hold out, and shall be the better able to judge of their value."'

Robert Truefit paused, and from the hearty cheers that were given as he retreated a step and laid his hand on Jimmy Virtue's shoulder, it was evident that his sentiments were indorsed by the better class of men in the meeting, and that they would not allow him or his friend to be put down. Mark Mallard saw that there was no escape for him, and without the slightest suspicion of

the shot Jimmy Virtue was about to fire, said, in a blustering tone,

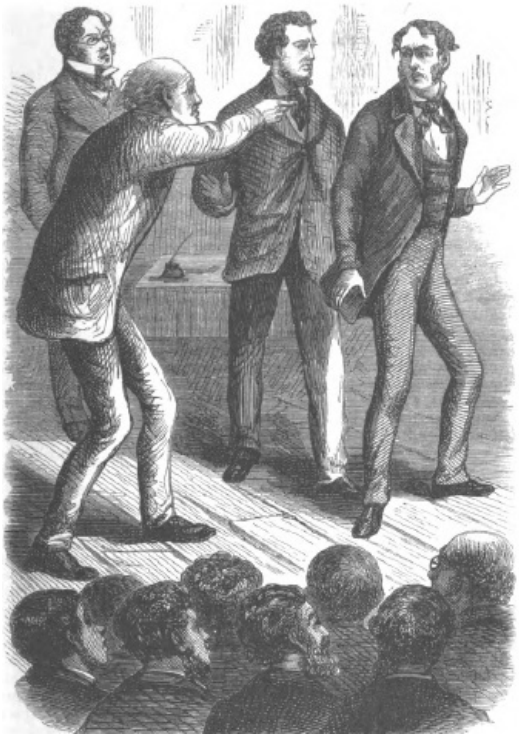
'Now, then, say what you've got to say, and be done with it.'

'I will,' replied Jimmy Virtue; 'and as you don't seem willin' to say what's your trade, I won't press you there. I'll just be satisfied with an answer to two questions, and I'll put 'em both in one breath.' The "two" men were standing in front of the platform in a line by themselves, and the eyes of all were upon them. Crooking the forefinger of his right hand, extending his arm, and bending forward towards Mark Mallard with an earnestness there was no withstanding, Jimmy Virtue said, 'Tell this meetin' if you ever lived in a place they calls Stoney-alley, and then tell 'em what's become of the wife you left there to starve!'

Mark Mallard staggered as if shot, and a deathly paleness came into his face.

'I knowed it!' cried Jimmy Virtue. 'Look at 'im, mates, look at 'im! I never set my eyes on a man but what I'd swear to 'im ag'in if there was fifty year atween! Look 'ere, mates'--(Jimmy's excitement was wonderful to witness)--'Look 'ere, mates. This man 'as come 'ere and starts a Temple o' Liberty 'as got no more right to the name of Mark Mallard than I've got to the name of Tippitiwitchet. Twenty-two year ago he lived four doors from where my shop is now in Stoney-alley. All the while he lives there he never does a stroke o' work, but passes his time in pot-'ouses, drinkin' the beer as is given to 'im freely because he's got the gift o' the gab, as we've 'eerd to-night. Don't think, mates, I'm agin a poor man 'avin 'is beer; I ain't one as 'd rob 'im of it. I'm *for* it! though I do believe at the same time that the poor man makes a sight too much of it--a blessed sight too much--as if 'is liberty and the whole blessed constitootion depended on it! Well, this man goes about pot-'ouses talkin' o' the Rights o' Man and leavin' 'is wife to starve. He pawns every blessed thing of 'er'n he can lay 'is 'ands on--she's 'eavy in the family-way, mind you!--he pawns 'er weddin' ring, and 'ere it is. I lent 'im money on it myself. And a week afore 'is wife's confined; he carries out the Rights o' Man, and makes a end of 'em, so to speak, by cuttin' away, and leavin' 'er without a loaf o' bread, or as much as 'd buy one! Nothin' more 's 'eerd of *'im*; 'is wife she's confined with twins, and dies a week arterwards from sorrer and starvation. And I put it to you, mates,--I put it to you, whether a mean thief like 'im is the proper sort o' man to set up a Temple o' Liberty and to come preachin' to us about the Rights o' Man!'

It is impossible to describe the storm of agitation that ensued; I know that the men present, stirred to honest indignation, would have dealt violently with Mark Mallard if they could have laid hand on him; but by strenuous means we saved him from their anger, and he escaped safely through a door at the back of the platform. When he was gone, Robert Truefit said in an agitated tone, 'For heaven's sake, Jimmy, tell us who that man is.'



'That man, Bob,' replied Jimmy Virtue, dabbing his face with his handkerchief, 'is Blade-o'-Grass's father. I knowed 'im agin, the thief, directly I set eyes on 'im!'

The meeting broke up in confusion; but not before the placard with the Temple of Liberty written on it had been torn into a thousand pieces.

XII.

IN THE DIM TWILIGHT OF THAT HOLY DAY.

It was but a little past nine o'clock when the meeting was over, and the night, though cold, was fine. When we were clear of the Temple of Liberty, Robert Truefit suggested that we should stroll as far as London-bridge, and talk over what had occurred. The principal question that arose in our conversation was what Mark Mallard would do. I was inclined to believe that he would make inquiries after his children, but Jimmy Virtue shook his head.

'You'll never 'eer of him agin,' Jimmy said. 'He's got no feelin' and no 'eart, and it ain't likely as he'd show his face in Stoney-alley. Sich fellers as 'im ain't got the pluck of a mouse. No, no; we sha'n't 'eer nothin' more o' Mr. Mark Mallard, and a good job too. What'd be the good of sich a father as 'im to Blade-o'-Grass?'

We agreed not to mention what had occurred to Blade-o'-Grass, as it could serve no good purpose. Jimmy Virtue and I united in praising Robert Truefit for the admirable part he had played at the meeting.

'Bob ought to do more o' that sort o' thing,' said Jimmy; 'that's what I've told 'im over and over agin.'

'And grow into an agitator!' exclaimed Robert Truefit. 'No, Jimmy; I haven't time for the business. When it comes into my way naturally, as it has come tonight, well and good. But I have my own little commonwealth at home to look after; it takes all my time to administer to that properly.'

We retraced our steps towards Stoney-alley, and found the neighbourhood in a state of great excitement. In answer to our inquiries we learned that there had been a fire in Stoney-alley. As we hurried thither, we were greeted by exclamations of

'Ah, there he is! There's the old un! Wonder bow he'll take it!'

We soon ascertained the meaning of these remarks. Jimmy Virtue's leaving-shop was a heap of ashes. A house on each side was partially burnt; but the only building completely destroyed was his shop. How long ago did it occur? A hundred tongues volunteered information. Not an hour ago; but, bless your heart! it was all over in twenty minutes. The place burnt like a piece of tinder; it was nearly all wood, you see, sir. The old man must have left a candle burning. To the questions which elicited these and other answers, Jimmy Virtue listened quietly, taking no part in them. The alley was strewn with rickety furniture and beds which, in the first alarm, the occupants of the adjoining houses had brought into the streets for safety; now that the danger was over, they were carrying their furniture back to their rooms. When it became buzzed about that Jimmy Virtue had arrived on the scene of action, there came surging around him a number of girls and women clamorously demanding their little bits of things, valueless perhaps in themselves, but a great loss doubtless to the poor people who had pledged them.

'Where's my Sunday 'at?' demanded one. 'Where's my gal's boots?' another. 'Where's my flannin-peddicoat?' another. 'Where's my crinoline?' 'Where's my chignon?' 'Where's my old man's waistcoat?'

These and a hundred other inquiries were literally hurled at Jimmy Virtue. He simply glared at the women, and told them to look for their things among the ashes.

'Are you insured, Jimmy?' asked Robert Truefit.

No; he was not insured for a shilling. His clients still continuing to badger him, he turned savagely upon them, and said he couldn't help the fire occurring; they were a parcel of fools; and they were welcome to any odds and ends of rags they could find. Suddenly he darted forward into the midst of the smouldering ruins, and fished-out an old greasy pack of cards burnt round the edges.

'Saved them!' he muttered triumphantly. 'I might 'ave lost every game with a new pack. There's one good thing--Jack's safe. When I'm out, he's never at 'ome.'

I really think that the saving of that pack of cards with which he played for great sums with his shadowy victim, Jack, was a perfect consolation to him for the burning of all the rest; but indeed

he did not seem to be in any way depressed by the misfortune which had overtaken him.

'Well,' he said, 'it's no good starin' at it any longer. Bob, you'd better go 'ome. Good-night, Mr. Meadow.'

Robert Truefit and I looked at each other.

'Mr. Virtue,' I said, 'you've no bed to sleep in to-night; and you'll feel lonely by yourself after what has occurred. Will you come home with me? I can make you up a rough bed in my room.'

'Thank you, sir,' he replied, with a set expression on his face; 'I was afraid you or Bob 'd say somethink o' that sort to me. I shouldn't be surprised, now, if you'd orfer to 'elp me in other ways. How long 'ave you and me known each other. Bob?'

'For more than ten years, old fellow.'

'I'll trouble you, Bob, not to "old-feller" me; it sounds special, and it don't suit me jist now. More than ten year, eh? So it is, Bob; so it is. You've found me a pretty obstinate old chap--pig'eaded you might say, eh?'

'Well, Jimmy, you are rather--'

'Pig-'eaded--that's the word. Now, look 'ere, you two! Pig'eaded I am, and pig-'eaded I'm goin' to be, to the last. If either o' you--you, Bob, or you, sir--ever orfers me anythink agin--bed, money, grub, I don't care what!--you can say good-bye from that blessed minute to Jimmy Virtue. I must be nigh on seventy year old--I can't speak for two or three year one way or another, but I must be nigh on seventy if I'm a day--and I've never took charity yet; and I don't mean to begin now. I've never pocketed no money as I didn't work for--except Jack's, and that's a matter 'twixt 'im and me--and I ain't a-going to begin that game at my time o' life. So I'll thank you to say good-night, and leave Jimmy Virtue to 'isself.'

'You might as well talk to the Monument,' said Robert Truefit, as we walked home, 'as talk to Jimmy after what he has said. He'll die before he'll take a penny-piece. We must humour the old fellow, and hope for the best.'

The following day I learned that Tom Beadle was undergoing another term of six months' imprisonment for pickpocketing. I went to him to tell him of the death of his child, and I took a piece of black crape with me for his cap. I had never spoken to him before, and I was wishful to know something of his nature, so that I might judge in what way I could best impress him to act for the good of the girl who clung to him with so much devotion. He received me with cunning civility; his lynx eyes watched every word from my lips, as if in every word might be concealed a trap. In his mind he classed me with those who wished Blade-o'-Grass to desert him, and therefore I was his enemy. I knew, also, that the fact of my being a minister was an additional argument against me in his eyes. But he must be civil to me, because Blade-o'-Grass had told him I had been kind to her. His eyes moistened when he heard of the death of his child, and his grief grew stronger in the brief pause that ensued. But after a time he said it was the best thing that could have happened to the little thing. I told him, also, of the kindness of Mr. Merrywhistle, and that it was he who had borne the expenses of the funeral.

'Yes,' was Tom Beadle's careless comment, 'the old chap's 'elped Blade-o'-Grass a good many times, on and off. He's knowed 'er since she was a kid.'

There was not a trace of gratitude in his voice.

'She has made other friends as well,' I said.

A jealous gleam shot into his eyes.

'What friends? Swells?'

'Friends,' I answered, 'who sympathise deeply with her, and who would help her if they could.'

'What's to 'inder 'em?'

I did not answer him. I left it to him to gather from my silence that it was he who barred the way to a better kind of life for the poor girl; that it was her entire devotion to him that kept her down.

'I know what you're drivin' at; it's me as 'inders 'em,' he said, with a sneer. 'Well, that's nothink new. Blade-o'-Grass and me's 'eerd that often enough. The way they'd 'elp 'er is by tellin' 'er to cut away from me. I don't think the old gal 'd do that. I'd bet a penny *you've* been tryin' to persuade 'er.'

'On the contrary; I have begged her to ask you to do something that will bring her closer to you.'

'Gammon!' he sneered. 'What is it you wanted 'er to ask me?

'That you should marry her.'

He looked at me in blank wonder. 'Marry 'er!' he exclaimed. He was evidently puzzled, and he ransacked his mind for motives and reasons; but all his cunning wit could not assist him.

'It's me as 'inders people from 'elpin' Blade-o'-Grass, and yet the parson wants me to many 'er!'

I saw this expressed in his face, and I saw also a deep suspicion that some treachery to himself lay behind the proposition.

'I'll think on it,' he said aloud. 'Will you take 'er a letter from me?'

'Yes; I will write it for you if you like.'

'Thank you for nothink!' he replied with a leer. 'I'll get it done through the governor. He'll 'ave to read it, you know, before it goes. Will you take your solemn oath you won't open it?'

'I promise you not to open it.'

'And you won't read it to 'er? You'll give it to the old gal 'erself, and tell 'er she's got to git some one else to read it?

I made this promise as well; and when I left with the letter, I think he was half inclined to believe that my words and sympathy were genuine. I gave an account of this interview to Mrs. Silver.

'I have been thinking all the morning of the poor girl,' she said. 'My servant is going to leave me to get married. I will take Blade-o'-Grass in her place, if she will come. It will be a home for her, and I may be able to do her some good.'

The proposal delighted me, and I went at once to Blade-o'-Grass to acquaint her with it. She thanked me and Mrs. Silver most gratefully, but said she could not accept the offer. 'No, sir, not to save my life.'

'But why?' I asked in grief and annoyance. 'Your refusal is unreasonable.'

'You don't understand, sir. Read Tom's letter. You'll see what part of it I mean.'

She gave me the letter I had brought her from Tom Beadle. The words she referred to were these:

'When I come out, we'll get married. And mind! So long as you are true to me, I will be true to you. But if you run away from Stoney-alley, and go with them friends of yours, I shall know what that means.'

'It means, sir,' said Blade-o'-Grass, 'as Tom'll think I've deserted 'im. So you see, sir, I can't go to Mrs. Silver's. Don't you fear for me, sir; Mr. Wirtue is a real good friend to me now; he's took the next room to this, and he's always bringin' things to me.'

Since the night of the fire I had not seen Jimmy Virtue; and I went at once to his room. He did not reply to my knock; and when I opened the door, I found him playing cribbage with his shadow-companion. He was so intent upon the game that he did not know I was in the room until I was close to him.

'Ah, Mr. Meadow, sir, I didn't 'eer yer. Take a chair.'

I noticed that his face was pinched and careworn; and I asked him if he was not well.

'Well enough,' he replied. 'I can't expect to be too well. My time's comin'. Yes, I'm near the end on it. I dreamt last night they was diggin' my grave.' He pushed the cards from him impatiently. 'Look 'ere, Mr. Meadow, take an old man's advice. Don't lead a lonely life; git somethin' about you to love, and as'll love you; if ever you git a chance, snap at it, or you'll rue the day! A nice thing for a man to play a game--it's life as I'm talkin' of--and when he comes to the end of it, to find out that he's played it all wrong! Do you think it's worth 'avin'?'

'What?'

'Life. Is it worth 'avin'?'

'Surely, surely. It would be sinful to think otherwise.'

'O, I don't put myself up for anythink good! And don't you think I'm different to what I was because I've been dropped upon by bad luck. But what's it worth 'avin' for?'

'For itself; for the good that there is in it; for the good that one can do; for that it is a preparation for the better life to come.'

'Yes, yes; Blade-o'-Grass 'as been tellin' me. She says 'er baby's there. Well, it's a good thing

for her to look forward to. There's nobody there for me, though; a good job then for me that I don't believe. No,' he said, holding up a warning finger; 'don't preach to me! I won't stand it! I've made my bed, and I've got to lay on it.'

As I wished to divert his mind from gloomy thought, I did not pursue the subject, but related what had passed concerning Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass, and asked if he had anything to advise.

'Why not marry 'em at once,' he said, 'if you think sich a lot o' good is comin' out of it? *I* think it's about the worst thing as could 'appen to 'er.'

'I have my plan already settled,' I replied, 'and if I can carry it out, it will be the redemption of both of them. Marry them at once, you say. But Tom is in prison!'

'Is there any law agin marryin' 'em there? I daresay you could manage it if you tried.'

I had not thought of that, and I resolved to act at once upon the suggestion. There were serious difficulties in the way, but I was fortunate enough to gain the sympathy of the governor and the chaplain of the prison, who, when they heard the story of Blade-o'-Grass, were most eager to aid me in carrying out my design. With their assistance, then, all obstacles were overcome, and the day was fixed for the ceremony. I decided that the marriage should be consecrated early in the morning of Christmas-day.

''Ow about the weddin'-ring?' asked Jimmy Virtue.

I said that I would have it ready on the morning of the ceremony.

'You'll 'ave to measure 'er finger,' he said; 'let's do it now.'

We were conversing in his room. He called Blade-o'-Grass, and she entered.

'We're a-goin' to measure your finger for the weddin'-ring. Hold on, Mr. Meadow, don't you say a word! Give us your 'and, Blade-o'-Grass.'

The blood mounted to her face as she held out her hand. Jimmy Virtue took a wedding-ring from his pocket, looked at it curiously, and placed it on her finger.

'See, Mr. Meadow,' he said, 'it just fits. This is my present, Blade-o'-Grass.'

She thanked him tearfully, and kissed the ring, and held it to her lips.

'It's 'er mother's,' whispered Jimmy Virtue to me.

The sun rose bright and clear on Christmas-day. How well I remember the morning! It is three years since that time, and every incident is as clear to my mind as if it had occurred but yesterday. Punctually at half-past eight o'clock Blade-o'-Grass was at my lodgings; she was nervous and very pale, and had evidently had but little sleep during the night. I had never seen her so neatly dressed, and I expressed my pleasure at her appearance.

'Mrs. Silver and Miss Rachel brought the things to me yesterday, sir,' she said. 'They are too good to me, sir--too good.'

'It gives them pleasure.'

'I don't deserve it, sir.'

'You can deserve it. If you could do something for them in return for their kindness, you would?'

'That I would, sir, and grateful to be able to.'

'Come, we are going to walk to their house now. It is a bright Christmas morning, is it not?'

'Yes, sir, I never remember sich a Christmas as this.'

'May it prove the commencement of a happy life for you, my dear!'

She turned from me and sobbed quietly. When she recovered we walked together to Buttercup-square. Then Blade-o'-Grass told me how one Christmas night, very soon after her baby was born, she had stood for more than an hour at the door of Mrs. Silver's house, in the midst of a heavy fall of snow, with her dear in her arms, waiting for Mr. Merrywhistle.

'If it 'adn't been for 'im, sir, we should 'ave been found dead in the snow, baby and me!'

'He is a good man, my dear. He is coming with us this morning. Do not cry. This is a bright day for all of us. Rachel, also, is coming.'

'O, sir!' she said, with quivering lips. 'What 'ave I done that you should all be so good to me?'

'It will be in your power to repay us all, my dear.'

'Will you tell me 'ow, sir?'

'By and by, my dear. The time will come.'

We found Rachel with her hat and shawl on, ready to accompany us. She gave Blade-o'-Grass a little present--a silk neckguard which she had worked, with a jet cross hanging to it. Mr. Merrywhistle came in almost at our heels, rubbing his hands, and saying what a fine morning it was. By a quarter to ten o'clock we four were at the prison gates, where Jimmy Virtue was waiting for us; he had smartened himself up for the occasion, but his face looked worn and aged. Time was telling fast upon him.

The governor of the prison had kindly set apart a private room for us, and there the ceremony was performed. Tom Beadle, when he first entered, looked half shamefaced and half defiant; but the solemnity of the prayers had its effect upon him, and after a time he drew his breath in short gasps, and the words he had to repeat after me came tremblingly from his lips. Jimmy Virtue gave Blade-o'-Grass away. So these two human waifs were joined together according to God's holy ordinance, and were made man and wife.

The last words were said, and I prepared to go to my church. Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass were standing a little apart from us; there was a dazed expression in his face, as if he could not fully realise what had occurred, but it softened as he gazed into Blade-o'-Grass's eyes, and saw the look of full-hearted love with which she was regarding him.

'Are you glad, old woman?' he asked.

'I am very, very 'appy, Tom!' she said.

Then Rachel, as had been arranged between us, asked Tom whether his wife might spend the day with her. He hesitated a moment or two, but the better part of his nature had been awakened, and he could not resist Blade-o'-Grass's pleading look.

'Tom told me,' said Blade-o'-Grass, as we walked to church, 'that he feels as if he was just born like.'

We wanted Jimmy Virtue to spend the day with the Silvers, but he refused, saying that he could pass the time well enough with Jack. 'I'm pig-'eaded, you know,' he added; 'that's what I am; and you ain't goin' to redemption *me!*' And so left us abruptly.

That happy Christmas day was an era indeed in Blade-o'-Grass's life. It was spent very peacefully; and every one strove in a quiet way to make Blade-o'-Grass feel that she was in the midst of friends. I watched her closely during the day, and I saw that new thoughts were stirring in her mind. In the evening we were sitting together in the parlour; the candles were not lighted, and the conversation was carried on in low tones. Blade-o'-Grass had removed to the window, where she sat, watching the birth of night. I drew a chair close to her.

'Mr. Meadow,' she whispered, 'I've been thinkin'----'

'Yes, my dear.'

'That if me and Tom 'ad 'ad a 'ome like this we might 'ave been different to what we are.' She paused, and I did not speak, for I saw that she was struggling to say something more. 'I'm almost sorry I came 'ere, sir.'

'Why, my dear?'

'It's ungrateful of me to say it; but seein' what I've seen 'ere today'll make me miserable to-morrer in Stoney-alley.'

I made no attempt to console her. I strove to prepare her for the end I had in view.

'This is a happy home, indeed, Blade-o'-Grass, and other homes as happy have sprung from it.'

I recalled to her mind the circumstance, which Rachel had narrated to me, of Ruth assisting her one day when she was beseeching Tom Beadle to bring home some money as there was no bread in the cupboard.

'I remember the young lady well, sir,' said Blade-o'-Grass; 'and I thought of 'er orfen, though I never set eyes on 'er since then.'

'She will be here presently. She is married, and has a baby.'

Blade-o'-Grass turned from me, trembling, and hid her face in her hands.

'She and her husband have a very happy home, not far from where we are sitting. If you had a

home like theirs----'

'O, sir! for pity's sake, don't mock me!'

'Listen, my dear. Do you believe that we have your happiness and well-doing very close to our hearts?'

'If I didn't believe it, sir, I wouldn't be fit to live.'

'Then believe this as well. Such a happy home as Ruth's and this may be yours, if you have the courage to make a sacrifice. No, not yet! nor will I tell you what it is until the time comes. But think of it, and believe in it. Even if you doubted me, and Rachel told you it would be a good thing to do----'

She looked lovingly at Rachel.

'I think, sir, that whatever she told me to do I would do, though I was sure to die the next minute.'

'You would be right, Blade-o'-Grass. All that she says and does is sweet and good.'

* * * * *

Ah, Rachel, my wife, how my heart yearned to you then! How tenderly, in the dim twilight of that Holy Day, did my thoughts dwell upon you in purest love! In the solemn pause that ensued I endeavoured to strengthen my heart by inward prayer. If the priceless gift of your love were denied to me, I might still hope that your friendship would sweeten my life.

* * * * *

Blade-o'-Grass laid her hand timidly upon mine, and whispered to me that the prospect I had held out was like heaven to her.

Soon after this, Charley, and Ruth with her baby, came in quietly, and I brought Ruth and Blade-o'-Grass together.

* * * * *

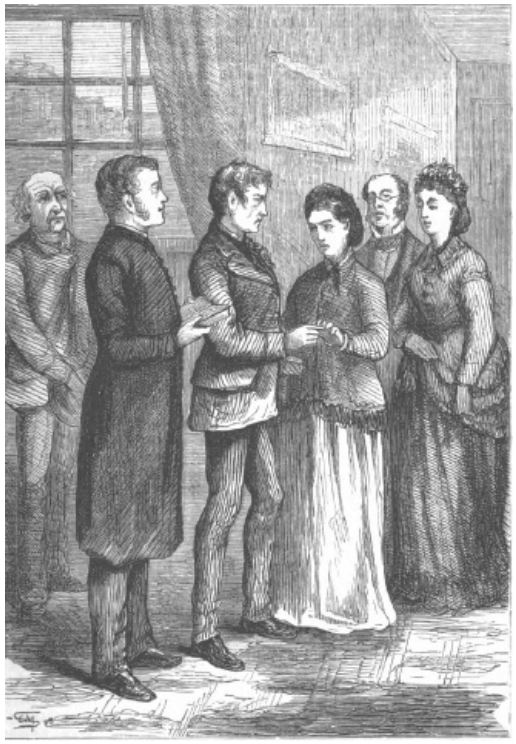
I see them standing side by side at the window. I see Ruth showing her baby to Blade-o'-Grass. I see Blade-o'-Grass's hands tremble and wander. I see her stretch forth her arms convulsively, and presently I see her sitting on a low stool, with the baby in her lap, sobbing quietly over the child, whose fingers caress her face, pityingly as it seems. Ruth sinks upon her knees by the side of the bereaved mother, and their arms are round each other's neck. Night's shadows steal upon them, and wrap them in a peaceful embrace.

XIII.

HIS SOUL IS IN YOUR HANDS TO SAVE AND PURIFY!

I had many opportunities of seeing Tom Beadle during his term of imprisonment, and I soon became engaged in the contemplation of a subject which has been studied and pondered over by thousands of earnest minds, but never, I believe, with greater seriousness than at the present time. Here was a man, with a man's strength, not unwilling to do his work in the world, if he knew the way to do it. Of a low type he certainly was, but he had grown into his condition

through no fault of his own. I penetrated the crust of his character, and I found behind it much material which could be worked to a good end. Gradually I won his confidence, and, in answer to certain remarks of mine affecting his career and character, he answered me in plain terms and with a rough shrewdness which greatly impressed me in his favour, I saw that he was helpless; that, in this country, society could do nothing for him, and that he would be utterly lost if he were left to himself and his own resources. If he were lost, Blade-o'-Grass would be lost also.



'It will be a happy task accomplished,' I thought, 'if I can save these two from the certain degradation which lies before them--if I can make their after-life happy in an honourable way, and worthy of the respect of men.'

Tom Beadle gave me a great proof of his confidence. I asked him to allow Blade-o'-Grass to visit the Silvers and Ruth, and he consented with but little pressure. I took care that she was frequently in one or other of the houses. She liked best to be with Ruth and Ruth's baby, whom she often begged to be allowed to nurse. I said to her one day when she was in Ruth's house, having spent a few happy hours there,

'If you and Tom had such a home as this----'

'It'd be like 'eaven, sir,' she answered. 'Don't speak of it, sir. It breaks my 'eart to think of it!'

But I knew that the plan I had in view would give them such a home, after a time, if they were willing to endure a present sacrifice. I knew it from a letter which I had received from Canada a week after Christmas. The letter was from Richard. I give it in its entirety:

'My dear Mr. Meadow,--I can now, I think, send you a letter which will give you satisfaction. My dear mother, and Ruth, and Mary, write so much about you, that I feel, although I have never seen you, as if I was talking to an old friend; and I feel very proud, I assure you, that you should write to me as you have written, and should place so much confidence in me. I cannot express to you how much I have thought of the story you have told me. I can see Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass as plainly as if they stood before me. I can see what they were when they were children (I saw it often, my dear Mr. Meadow, when I was in London), and what they are likely to become, if a helping hand is not stretched forth to save them. You say you place your hopes in me, and that if it is out of my power to help you, you will not know which way to turn to accomplish what you desire. My dearly-beloved mother has written to me also, urging me to try and do something, and I need not say what an incentive that has been to me.

'Now let me tell you. It has been my good fortune to make the acquaintance of a farmer, at whose house I spend my day of rest every week. His name is Gibson. Is it letting you into a secret, when I tell you that he has a daughter, and that I hope some day, please God!----Well, dear Mr. Meadow, you must finish the uncompleted sentence yourself. And yet I must tell you that I do love her, with all my heart! You are not the first I have told. My dear mother knows all about it.

'Mr. Gibson has a large farm, and employs eighteen hands, who all receive fair wages, and have made comfortable homes for themselves. The Sabbath before last, Mr. Gibson was telling me the history of some of the men he has employed, and it suddenly flashed upon me that it was in his power to do what you desire with respect to Tom Beadle.

'Well, dear Mr. Meadow, I told him the story, and I gave him your letters and my dear mother's letters to read. Annie--that is his daughter--was present, and I spoke with all my earnestness. When I had finished, Annie was crying, and I myself was very nearly crying too. It would take too long for me to tell all that passed, but Mr. Gibson said he would keep the letters for a week, and that he would consider whether he could do anything. When I wished Annie good-night, I asked her if she would help me with her father, and she said she would--and said, too, how she wished that she knew you and my dear mother and sisters! You have no idea, Mr. Meadow, what a dear good girl she is.

'I didn't have one good night's rest all the week for thinking of what Mr. Gibson would say, and last Sabbath I went to his house with a trembling heart. We go to the same church, and after church we took a walk. It was a fine cold morning--you should have seen how Annie looked! Well, but I must not wander from the subject. Then Mr. Gibson told me he had read all your letters, more than once he said, and that he had made up his mind. This is what he says. If Tom Beadle will come out to us, Mr. Gibson will take him into his service, and will give him fair wages. He will work and live on the farm, and Mr. Gibson will do all he can for him. But Mr. Gibson made conditions. Tom Beadle must come out by himself, and must bind himself to work for Mr. Gibson for five years. "At the end of that time," Mr. Gibson said, "he will, if he is industrious, have a home of his own and money in his pocket. Then he can send for his wife, and they will have a good future before them." Mr. Gibson put it this way. "Tom Beadle," he says, "must do something to show that he is worthy of the confidence that is to be placed in him; he has to grow out of old bad ways into new good ones. Give him something to work for," said Mr. Gibson, "something to look forward to, and the chances of his turning out right are more in his favour." Well, dear Mr. Meadow, that is how it stands. If Tom Beadle will come over, there is a home for him at once, and there is honest good work, with fair wages, for him to commence at, right away.

'I hope you will be satisfied and pleased with this. I am sure it will turn out right. *I* will make a friend of Tom Beadle, and he shall not go wrong, if we can help it. Annie will help too, I am sure. I do not write any news about myself; dear mother will tell you all about me. I am getting along famously. With affectionate esteem, my dear Mr. Meadow, believe me to be most faithfully yours,

'Richard Silver.'

I deemed it wise not to disclose the contents of this letter to Blade-o'-Grass until the day before Tom Beadle was to come out of prison. I had persuaded her to spend a few hours of that day with Ruth, and when I went to Ruth's house in the evening, I found that Blade-o'-Grass had gone to her home in Stoney-alley. About nine o'clock in the night I went to her room, to play the great stake upon which her future rested, and as I walked through the labyrinth of narrow thoroughfares which led to Stoney-alley, I prayed fervently that my mission would be successful. Blade-o'-Grass's room was very clean and tidy; she had been busy making preparations for the return of Tom Beadle. When I entered, her work was done, and she was sitting with her head resting on her hand.

'Don't disturb yourself, my dear,' I said; 'I have come to have a long chat with you. You have been busy, I see.'

'Yes,' she said; 'Tom's comin' 'ome to-morrer.'

I noticed that there was sadness in her tone.

'You are glad?' I said.

'Yes, sir, of course I'm glad. But I've been thinkin' of a good many things. I've been thinkin' of baby, and--and----'

She bit her lips, as if that effort were necessary to restrain the expression of what was in her mind.

'Don't hide anything from me, my dear; tell me what you've been thinking of.'

'I 'ardly know 'ow to tell it, sir. My thoughts seem as if they was turnin' agin myself. I see that I must ha' been goin' on wrong all my life, and that Tom 's been doin' the same. And my 'eart's fit to break, when I think it can't be altered now!'

'It can be altered, my child.'

She looked at me imploringly.

'You've said somethin' like that afore, sir; but it's all dark to me. Tom'll come 'ome to-morrer, and things'll go on in the old way, and per'aps he'll be took up agin before long----'

She could not proceed for her tears.

'You see, my dear, that the life he is leading is wrong.'

'I see it, sir--I see it. It'd be better, arter what you've told me, if Tom and me was to die to-morrer!'

'Our lives are not in our own hands, my dear. What has been done in the past has been done in ignorance, and the shame of it can be wiped away. It *is* shame, my dear. Place yourself and Tom by the side of Ruth and *her* husband.'

She uttered a cry, as if a knife had struck her. But I continued:

'Place your home by the side of theirs. See the happy future that lies before them, and think of what lies before you, if, as you have said, things go on with you in the same old way.'

She covered her face with her hands. I was striking her hard, but I knew it was necessary for the sacrifice I was about to call upon her to make. I drew a picture of the two homes. I placed children in them, and contrasted their appearance, their lives, their chances of happiness. I did not spare her; I spoke with all my strength and earnestness. Suddenly she interrupted me with wild looks and in a wild tone.

'What are you tellin' me all this for?'

'Because it is in your power to choose between them,' I replied. 'Not only for yourself, but for Tom. His future is in your hands to shape to a good end, if you have the courage to make a sacrifice. Nay, not only his future in this world--his soul is in your hands to save and purify!'

She parted the hair from her eyes, and gazed at me as if she were in a dream.

'Will you do this? Will you save your husband from the net of crime and shame in which he is entangled?'

'Will I do it?' she cried, in a tone of wonder. 'Can you arks me? Show me the way!'

I did. I told her the end I had been working for. I read Richard's letter to her, and dilated upon the prospect it held out.

'There is no chance for Tom here,' I said; 'there is in that new land, and with such friends as he will have about him. I believe it is in your power to persuade him to go. He loves you, and would do much for you. The separation will not be a very long one. Five years will soon pass, and then you will both be young. While he is working out the commencement of a good and better life there, you can stop with Mrs. Silver; she bids me offer you a home. Will you make the sacrifice?--a sacrifice that in all your after-life you will bless us for persuading you to make. My dear sister,'--she bowed her head to her breast convulsively as I thus addressed her--'it will be your salvation, and his. All our hearts are set upon it for your good and his. I know how you will suffer in parting from him, but the love's sacrifice that you will make for him will be a truer test of love than all you have hitherto done.'

She was silent for a long, long time before she spoke.

'When will he 'ave to go, sir?'

'A ship sails from Liverpool the day after to-morrow.'

'So soon!' she cried, clasping her hands.

'It is best so. Every hour that he passes here after he is out of prison is an hour of peril to you both. I will myself accompany him to Liverpool to-morrow. Let him commence his baptism at once, and in the new land work out his regeneration. He will thank you for it by and bye. Shall I tell you what I see in a few years from this present moment, my dear?'

'If you please, sir,' she said, tears streaming down her face.

'I see you and Tom in the new land living happily in your own little home. I see you standing at the door in the morning looking after him, as he goes to his work, and he turning round to smile upon you. I see him, when he is out of your sight, exchanging friendly greetings with men whose respect he has earned; no longer ashamed to look men in the face, my dear, but walking with head erect, without fear, as one can do who earns his bread honestly. I see him coming home at night, when his day's work is done, and you, perhaps, reading to him----'

'Reading, sir!'

'Yes, my dear, reading. Reading a letter, perhaps, that Mrs. Silver, or Ruth, or Mr. Merrywhistle has written to you and Tom. It will come--you will learn while he is away. I see your cupboard well stocked, your house prettily furnished, yourselves comfortably clothed. Perhaps Richard--Ruth's brother--and his wife come in to see you, and you talk together of the dear ones at home, bound to you as to him, my dear, by links of love. I hear you thank God before you sleep

for all His goodness to you. I see you helping some poor child who has been left orphaned and helpless as you were left----'

'O, sir!'

'It will come, my dear, if you live, as surely as we are speaking together at this minute. I see you, perhaps, with a baby in your arms, like the dear one who has passed away from you----'

She caught my hand hysterically, and I paused. I saw that my work was done. I will not set down here what she said when she was calmer. When I left her she was animated by a high resolve, and I knew that she would not falter.

'What time will you be 'ere in the mornin', sir?' she asked, as she stood with me at the street-door in Stoney-alley.

'At twelve o'clock, my dear.'

'Tom'll be ready to go with you then, sir. It'll 'urt 'im to leave me, sir, but he'll do it for my sake. I know 'im, sir!'

'Good-night, my dear; God bless you!'

'And you, sir,' she said, kissing my hand.

I was punctual to my appointment on the following day. Blade-o'-Grass heard my step on the stairs, and came into the passage to meet me.

'Tom's inside, sir.'

I looked into her face, and saw in the anguish expressed there the marks of the conflict she had passed through.

'He's ready to go with you, sir.'

Tom Beadle's face bore marks of trouble also, and he evidently had not made up his mind whether he should receive me as a friend or an enemy.

'I feel as if I was bein' transported,' he said in a dogged manner.

'You will live to thank us, Tom,' I said, as I held out my hand to him. He hesitated a moment or two before he took it, and then he gripped it fiercely.

'Look 'ere!' he exclaimed hoarsely. 'Is it all goin' to turn out as you've told 'er? Take your oath on it! Say, May I drop down dead if it won't all come right!'

'As surely as I believe in a better life than this, so surely do I believe that this is your only chance of bestowing happiness upon the woman who loves you with her whole heart and soul.'

'I wouldn't do it but for 'er!' he said, and turned to Blade-o'-Grass. She crept into his arms, and clasped him to her faithful heart, and kissed him again and again. I went into the passage, and I heard her tell him, in a voice broken by sobs, how she loved him, and would love him, and him only, till death, and after death, and how she would count the minutes while he was away, till the blessed time came when they would be together again. Powerful as was her influence over him, it would not have been perfect if he had not had some good and tender qualities in his nature. I felt that the words that were passing between them in this crisis of their lives were sacred, and I went downstairs to the street-door. I found Mr. Merrywhistle there.

'I have a cab waiting for you,' he said, 'and a box.'

'A box!'

'With some clothes in it for Tom Beadle, my dear sir. It will make a good impression upon him. And here are two sovereigns for him.'

'Give them to him yourself, Mr. Merrywhistle,' I said; 'he will be down presently.'

Tom Beadle joined us in a few minutes.

'Mr. Merrywhistle has brought a box of clothes for you, Tom,' I said; 'and he has something else for you also.'

'It's only a matter of a couple of sovereigns, Tom,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, stammering as if he were committing an act of meanness instead of an act of kindness. 'They may come useful to you when you land in Canada.'

Tom took the money and thanked him; then said that he had forgotten to say something to Blade-o'-Grass, and ran up-stairs. I learnt afterwards that he had given her the money, and had insisted, despite her entreaties, that she should take it.

I did not leave Tom Beadle until the ship sailed. He related to me the whole story of his life, and asked me once,

'Won't the old devil break out in me when I'm on the other side o' the water?'

'Not if you are strong, Tom--not if you keep your thoughts on Blade-o'-Grass, and think of the perfect happiness you can bestow upon her by keeping in the right path.'

'I'll try to, sir. No man's ever tried 'arder than I mean to.'

When I thought of the friends that were waiting on the other side of the Atlantic to help him, and encourage him, and keep him straight, I was satisfied that all would turn out well.

I returned to London with a light heart. It was nearly nine o'clock at night when I reached home. I lit my lamp, and saw upon my table a large envelope, addressed to me in a lawyer's handwriting. I opened the letter, and found that it contained a sealed packet, and the following note, dated from Chancery-lane:

'Sir,--In accordance with instructions received from our late client, Mr. James Fairhaven, we forward to you the enclosed packet, seven days after his death.--We are, sir, your obedient servants,

'WILSON, SON, & BAXTER.

'To Andrew Meadow, Esq.'

The news of the death of my benefactor and old friend, Mr. Fairhaven, shocked and grieved me. It was a sorrowful thought that he had parted from me in anger. If I had known of his illness, I am sure I should have gone to him, despite his prohibition. But I did not know; and even the consolation of following to the grave the last remains of the man who had so generously befriended me had been denied to me. I passed a few minutes in sorrowful reflection, and then took up the sealed packet. It was addressed, in his own handwriting, to Andrew Meadow, and was very bulky. The manuscript it contained was headed,

'*James Fairhaven's last words to Andrew Meadow*.'

It was with a beating heart I prepared to read what he had written.

XIV.

IT IS SUNRISE. A GOLDEN MIST IS RISING FROM THE WATERS.

On two occasions you have expressed to me your wish to know what it was that induced me to take an interest in you when you were left an orphan, friendless, as you might have supposed. As the answer to your inquiry would have disclosed one of the secrets of my life, I refused to answer. But tonight, sitting, as I am sitting, alone in this desolate house, I am impelled to write an answer in my own way--impelled by the resurrection of certain memories which have arisen about me during the last hour, and which cling to me now with terrible tenacity. For the only time in my life that I can remember I will indulge myself by a free outpouring of what is in my mind, setting no restraint upon myself, as has hitherto invariably been my rule. I do this the more readily, as these words will certainly not be read by you until I am dead, and may never be read by you at all, for the whim may seize me to destroy them. To this extent I may therefore think that I am speaking to myself only--making confession to myself only. I strip myself of all reserve; the mere expression of this resolution gives me relief.

I am not writing in my study; it was my first intention to do so, but the room was close and

warm, and when the door was shut a stifling feeling came upon me, as if other forms besides my own were there, although I was the only living presence in it. Directly the fancy seized me, it grew to such monstrous proportions that, with a vague fear, I brought my papers away, and felt when I left the room as if I had escaped from a prison. I am writing now in the large drawing-room, by the window which looks out upon the garden and the river, where you and I have sometimes sat and conversed. The night is dark; the river and the banks beyond are dark; the garden is filled with shadows. The only light to be seen is where I am sitting writing by the light of a reading-lamp. The other portions of the room, and the garden, and the river, and the river's banks are wrapped in gloom. I open the window; I can breathe more freely now.

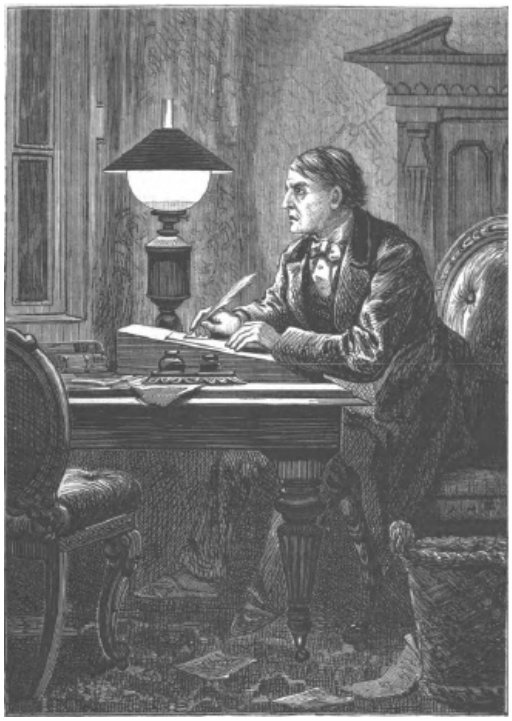
Certain words you spoke to me, during our last interview, have recurred to me many times, against my wish, for I have endeavoured vainly to forget them. According to your thinking, you said, money, was only sweet when it was well-earned and well-spent. Well-earned? I have worked hard for the money which I have gained. I have toiled and laboured and schemed for it, and it is mine. Has it not been well earned? I ask this question of myself, not of you; for I believe your answer, if you could give it to me, would not please me. Well spent? I do not know--I never considered. I have gone on accumulating. 'Money makes money,' I used to hear over and over again. Money *has* made money for me. Well, it is mine. The thought intrudes itself, For how long? This thought hurts me; I am an old man. For how many years longer will my money be mine? But I go on accumulating and adding; it is the purpose of my life.

It has been the purpose of my life since I was a young man. Then I was clerk to a great broker. I became learned in money; I knew all its values and fractions; it took possession of my mind, and I determined to become rich. It seemed to me that money was the only thing in life worth living for; I resolved to live for it, and for it only, and to obtain it. I have lived for it--I have obtained it--and I sit now in my grand house, a desolate man, with a weight upon my heart which no words can express.

How still and quiet everything is around me! I might be in a deserted land, alone with my wealth, and the end of my life is near! 'Money is only sweet when it is well-earned and well-spent?' Are you right, or am I? Has my life been a mistake?

The great broker in whose employ I was, noticed my assiduity and my earnestness. There were other clerks of the same age as myself in the office, but I was the most able among them, and I rose above them. Little by little I became acquainted with the mysteries of money-making, and it was not long before I commenced to take advantage of the knowledge I gained. I began to trade upon the plots and schemes of the money men. Others lost; I gained. Others were ruined; I was prospering. In time to come, I said, I shall ride in my brougham--like my master. In time to come, I shall own a fine house--like my master. I never paused to consider whether he was happy. I knew that he was rich; I knew that he had a fine wife and a fine daughter, a fine house and a fine carriage. His wife was a fine lady--a fashionable lady--who, when I saw her in her carriage, looked as if life were a weariness to her; her daughter was growing into the likeness of her mother. I know now that he was an unhappy man, and that his pleasures were not derived through home associations.

A clerk--Sydney by name--over whose head I had risen, had often invited me to visit him; I spent one Sunday with him. He lived half-a-dozen miles from the City, and his salary at the time I visited him was a hundred and seventy-five pounds a year. I was then making, with my salary and speculations, at least a thousand. He was a married man, with a pretty wife and a baby. The house in which they lived was small, and there was a garden attached to it. After dinner we sat in the garden and talked; he told his wife what a clever fellow I was, and how I had risen over all of them. I told him that he could do as well as I if he chose, although I was inwardly sure he could not, for his qualities were different from mine. 'You have only to speculate,' I said. He returned a foolish answer. 'This is my speculation,' he said, pinching his wife's cheek. 'Is it a good one?' his wife asked merrily. I do not know what there was in the look he gave her which caused her to bend towards him and kiss him; I think there were tears in her eyes too. 'Well,' I said, 'every one to his taste.' 'Just so,' he replied, with his arm round his wife's waist In the evening, your mother, then a single girl, came in with her father. They and the Sydneys were friends.



Now, to whom am I speaking? To myself or to you? Shall I go on with my confession, and go on without moral trickery, or shall I tear up these sheets, and deaden my memory with excess of some kind? It is rather late in life for me to commence this latter course. I have often been drunk with excitement, but never with wine. My life has been a steady one, and it has been my study to keep a guard over myself. Indeed, it has been necessary for success, and I *have* succeeded. 'When the wine is in, the wit is out'--a true proverb. Why am I debating about my course? I have already decided that I will speak plainly, and will strip myself of all reserve. When I have finished, I can destroy. I will not waver; I will go on to the end.

Even if you do read what I write, it will not matter to me. I shall have gone, and shall not know. Stop, though. You, as a clergyman, would tell me otherwise, and would doubtless, if you had the opportunity, enlighten my darkness, to use a common phrase. I have never considered it before; but I suppose I am a Christian. Is that a phrase also? To speak without reserve, as I have resolved to do, it is to me nothing more than a name. If the question, What has been your religion? were put to me, and I were compelled to answer (again without moral trickery), I should answer, Money. These reflections have come to me without foreshadowing, and I set them down. If they cause you to be sad, think for a moment. How many Christians do you know? I could argue with you now, if you were here. Christianity, as I have heard (not as I have seen), cannot mean a set belief in certain narrow doctrines; it cannot include trickery and false-dealing in worldly matters. It means, as I have heard and not seen, the practical adoption of a larger view of humanity than now obtains. Certain self-sacrifices, certain tolerations, which are not seen except in the quixotic, are included in this larger view. I repeat my question: How many Christians do you know?

A bitter mood is upon me; it may divert me from my purpose. I will lay down my pen, and look into the shadows.

What have I seen after an interval of I do not know how many minutes? Shadows in the future. Shadows from the past. Shadows all around me as I sit--in the room, in the garden, in the river. Stay. I see a light coming into the sky. The waters of the river are trembling. The moon is rising.

Andrew, I loved your mother. I never told her this, in words; but she knew it. There was a time, I have sometimes thought, when I might have won her. But I held back until, so far as she herself was concerned, it was too late. If she had not met your father--(she had not seen him when I first knew her)--and if she had not loved him, I should still have held back. For my design then was to many money, if I married at all. My master had married money. Other rich men, to whose height I had hoped to rise, had married money. I would do the same. Love was a dream to be blotted out. It stopped advancement. I strove to blot out my love for your mother, but I could not. I did the next best thing; I strove to conceal it. Even in that attempt, however, I was not successful. The Sidneys whose house I frequently visited in the hope of meeting her, saw it, and threw us much together. Mrs. Sydney said to me once, out of her ignorance, 'See how happy we are! You can be the same if you please.' I smiled, but did not reply. I could be the same, if I pleased! Why, I could have bought them up twenty times over. Sydney himself owed me money, having been duped by a friend, as foolish persons almost always are. I have never been duped by a friend in all my long life. I have lost money in the way of business, but I have never been duped by a friend. Life is an intellectual battle. Those win whose wits are the sharpest.

Your mother and I grew very intimate. I interested her in my career, although I never entered into the details of my successes. I told her only the results. Her father encouraged our intimacy. I had already lent *him* money. About this time I saw signs of an approaching panic. I said to myself, 'This is your chance; there will be precious pickings in the ruins. Sharpen your wits; now is your time.' I gathered in my money; I studied the signs, with a cool head. I mentioned the matter, under the seal of secrecy, to your mother. 'If all goes well,' I said, 'in six months I shall be worth so-and-so.' Your mother answered, 'But how about the people with whom all will go ill?' I said gaily, 'What is one man's meat is another man's poison. If I don't gather, others will.' The panic came and parsed, and did not leave me a mourner. England was strewn with wrecks, but I was safe; I was one of the fortunate wreckers. It was an anxious time; sharp wits were about, but few sharper than mine; and every man's hand was against his neighbour. Thousands of weak ones lost their all, and thousands more were bruised to death in rash attempts to recover what they had lost I saw them struggling all around me, and I saw here and there a foolish one holding out a helping hand, and being dragged into the whirlpool for his pains. When the storm passed, and the sky became clear, the land was filled with mourning. Among the foolish ones was Sydney. How could such a man expect to get on in the world? 'Self-preservation is the first law of nature.' What wisdom there is in many of these proverbs! There were very few smiling faces after the storm; but mine was one. I had netted thirty thousand pounds. This was the solid commencement of my fortune.

During this time I had but little leisure, and I saw scarcely anything of your mother. Now that the struggle was over, I went to her to tell her of my successes. Then I learned that her father had been ruined in the panic, and that if it had not been for a friend who sacrificed his small fortune for them, they would have been turned out of house and home. This friend was your father. He was a friend also to Sydney; and it was with his money, I believe, that Sydney discharged his debt to me; I had other security, but I was glad that there was no need to enforce it.

I held my passion in full control when I was told that your mother was engaged to be married. It was bitter to bear, but I argued with myself that it was best so; I *might* have done a foolish thing. A coldness sprang up between the Sydneys and me, and our intimacy weakened. It was natural, for our positions were very different from what they were a few months before. I had risen, and he had fallen. We were not upon an equality.

I never saw your mother after she was married. Engrossed in the purpose of my life, deeply engaged in schemes involving large interests, rising and prospering, amassing and accumulating, I lost sight of her. But I did not forget her. Now and again, in my calmer moments, when a great venture had been brought to a successful issue and I had added to my store, or when the fever of a great speculation was over, I thought of her with a certain tenderness and a certain regret; but I strove to find happiness in my money. Did I find it? No.

No; I did not find it. Looking back into my life, with all its cares and anxious struggles, I know that I was never happy. Looking upon myself now, as I sit in my great house, an old man, writing my confession, I know that I am an utterly miserable man. Yet are not most men unhappy? It seems so to me. Then I am no different from others, and under any other circumstances I should be as I am. Should I? Supposing I had married, and had children who loved me. There would be consolation in that, surely. Children, wife, friends, who loved me! Answer me, Myself. Is there one living being in the world who thinks of you with affection, who pauses now and then to give you a thought of love? Answer honestly. Not one!

Is it fancy, and am I working myself into a morbid state of feeling? From the dense shadows that lurk in the corners of the room, seemed to come an echo of the unspoken words--Not one! The air seemed to carry the words to the river--Not one! The river is flowing to the sea--to the vast unseen waters which in my present mood I liken to the future into which my life will sink, unremembered, unblessed!

Most men are unhappy, I have said. Well, it is so in my experience. Yet the Sydneys were happy; I am sure of it. Even after the panic which enriched me and impoverished him, I have seen him on the top of an omnibus, after business hours, on his way home, with happiness in his face. Home! Is this my house a home? I have seen glimpses of happiness also elsewhere, and always, as I now recognise, in connection with women and children.

I thought often of your mother; but years passed, and I made no effort to see her. One day among my letters was one with a black envelope. I have the letter by me now. Knowing what I was about to write, I brought it with me from my study. You will recognise your mother's writing. I place it after these words, so that--should these pages come to your hands--you may read it in its natural order.

'My dear Sir,--You will be surprised to receive a letter from me, but not angry, I hope. You will regard it with kindly feelings, perhaps, when I tell you that when you read it I shall be in my grave. I come to you a suppliant, and with all the earnestness of my soul I pray that I may not write in vain. My husband--whom I shall soon see again--died three years since, leaving me with a child, a boy, in whom you will see a resemblance to the girl to whom you used to confide your hopes and plans. He has his father's mouth, but he has my eyes and hair. I was very very happy with my husband, who was a good man, but not fortunate in worldly matters. I used sometimes to wish that you could have visited us, and seen our happy little home. But you were too far

removed from us in station; I often heard of your great successes in life, and was very very glad to know that you had gained what you most desired. When my husband died, he left me very poor. Can you guess now--you who must receive so many applications from the unfortunate--my purpose in writing to you?

'The doctor tells me I have not many days to live. I may live a month, he says; I may die tomorrow; and my child will be left quite penniless and unprovided for. I made up my mind to write before my strength fails me. Will you befriend my orphan boy? I do not know what words to use to strengthen my appeal. If you were to ask me what it is I wish you to do, and I could answer from my grave, I would say. Arm him for the battle of life; give him some sort of plain and useful education; and when he is old enough, put him in some way so that he may be able to work for his living. Will you do this, for the sake of old times, for the sake of the girl you used to like to chat with, for the sake of charity? When I write my name to this letter, I will kneel down and pray to the Almighty that you will not turn a deaf ear to my appeal, and I will bless you with my dying breath. As you read these words, think that I am by your side, imploring you to say, "Yes, I will do this out of pity for the orphan and his dead mother, and for the sake of old times." God prosper you in all your undertakings!--Your old friend and suppliant, ISABEL.'

You know now why I interested myself in you. Yes, I think there is one living being who will remember me with affection when I am gone.

I am thinking of you now, Andrew, and I am considering whether I shall carry out an idea which has occurred to me with reference to my money. I have nearly run my span of life. Death may, in the natural order of things, claim me at any moment. Say it claims me to-morrow, and I die without a will, what will become of the great fortune I shall leave behind me? Litigation will ensue. The lawyers will have a banquet You said once, 'If there were in the world one lawyer where now there are a hundred, the world would be the better for it, and justice would be more easily administered.' Well, the law shall not juggle with my money if I live another week; neither shall you have it for your own use; no, not one shilling of it. And yet, if I keep in my present mind, you shall have the entire control of it, and shall have the power of disposing of it in any way you please--except for your own benefit. I know that I can trust you thoroughly; there is not another man in the world whom I would dream of placing such confidence in. It was my desire that you should take my name after my death, and spend my money in such a manner as to make the name a great one in society. As that satisfaction is denied to me, and as you say that 'money is only sweet when it is well-spent,' use mine in fulfilment of your sentiment. The more I think of it the more am I disposed to regard my scheme with favour. To-morrow morning I will go to my lawyer, who will communicate with you after my death. You may be sure that everything will be plainly set down, and that you will not be able to appropriate the money to your own private use. But I must be just. Every labourer is worthy of his hire. If the administration of the trust occupies the chief portion of your time, you shall be warranted in drawing from the funds the sum of one hundred and fifty pounds per annum--to cease immediately your labours cease.

* * * * *

It is long past midnight. As I look out of window, I see that the moon has risen, and that the heavens are filled with stars. My garden is really beautiful now, with the light shining upon it. I have never seen my property present so fair an aspect as it does at this present moment. The river is very beautiful also. I will go out and stroll along the banks, or sit and muse, as the whim seizes me. Shall I wish you 'Good-night before I go? No, I will wait until I return.

* * * * *

Three hours have passed since I wrote the last words. I have heard no human voice, and yet it seems to me that I have heard voices. The air has grown very sweet. Flecks of gold are coming into the sky. I have watched their faint colour grow strong. It is sunrise. A golden mist is rising from the waters. I cannot tell you what has passed through my mind during the last few hours. I cannot tell you what is in it now. I can scarcely comprehend it myself, but I feel happier than I have felt for some time. I cannot wish you Good-night, for the night has passed. Good-morning, Andrew!

XV.

FAIRHAVEN.

The perusal of this remarkable document affected me beyond power of description. My mother's letter to Mr. Fairhaven brought her dear figure vividly to my mind's eye, and I sobbed from happiness. It was love that had accomplished this wonderful thing--love, which death cannot destroy.

I read the latter portion of the document again and again, until I could almost repeat the words from memory. 'Good-morning, Andrew,' were Mr. Fairhaven's last words to me. Ah, yes! In the night of his life the morning had dawned sweetly and holily. I blessed him for his noble revenge. I prayed for strength, for wisdom, to worthily fulfil the solemn trust reposed in me.

But in what way to apply it, so that unalloyed good might spring from its use? My heart cried out, 'Teach me! Show me the way!' An answer came. Side by side I saw the figures of Ruth and Blade-o'-Grass. 'Look here and here,' a voice seemed to say to me. 'See this one trodden into the mire. See this one tended, cared for, raised to purity and usefulness.' I trembled with mingled fear and happiness. A great thought loomed upon my mind, like a sunrise to my soul.

I placed my hand upon my heart to still its beating. I was alone, and I yearned for the presence of friends in whom I could confide. Should I go to those who were dearest to me--to Rachel and to Mrs. Silver, and tell them this wonderful news? I started to my feet with the intention of proceeding at once to Buttercup-square. I placed the precious document in my breast-pocket, and I buttoned my coat tightly and securely. But what, after all, if it should prove a mockery? No, I would wait until I had assured myself. I knew what hopes would be raised in their breasts, and I would spare them a possible disappointment.

If it were not mockery--if it were true, clear, incontestable--this immense fortune was at my disposal to do as I pleased with. Not to spend upon myself; to spend upon others; to sow and reap the crop. Golden Grain!

But before it grew to fulness and ripeness, before it waved in perfect comeliness in the eyes of God and man, to watch the tender green leaves springing from the beneficent earth, smiling in the face of the bright sun, with nature's health-giving tears glistening upon them--to watch them gather sufficient strength to resist the attacks of wind and storm and adverse circumstances, each Blade of Grass a thing of beauty---- Ah, Golden Grain! Golden Grain indeed!

I could not sleep on that night I rose many times, and paced the room, praying for sunrise. And then, when the business of the day had fairly commenced, I was in the office of Mr. Fairhaven's lawyers. The principal member of the firm received me. He eyed me with curiosity through his golden spectacles.

'I expected you would call,' he observed, as he motioned me to a seat.

'Are you acquainted,' I asked, 'with the contents of the packet you sent to me yesterday?'

He answered me like a lawyer.

'It came to me sealed; my instructions were to forward it.'

I placed it in his hands, and he read it, slowly and attentively.

'I was in doubt,' he said, as he handed it back to me, 'whether you were a relative of the late Mr. Fairhaven.'

'You see that I am not'

'I see. It is all the more remarkable because of that.'

'The will,' I said, and paused. He took up my words.

'----Is in exact accordance with the terms of the letter.'

He opened his safe, and produced the will. He referred to the date of the letter.

'I received my instructions,' he said, 'from the late Mr. Fairhaven on the morning following the day on which he wrote this communication.'

'I should have wished to attend his funeral,' I said, 'if I had but known! Even without this, it would have been my earnest desire. I owe much to him.'

'I received no instructions that have not complied with.'

'You saw my dear friend before his death?'

'Frequently. Two days before his death, indeed. You are aware that he died rather suddenly.'

'I was not aware. I am glad to know that he did not suffer long.'

'Up to the last his intellect was remarkably clear.' He said this with a half smile.

'You put stress upon that,' I observed.

'Undoubtedly, my dear sir. It is an important point.'

'In what way?'

He gave me an odd look, and said: 'The late Mr. Fairhaven must have relations. The will he has made is undoubtedly an eccentric one. Has it occurred to you that its validity may be disputed?'

'No.'

'It will be,' he said dryly; 'and that is the reason why it is important to be able to prove that his intellect was clear to the last. You need have no fear, Mr. Meadow. The will cannot be shaken.'

I thanked him for the assurance, and asked him if he was acquainted with the extent of the property.

'It will probably realise,' he answered, 'not less--yes, I should certainly say not less--than two hundred and thirty thousand pounds.'

'A vast fortune, indeed,' I said, with a beating heart at this confirmation of my hopes.

'And made out of nothing,' he added. 'He commenced life as a poor clerk. I have heard it said of him that whatever he touched turned to gold.'

I left to the lawyer the management of everything connected with Mr. Fairhaven's will. As he had predicted, it was disputed, on the ground of the testator's incapacity. But it was proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Mr. Fairhaven was in the full possession of his reasoning faculties not only at the time he made his will, but up to the very day of his death. The validity of the will was unhesitatingly upheld by the judges, and the property came into my possession. Nevertheless the case was not finally settled until after the lapse of many months, and during this time the newspapers were busy upon Mr. Fairhaven's eccentricity. 'It remains to be seen,' said an influential paper, in a leading article, 'and it is a matter of much curiosity, how the legatee will administer his trust' I found myself quite a public character, and I was inundated with applications and with letters of advice. But my resolution was already formed.

I did not disclose this resolution to the Silvers while the matter was in the law-courts. So great was my anxiety that I feared, even up to the last moment, that some chance or quibble of the law would deprive me of the means for carrying it out. Not until everything was settled, not until the property was declared to be mine incontestably, not until it was realised, and the money invested in the Funds, did I consider myself free to open my mind to my dear friends. I had my last interview with the lawyer; he had acted throughout in the most straightforward manner, and I thanked him sincerely.

'And yet,' he remarked, 'you said once to Mr. Fairhaven that if there were in the world one lawyer where now there are a hundred, the world would be the better for it.'

'I think so still,' I replied.

'Strange,' he said, with a touch of pleasant satire, 'that the world has never been able to get along without us.'

'Never!' I exclaimed. 'Nay, you must be mistaken.'

'I am not mistaken. I can go as far back as the days of Abraham for proof. Did not that patriarch buy "the field of Ephron, which was in Macphelah, which was before Mamre; the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders round about?" The very words we read in Genesis. Do you mean to tell me that any one but a lawyer could have written such a description? We have our uses, my dear sir!'

I smiled. I was too happy to argue with him, and we parted the best of friends. In the evening I found myself, as I had designed, in Buttercup-square. I knocked at Mrs. Silver's door, and she herself opened it. Only Rachel and she were at home. I had kept her fully acquainted with the progress of affairs, and she knew that I expected to have my final interview with the lawyer on this day.

'All is settled,' I said. 'What do you see in my face?'

'Happiness.'

'It is in my heart. This is a supreme moment in my life. I feel that I am about to commence a

great work.' Mrs. Silver did not reply, but looked earnestly at me. I noticed also that Rachel suspended her sewing. 'The vast fortune that Mr. Fairhaven left has been safely invested in Consols. What income, do you think, is derivable from the money?'

'I am afraid to guess.'

'What would you say to nearly nine thousand pounds a year?'

'As much as that?' asked Mrs. Silver, with an exclamation of astonishment.

'Quite as much. What is to be done with this great sum, of which I am the steward?'

'It is a grave question,' she said; 'one not easily answered.'

'Still I have not found it difficult to decide. When I first received Mr. Fairhaven's letter an inspiration fell upon me, and my resolution was formed. But I did not dare to consult you upon it, for I feared that the means of carrying it out would slip from me. Now I am free to speak. Listen to me in silence, and when I have unfolded my plan, tell me what you think of it. The inspiration that fell on me on the first disclosure of this good fortune came, my dearest friend, from you, and from the history and influence of your happy home. During the interval that has passed since that eventful day I have thought deeply over my scheme, and have matured it to some extent in my mind. I have not been so wrapt up in it as to be regardless of other modes of expending the money in a good and useful way; but, in the continual contemplation of it, I have become more and more strengthened in my belief that my first thoughts are the happiest and the best. I know the solemnity of the trust reposed in me, and from this moment I consecrate my life to it, convinced that I shall find true happiness in it. I propose to establish on a large scale a Home for the poorest orphaned and friendless children, whom we shall adopt while they are very young, and educate and rear in such a manner as shall make them good and useful members of society. We will take them from the gutters, and rescue them from ignorance and crime; and as they grow up we will draft them into the ranks of honest bread-winners, either in this or in other countries, and fill their places with other poor children. There shall be no distinctive mark of charity upon them; they shall be so brought up as to be proud of the Home in which they are armed for the battle of life. There are numerous matters of detail which need not be discussed and decided upon at present; such as establishing schools of trade in our Home, so that the children may be usefully employed until they take their places in the ranks of out-door workers. I have seen a large building, with ground attached, which will suit our purpose admirably; the rental is three hundred pounds a year. I requires a great deal of alteration, which the proprietor is willing to make if he can let it on a long lease. There is sufficient available land round the building for playgrounds and gardens. The children themselves shall learn to be the gardeners. This, in brief, is my scheme, of which I ask your approval. I see many beautiful pictures in the future in connection with it, the contemplation of which makes me supremely happy. I see men and women in whom have been implanted the seeds of cleanliness, industry, virtue, and religion, living their useful lives, and some among them rising even to eminence in this and other lands--men and women who, without this Home, would be lurking about in rags and want, and filling the public houses and prisons. I see them marrying, and bringing up *their* children in the right path, and holding out a helping hand to others. I see the means for enlarging our Home coming from some of the prosperous ones, out of the gratitude of their hearts. And when the time comes for me to render an account of my stewardship, I trust I shall have earned the approval of Him from whom all blessings are derived. Tell me, dear friend, do you think my scheme a good one?'

Mrs. Silver took my hand in hers, and retained it. She was too agitated to speak, but I saw perfect approval in her sweet face, and in the sweet face of Rachel. I continued:

'In his first proposition to me to make me his heir, Mr. Fairhaven expressed a wish that I should take his name after his death, and spend his money in such a manner as to make the name a great one in society. I shall call our Home, Fairhaven; and thus his goodness will be perpetuated. I look to you, dear madam, to assist me in my scheme, and I ask you to enlist under my banner, as I once enlisted under yours.'

She gave me the assurance of her fullest help, and said she had never hoped such happiness would be hers as to assist in the development of a scheme which she described as noble and good.

'And now,' I said, in tones which trembled with emotion, for I was approaching a subject very dear to my heart, 'if I might be permitted to say a few words privately to you----'

Rachel rose and left the room. I followed her form with wistful eyes, and when I turned to Mrs. Silver I saw that good woman regarding me more attentively than she had hitherto done. I paused for awhile before I resumed.

'I am about to speak of a selfish subject--myself. In Mr. Fairhaven's letter to me, he states that every labourer is worthy of his hire, and that if the administration of the trust he has reposed in me occupies the chief portion of my time, I am warranted in drawing from the funds an annual salary of one hundred and fifty pounds. As I shall make my home at Fairhaven, and shall devote all my time to the furtherance of my scheme, I believe I am fairly entitled to that sum. If I were possessed of private means I would not accept one shilling of the money for my own use; I would cheerfully give my labours without fee and without reward. But it is otherwise with me, and in the annual statement which I shall draw up and endeavour to get published in the papers, I shall place the sum of a hundred and fifty pounds as the fixed salary paid to the general manager of the Home. I *am* justified in doing that, am I not?'

'Quite justified.'

'The income I have hitherto received for my labours has been sufficient for my personal needs, but not more than sufficient. I have felt this sorely, for with those means I have not dared to indulge in the contemplation of the dearest wish and hope of my heart. But now all is clear before me, and I may speak without hesitation.'

My agitation communicated itself to her; I saw the signs of it in her face.

'Not very long ago you said something to me which was very sweet to my ear. You said that if it had pleased God to give you a son of your own, you would have wished him to resemble me. I have thought of these words very often. Have you sufficient confidence in me to give into my care one whom I love with all the strength of my heart and soul? Will you give me Rachel for my wife? Will you let me call you Mother?'

I leant towards her eagerly; she looked at me with solemn affection.

'I *am* proud of you,' she said, 'and I love you as if you were my own. But have you well considered? Rachel is blind----'

'Not to me--not to me, Mother! To make her my wife is the dearest hope of my heart.'

'If I seem to hesitate,' she said tearfully, 'it is because I love you. I would trust you with the dearest treasure I have.'

'If you hesitate,' I replied, 'I shall think that you begin to doubt me. You must believe what I say. Rachel's love will crown my life with perfect happiness.'

I have cause to remember and bless that night. Before I left the house Rachel and I plighted our troth to each other. The dear girl, while confessing that she loved me, actually needed persuasion to accept me as her husband. She was full of doubts of herself, and of her fitness, being blind, to fulfil a wife's duties. Pure, gentle heart! Her presence would sweeten and add lustre to a palace. It was decided that we should not be married until Fairhaven was fairly established, and this I knew would occupy some considerable time.

So now, with everything fair before me, I set to work upon my scheme. The house and grounds I had mentioned to Mrs. Silver as being suitable for the Home, I took on a long lease, in which a purchasing clause was inserted. The necessary alterations were carefully discussed, and were commenced as soon as possible. As I had resolved, I made my scheme public, through the medium of the newspapers, the writers in which gave me the most generous assistance and encouragement. To my surprise, not one thought my idea quixotic; and before Fairhaven was ready to receive inmates, its name became famous not only in this, but in other countries. Every hour of my time was occupied, and I think I may fairly say I earned my wages. It would occupy too much space here to narrate the details of my work; they were numerous and onerous--more so than I had contemplated; but I did not shrink from them, and the assistance I received from the Silvers was of incalculable value to me. Letters poured in upon me, and among them were some addressed to the Master of Fairhaven. It pleased my friends to adopt this title for me, and I accepted it with pride and pleasure.

One of the most gratifying features of the movement was that many of the letters contained subscriptions in money in aid of the Home. These subscriptions it was necessary to acknowledge, and I thought it would be a good thing to acknowledge them in the newspapers. I did so; and the result was astonishing. Stimulated by the example, money was sent to me from all quarters and from all kinds of people, even from the poorest. Before many weeks had elapsed I found that the work of answering these letters was too much for me.

'You want a secretary,' said Mrs. Silver.

'I have been thinking of it,' I said; 'and I have thought of offering the situation to some one whom you know.'

'To whom?'

'To Mary. The work will be no harder for her than that which she already accomplishes in the telegraph office.'

Mrs. Silver was delighted with the suggestion, and Mary was offered and accepted the situation. Thus the work went on harmoniously, and a fortnight before Christmas the Home was in a sufficiently forward state to commence operations. I had schemed that the inauguration should take place on Christmas-day, and I proposed that all my friends--the Silvers and their children, Mr. Merrywhistle, Jimmy Virtue, Robert Truefit and his family, and Blade o'-Grass--should spend the day at Fairhaven. It was thus arranged, and this Christmas two years, Fairhaven received more than sixty poor orphaned children, and the good work was actually commenced.

I must mention here that Blade-o'-Grass had lived with Mrs. Silver from the time of Tom Beadle's departure; and on this, our inauguration day, I found her assistance with the children peculiarly valuable.

'This is the anniversary of your wedding-day, my dear,' I said to Blade-o'-Grass.

'Yes, sir,' she answered; 'there are only four years now to wait. Did you know I had a letter last night from Tom?'

'No, my dear.'

She gave me the letter, and I found that it was written--very badly, of course--by Tom Beadle himself. He was learning to read as well, he said in the letter; Richard was his tutor.

'You are getting along also, my dear, with your reading and writing.'

'Yes, sir. It's a good letter, isn't it?

It was a good letter. Everything was turning out as I had hoped. The different life which Tom was leading was having its effect upon him, and he was beginning to look forward. From

Richard's letters to me I knew that he had had some trouble with Tom at first; Tom had not taken too kindly to the restrictions of his time which regular labour imposes; but this feeling--the natural result of the vagrant life he had hitherto led--was passing away, and Tom's mind was nearly settled. In his letter, which I held in my mind, there was a message of goodwill to all who had been kind to Blade-o'-Grass.

'Now, my dear,' I said, as I returned the letter, 'I have a proposition to make to you. You have four years to wait before you wish us good-bye, and sail for your new home in another land. What do you say to living at Fairhaven until that day comes? You shall be one of my matrons--I want those about me whom I can depend upon--and I can afford to pay you twenty pounds a year for your services. You will have a little purse to give Tom when you see him, and that will be an agreeable surprise to him. What do you say to my proposition?'

She could not answer me immediately; but when she was sufficiently recovered to speak, she told me that she had yearned to be allowed to stop at Fairhaven, but that she should not have been able to muster courage to ask me--not deeming herself capable enough or good enough. She accepted the offer gratefully, but begged me not to pay her money.

'Let me work for you for love, sir!' she pleaded.

'No, my dear,' I said firmly, 'not entirely for love. Why! *I* take money for my services, and so shall you! It is just and right.'

From that time until this, Blade-o'-Grass has not spent a day away from Fairhaven, and she is the most valuable assistant I have in the Home. I shall miss her sorely when she goes. Her influence over the children is wonderful, and they, as well as we, love her very sincerely.

The year that followed was even busier than the preceding year. So much had to be seen to! Rachel and I decided to wait until everything was settled and in far working order before we were married. We had another reason for the delay. The rooms in Fairhaven that I had set aside for ourselves required to be furnished, and the money for the furniture could not be taken out of the general fund. I had to earn the money before I could offer Rachel a home which she could call properly her own. During the year subscriptions continued to flow in upon us, without any appeal being made. The charitable heart of England is not hard to touch. And one day, to my intense delight and joy, a letter came from a Great Lady, containing a cheque for a large amount. The letter itself is a bright testimonial in favour of the good work.

I could tarry with pleasure over this portion of my story, but my time is drawing short. My holiday is nearly at an end--the day after to-morrow my wife and I return to Fairhaven. We have enjoyed our honeymoon beyond description, although it is winter. Many a happy walk have we taken in the crisp cold air; many a happy evening have we spent by the cheerful fireside, Rachel busy with her needle, and I reading to her what I have written; breaking off every now and then to talk of the dear house in Buttercup-square, and of the dear ones in it; of the children at home in Fairhaven, and of the happy future there is before us, and we hope before them. The house in which we have been living during our honeymoon is completely covered with ivy up to the very chimneys, and the wrens find shelter there, and leave not a crumb of the bread we scatter for them every morning upon our windowsill. The holly-bushes are bright with crimson berries; Christmas will be with us soon; a bunch of Christmas-roses is on my table now. But one eventful circumstance remains to be narrated.

It was the autumn of last year; I had called into see Mrs. Silver early in the morning, to consult her on some arrangements for the Home. She asked after all there, and we fell a-talking, as we often did, about Blade-o'-Grass, who was very much changed in appearance from what she was. A stranger, looking upon her now for the first time, would never have guessed what her previous life had been; her dress was neat and modest, her hair was done up in a simple knot, hope and happiness dwelt in her face. Day by day she was strengthening her hold upon all our hearts; her gentle behaviour to the children, her gratitude and her love for all around her, her patience, her cheerful willingness, were very pleasant to behold. Mrs. Silver and I spoke of one fancy which Blade-o'-Grass indulged in. She seemed to have set Ruth before her as a model; and in the matter of dress and the fashion of her hair, she copied Ruth as closely as she could. The subject of her resemblance to Ruth had never been touched upon by any of us since my conversation with Rachel, although I am sure it was in the mind of my friends as it was in my own. But it seemed to be avoided by general and unexpressed consent. I was telling Mrs. Silver that before I left Fairhaven, Ruth had come with her child to spend the day there with Blade-o'-Grass, when the servant entered to say that a visitor wished to see Mrs. Silver very particularly.

'She says she don't think you know her, ma'am, but that she'll tell you who she is herself.'

'Let her come in, Emma.'

The visitor proved to be a tidily-dressed woman, of about fifty or fifty-five years of age; she looked like a farmer's wife. If I wished to describe her by a word, I should use the word 'comfortable.' In her dress and general appearance she was eminently a comfortable woman. She looked at Mrs. Silver very earnestly, and took the chair that was offered to her. There was something very homely and genial about her; and although I felt somewhat curious to know her errand, I asked Mrs. Silver if I should retire.

'Not unless this lady wishes it,' said Mrs. Silver.

'Love your heart!' was the reply, in a pleasant tone; 'I don't wish it if you don't. And I hope you'll forgive the liberty I've took in coming here; but I couldn't rest without seeing you, after coming all these miles.'

'You have come a long way, then,' said Mrs. Silver; 'you must be tired.'

The visitor laughed. 'I've come sixteen thousand miles over the water, all the way from Australia, and I'm going back there next month, please God!'

'You are an Englishwoman?'

'O yes, ma'am; I was born in London. Me and my husband emigrated eighteen year ago. It was the best day's work we ever done, though I love the old country, ma'am; but we were driven out of it, in a manner of speaking. My husband was a carpenter--he's a builder now, and we've done well, thank God, and our children are in the way of doing well too.'

'I am glad to hear it.'

'I'm the mother of fourteen, ma'am--twelve of them living.'

'That's a large family.'

'Not a bit too large out there; too large here for a poor man, but not there. I've been longing these five or six years past to come and see the old country once more before I die; and four months ago, my man said, "Well, mother, if your mind's set on it, we'd best go and get it over." So we've come, and we sha'n't lose anything by it. He's busy this morning looking at a steam-plough we're going to take back for our eldest son, who has a farm--if you'll excuse me for rambling on in this way, ma'am.'

'It interests me to hear you.'

'When a person comes back to the old spots, after being away for so many years, all sorts of curious feelings comes over her. It seemed to me as if I was in a dream when I walked through Stoney-alley this morning----'

'Stoney-alley!'

'I lived there a long time, ma'am; but I never knew until this morning what a dreadful place it is. I think I should die if I was compelled to live there again. There's the old shops there, just the same as they were eighteen years ago--all except Mr. Virtue's leaving-shop, which I was told was burnt down. You look as if you knew the place, sir.'

'I know it well,' I said, 'and Mr. Virtue also.'

'Ah, he was a queer old man! but he had a heart, though he *was* so grumpy! But I mustn't ramble. I've come to make a confession to you, ma'am, and to ask you after some one I nursed in these arms when she was a baby.'

Mrs. Silver turned pale.

'I've nothing to blame myself for, ma'am; what was done was done for the best. Do you remember anything that, occurred last Christmas-eve come twenty-three year ago?'

'Yes, I remember it well; very well,' replied Mrs. Silver, in an agitated tone. 'I have cause to remember it with gratitude. It was on that night, Andrew, that Ruth came to us; it was on that night I visited Stoney-alley, the place where this good woman lived.'

'You came to the very house in which I lived, ma'am, and you took away--bless your loving heart for it!--one of the sweetest children that ever breathed. The landlady brought her to you out of these very arms. Ruth, you say her name is. Tell me, ma'am--tell me--you know what it is I want to ask.'

'She is well and happy.'

'Thank God for that!'

'But you say the landlady gave me the child out of your arms. You are not her mother----' Mrs. Silver was unable to proceed.

'Love your dear heart, no! The poor child's mother was dead. But the landlady only told you half the truth when she told you that. She said there was only one baby--she didn't tell you that the poor mother was confined with twin-girls. On the Christmas-eve that you came to Stoney-alley I had them both on my knees--the sweet little things! They hadn't a friend, and we were too poor to take care of them. We had a large family of our own, and our hands were as full as full can be! As I was nursing the dears, the landlady came into the room in a flare of excitement, and said that there was a kind lady downstairs--it was you, ma'am--who wanted to adopt an orphan

child, and who would give it a home and bring it up properly. The landlady said that if she had told you there was twins left in that way, she was sure you wouldn't be willing to part them, and that it would be a good thing, at all events, if one of the poor little ones could be taken care of. My husband thought so too; and though it cut me to the heart to part the dears, I felt it was the best thing we could do. We were a long time choosing between them; they were so much alike that we could hardly tell which was which; but one of them had a pretty dimple, and we kept that one, and sent the other down to you. If you remember, ma'am, you left your name and address with the landlady, and I never parted with the piece of paper you wrote it on, for I didn't know what might turn up. That is how I've found you out now.'

Mrs. Silver looked at me in distress.

'There is no need for sorrow here,' I said. 'If what I suspect is true, it is but a confirmation of what has been in my thoughts and in Rachel's also for a long time.' I turned to our visitor. 'I should know your name; Mr. Virtue has told me of you, and of your kindness to these babes. You collected money for them before they were a fortnight old.'

'Yes,' she assented with pleasant nods, 'and Mr. Virtue himself gave me a penny. My name is Mrs. Manning.'

'Tell me. What became of the other child?'

'That's what I want to know. If she's alive now, poor thing! she must be a woman grown; very different, ma'am, I'm afraid, from the child that you adopted. But if she wants a friend I'll be that friend. I'll take her back with me, if she'll come--my man wouldn't mind! She'd have a chance out there; and what's a mouth more or less at a full table, as ours is, thank God! a slice off a cut loaf is never missed.'

'You good soul! I said, pressing her hand. 'We want to know all you can tell us about the other child. Do you remember what name she was known by?'

'Ah, that I do, and a curious way it was how she came by that name! You see, ma'am, two or three blades of grass happened to sprout up in our back-yard, and the child took to watching them, and fell quite in love with them, poor little dear! This went on for three or four days, till one morning, when she was sitting by the side of the blades of grass, a lodger, hurrying along, happened to tread them down. The child was in a dreadful way, ma'am, and, as children will do, she hit at the man with her little fists. He pushed her down with his foot, not intending to hurt her, I do believe; and I ran out, and blew him up for his unkindness. He laughed, and said it was a fine fuss to kick up about two or three blades of grass, and that it was a good job for the child that she wasn't a blade of grass herself, or she might have been trod down with the others. From that time the child began to be called little Blade-o'-Grass, and that was the only name I ever knew her to have.'

'Ruth is at Fairhaven,' I said to Mrs. Silver.

'We will go there at once,' said Mrs. Silver, rising. 'This will be a joyful day for both of them. You will accompany us,' to Mrs. Manning. 'You would like to see these sisters whom you nursed and were good to in their helplessness?'

'It's what I've been praying for, ma'am. Many and many a time, over the water, has my man and me talked of them, and wondered what has become of them. Fairhaven! It's a pretty name; but are they both there? and what kind of a place, is Fairhaven?'

'You shall see for yourself,' replied Mrs. Silver, with tearful smiles. 'And on the way the Master of Fairhaven shall tell you the story of these sisters' lives.'

How the good creature cried and laughed over the story I need not here describe. When I came to the end her delight knew no bounds. She shook hands with me and Mrs. Silver, her honest face beaming with joy, and said, under her breath, 'Well, this is the happiest day!'

Blade-o'-Grass and Ruth were in the garden. As we approached them Mrs. Manning raised her hands in astonishment, and whispering to us that they were as like each other as two peas, asked which was Blade-o'-Grass and which was Ruth. We told her; and, in her motherly homely fashion, she held out her arms to them. Blade-o'-Grass passed her hands over her eyes and gazed earnestly at Mrs. Manning.

'Do you remember me, my dear?' asked the good woman. 'I've come a long way to see you--sixteen thousand miles--to see both of you, my dears! I nursed you both on my knees before you were a week old----'

Her motherly heart overflowed towards the girls, and Mrs. Silver and I stole away and left them together. We did not disturb them for fully half-an-hour. Then we went softly towards them. Blade-o'-Grass was kneeling by the side of Ruth, looking into her sister's face with a look of unutterable love. Ruth's arm was embracing Blade-o'-Grass, and Mrs. Manning was standing, with clasped hands, contemplating the sisters with ineffable gladness.

My story is told.

I write these last words at Fairhaven. The morning after our arrival home, I stood upon the threshold of our little snuggery, which is built on an elevation, with my arm around my wife's waist, describing to her the picture which I saw. It was the play-hour of the day, and the grounds were filled with children, comfortably dressed. We have nearly three hundred children in our Home. Immediately before me, in the centre of a group of young ones, who were clustering round her, was Blade-o'-Grass, strengthened and chastened by the troubles she has experienced, beautified by the better sphere of life which she now occupies. The innate goodness of her nature has made her beloved by all. Of all our sisters she is the dearest.

We are making great preparations for Christmas. May it be as happy a time to you, dear reader, as, in all human probability, it will be to us and to the little ones who are in our charge!

THE END.

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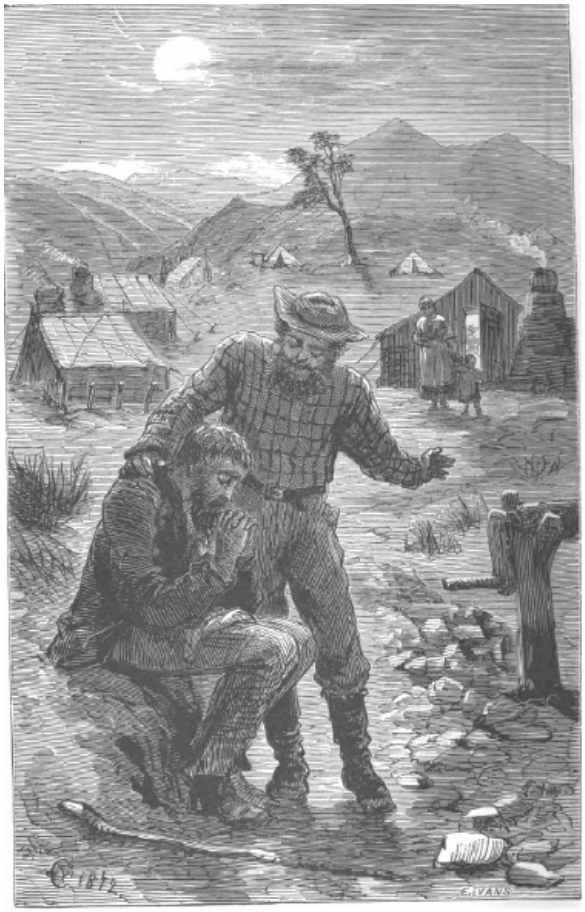

Saul and David.

BREAD AND CHEESE AND KISSES.

BY B. L. Farjeon

AUTHOR OF BLADE OF GRASS "GRIF" AND JOSHUA MARVEL.]

Introduction,
which
serves in part as a
Dedication
to the
Memory of my Mother.

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With a sense of infinite thankfulness upon me, I sit down to commence my Christmas story. This thankfulness is born of overflowing gratitude. I am grateful that I am spared to write it, and grateful because of the belief that the Blade of Grass I put forth a year ago was: out of the goodness of many sympathising hearts: not allowed to wither and die. It has been pressed upon me, and I have had it in my mind, to continue the history of the humble Blade of Grass that I left drooping last year; but the social events that have occurred between that time and the present would not justify my doing so now. I hope to continue it before long. By and by, please God, you and I will follow the Blade of Grass through a summer all the more pleasant because of the bleak winter in which it sprung, and by which it has hitherto been surrounded. In the mean time, the tears that I shed over it will keep it green, I trust. And in the mean time, it gladdens me to see a star shining upon it, although it stands amid snow and wintry weather.

As I sit in my quiet chamber, and think of the happy season for which I am writing, I seem to hear the music of its tender influence, and I wish that the kindly spirit which animates that day would animate not that day alone, but every day of the three hundred and sixty-five. It might be so; it could be so. Then, indeed, the Good Time which now is always coming would be no longer looked forward to.

Not that life should be a holiday: work is its wholesomest food. But some little more of general kindliness towards one another, of generous feeling between class and class, as well as between person and person; some little less consideration of self; some more general recognition by the high of the human and divine equality which, the low bear to them; some little more consideration from the poor for the rich; some little more practical pity from the rich for the poor; some little less of the hypocrisy of life too commonly practised and too commonly toadied to; some better meaning in the saying of prayers, and therefore more true devotion in the

bending of knees; some little more benevolence in statesmanship; some hearty honest practising of doing unto others even as ye would others should do unto you:--may well be wished for, more appropriately, perhaps, at this season than at any other, associated as it is with all that is tender and bright and good.

Why does the strain in which I am writing bring to me the memory of my Mother? It is, I suppose, because that memory is the most sacred and the tenderest that I have, and because what I feel for her is inwoven in my heart of hearts.

But there is another reason. From her comes the title of my Christmas story. And this introduction serves in part as a dedication to the beautiful goodness of her nature.

I think that in this wide world: among the thousands of millions of human beings who live and have passed away: there is not, and never was, a woman who lived her life more contentedly, nor one who strove more heartfully to make the most cheerful use of everything that fell to her lot--of even adversity, of which she had her full share. She was beloved by all who knew her. To her sympathising heart were confided many griefs which others had to bear; and, poor as she was for a long period of her life, she always, by some wonderful secret of which I hope she was not the only possessor, contrived to help those who came to her in need. I remember asking her once how she managed it. 'My dear,' she answered, with a smile which reminds me of a peaceful moonlight night; 'my dear, I have a lucky bag.' Where she kept it, heaven only knows; but she was continually dipping her hand into it, and something good and sweet always came out. How many hearts she cheered, how many burdens she lightened, how many crosses she garlanded with hope, no one can tell. She never did. These things came to her as among the duties of life, and she took pleasure in performing them. I am filled with wonder and with worship as I think how naturally she laid aside her own hard trials to sympathise with the trials of others.

She was a capital housewife, and made much out of little. She had not one selfish desire, and being devoted to her children, she made their home bright for them. There was no sunshine in the house when Mother was away. She possessed wonderful secrets in cookery, and I would sooner sit down to one of the dinners she used to prepare for us (albeit they were very humble) than to the grandest banquet that could be placed before me. Everything was sweet that came from her hands--as sweet as was everything that came from her lips.

I would ask her often, being of an inquisitive turn of mind, 'Mother, what have you got for dinner to-day?' 'Bread-and-Cheese and Kisses,' she would reply merrily. Then I knew that one of our favourite dishes was sure to be on the table, and I rejoiced accordingly. Sometimes, however, she would vary her reply by saying that dinner would consist of 'Knobs of Chairs and Pump-Handles.' Then would I sit in sackcloth and ashes, for I knew that the chance of a good dinner was trembling in the balance.

But Knobs of Chairs and Pump-Handles was the exception. Bread-and-Cheese and Kisses was the rule. And to this day Bread-and-Cheese and Kisses bears for me in its simple utterance a sacred and beautiful meaning. It means contentment; it means cheerfulness; it means the exercise of sweet words and gentle thought; it means Home!

Dear and sacred word! Let us get away from the garish light that distorts it. Let you and I, this Christmas, retire for a while, and think of it and muse upon it. Let us resolve to cherish it always, and let us unite in the hope that its influence for inconceivable good may not be lost in the turmoil of the Great March, to the thunderous steps of which the world's heart is wildly beating. Home! It is earth's heaven! The flowers that grow within garret walls prove it; the wondering ecstasy that fills the mother's breast as she looks upon the face of her first-born, the quiet ministering to those we love, the unselfishness, the devotion, the tender word, the act of charity, the self-sacrifice that finds creation there, prove it; the prayers that are said as we kneel by the bedside before committing our bodies to sleep, the little hands folded in worship, the lisping words of praise and of thanks to God that come from children's lips, the teaching of those words by the happy mother so that her child may grow up good, prove it. No lot in life is too lowly for this earth's heaven. No lot in life is too lowly for the pure enjoyment of Bread-and-Cheese and Kisses.

I wish you, dear readers and friends, no better lot than this. May Bread-and-Cheese and Kisses often be your fare, and may it leave as sweet a taste in your mouth as it has left in mine!

PART I.

COME AND SHOW YOUR FACE, LIKE A MAN!

If I were asked to point to a space of ground which, of all other spaces in the world, most truly represents the good and bad, the high and low, of humanity, I should unhesitatingly describe a circle of a mile around Westminster Abbey. Within that space is contained all that ennobles life, and all that debases it; and within that space, at the same moment, the lofty aspiration of the statesman pulses in the great Senate House in unison with the degraded desires of the inhabitant of Old Pye-street. There St. Giles and St. James elbow each other. There may be seen, in one swift comprehensive glance, all the beauty and ugliness of life, all its hope and hopelessness, all its vanity and modesty, all its knowledge and ignorance, all its piety and profanity, all its fragrance and foulness. The wisdom of ages, the nobility that sprung from fortunate circumstance or from brave endeavour, the sublime lessons that lie in faith and heroism, sanctify the solemn aisles of the grand old Abbey. Within its sacred cloisters rest the ashes of the great: outside its walls, brushing them with his ragged garments, skulks the thief--and worse.

But not with these contrasts, nor with any lesson that they may teach, have you and I to deal now. Our attention is fixed upon the striking of eight o'clock by the sonorous tongue of Westminster. And not our attention alone--for many of the friends with whom we shall presently shake hands are listening also; so that we find ourselves suddenly plunged into very various company. Ben Sparrow, the old grocer, who, just as One tolls, is weighing out a quarter of a pound of brown sugar for a young urchin without a cap, inclines his head and listens, for all the world as if he *were* a sparrow, so birdlike is the movement: Bessie Sparrow, his granddaughter, who, having put Tottie to bed, is coming downstairs in the dark (she has left the candle in the washhand-basin in Tottie's room, for Tottie cannot go to sleep without a light), stops and counts from One to Eight, and thinks the while, with eyes that have tears in them, of Somebody who at the same moment is thinking of her: Tottie, with one acid-drop very nearly at the point of dissolution in her mouth, and with another perspiring in her hand, lies in bed and listens and forgets to suck until the sound dies quite away: a patient-looking woman, pausing in the contemplation of a great crisis in her life, seeks to find in the tolling of the bell some assurance of a happy result: James Million, Member of Parliament, whose name, as he is a very rich man, may be said to be multitudinous, listens also as he rolls by in his cab; and as his cab passes the end of the street in which Mrs. Naldret resides, that worthy woman, who is standing on a chair before an open cupboard, follows the sound, with the tablecloth in her hand, and mutely counts One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, the last number being accompanied by a resigned sigh, as if Eight were the end of all things.

The room in which Mrs. Naldret is standing is poor and comfortable; a cheerful fire is burning, and the kettle is making up its mind to begin to sing. An old black cat is lazily blinking her eyes at the little jets of gas that thrust their forked tongues from between the bars of the stove. This cat is lying on a faded hearthrug, in which once upon a time a rampant lion reigned in brilliant colours; and she is not at all disturbed by the thought that a cat lying full-length upon a lion, with his tongue hanging out, is an anomaly in nature and a parody in art. There is certainly some excuse for her in the circumstance that the lion is very old, and is almost entirely rubbed out.

Mrs. Naldret steps from the chair with the tablecloth in her hand, and in one clever shake, and with as nimble a movement as any wizard could have made, shakes it open. As it forms a balloon over the table, she assists it to expel the wind, and to settle down comfortably--being herself of a comfortable turn of mind--and smoothes the creases with her palms, until the cloth fits the table like wax. Then she sets the tea-things, scalds the teapot, and begins to cut the bread and to butter it. She cuts the bread very thick, and butters it very thin. Butter is like fine gold to poor people.

'I don't remember,' she says, pausing to make the reflection, with the knife in the middle of the loaf, 'its being so cold for a long time. To be sure, we're in December, and it'll be Christmas in three weeks. Christmas!' she repeats, with a sigh, 'and George'll not be here. He'll be on the sea--on the stormy ocean. It'll be a heavy Christmas to us. But, there! perhaps it's all for the best; though how George got the idea of emigrating into his head, I can't tell; it seemed to come all of a sudden like. The house won't seem like the same when he's away.' For comfort, her thoughts turn in another direction--towards her husband. 'I wish father was home, though it isn't quite his time--and he's pretty punctual, is father.' She goes to the window, and peeps at the sky through a chink in the shutters. 'It looks as if it was going to snow. What a bright clear night it is, but how cold! It's freezing hard!' Turning, she looks at the fire, and at the cozy room, gratefully. 'Thank God, we've got a fire, and a roof to cover us! God help those who haven't! There are a many of 'em, poor creatures, and times are hard.' She turns again to the window, to takes another peep at the sky through the shutters, and finds the light shut out. 'There's some one looking into the room!' she exclaims, retreating hastily out of view. 'It can't be Jim--he's never done such a thing. He's only too glad to get indoors such nights as this. And it can't be George. And there's the lock of the street-door broken--no more use than a teapot with a hole in the bottom.' Being a woman of courage, Mrs. Naldret runs into the passage, and opens the street-door. 'Who's there? she cries, looking into the street, and shivering, as the cold wind blows into her face. 'Who's there? Don't sneak away like that, but come and show your face, like a man!'

The man pauses at the challenge, stands irresolute for a moment or two, then walks slowly back to the window, with hanging head.

'Show my face, like a man!' he repeats, sadly, bitterly, and with a world of self-reproach in his tone. 'There's not much of that stuff left in me, Mrs. Naldret.'

'Good Lord!' she exclaims, as he stands before her like a criminal. 'It's Saul Fielding!'

'Yes,' he replies. 'It's Saul Fielding, God help him!'

'Why can't Saul Fielding help himself?' she retorts, half angrily, half pityingly. 'There was stuff enough in him once--at all events I thought so.'

'Show me the way!' he cries; but lowers his tone instantly, and says humbly, 'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Naldret, for speaking in that manner. It's ungrateful of me to speak like that to any of George's friends. and least of all to his mother, that George loves like the apple of his eye.'

'So he does, dear lad,' says the grateful woman, 'and it does my heart good to hear you say so. But you've nothing to be grateful to me for, Saul. I've never done you any good; it's never been in my power.'

'Yes, you have, and it has been in your power, Mrs. Naldret. Why, it was only last week that you offered me----'

'What you wouldn't take,' she interrupts hastily; 'so you don't know if I meant it. Let be! Let be!'

'----That you offered me food,' he continues steadily. 'But it's like you and yours to make light of it. You've never done me any good! Why, you're George's mother, and you brought him into the world! And I owe him more than my life--ay, more than my life!'

'I know the friendship there was between you and George,' she says, setting the strength of his words to that account, 'and that George loved you like a brother. More's the pity, because of that, that you are as you are.'

'It is so,' he assents meekly; 'but the milk's spilt; I can't pick it up again.'

'Saul, Saul! you talk like a woman!'

'Do I?' he asks tenderly, and looking into her face with respect and esteem in his eyes. 'Then there's some good left in me. I know one who is stronger than I am, better, wiser, than a hundred such as I--and I showed my appreciation of her goodness and her worth by doing her wrong. Show my face like a man! I ought to hide it, as the moles do, and show my contempt for myself by flying from the sight of men!'

Filled with compassion, she turns her face from him so that she may not witness his grief.

'She is the noblest, the best of women!' he continues. 'In the face of God, I say it. Standing here, with His light shining upon me, with His keen wind piercing me to my bones (but it is just!), I bow to her, although I see her not, as the nearest approach to perfect goodness which it has ever been my happiness and my unhappiness to come in contact with. Ay; although virtue, as humanly exercised, would turn its back upon her.'

'Are you blaming the world, Saul Fielding,' she asks, in a tone that has a touch of sternness in it, 'for a fault which is all your own?'

'No,' he answers; 'I am justifying Jane. *I* blame the world! a pretty object I, to turn accuser!'

He appeals to his rags, in scorn of them and of himself.

'Saul Fielding,' she says, after a pause during which she feels nothing but ruth for his misery, 'you are a bit of a scholar; you have gifts that others could turn to account, if they had them. Before you--you----'

'Went wrong,' he adds, as she hesitates, 'I know what you want to say. Go on, Mrs. Naldret. *Your* words don't hurt me.'

'Before that time, George used to come home full of admiration for you and your gifts. He said that you were the best-read man in all the trade, and I'm sure, to hear you speak is proof enough of that. Well, let be, Saul; let the past die, and make up your mind, like a man, to do better in the future.'

'Let the past die!' he repeats, as through the clouds that darken his mind rifts of human love shine, under the influence of which his voice grows indescribably soft and tender. 'Let the past die! No, not for a world of worlds. Though it is filled with shame, I would not let it go.--What are you looking for?'

'It's Jim's time--my husband's--for coming home,' she says, a little anxiously, looking up the

street. 'He mightn't like----' But again she hesitates and stumbles over her words.

'To see you talking to me. He shall not My eyes are better than his, and the moment I see him turn the corner of the street, I will go.'

'What were you looking through the shutters for?'

'I wanted to see if George was at home.'

'And supposing he had been?'

'I should have waited in the street until he came out.'

'Do you think Jim Naldret would like to see his son talking to Saul Fielding?'

'No, I don't suppose he would,' he replies quietly; 'but for all that, I shall do George no harm. I would lay down my life to serve him. You don't know what binds me and George together. And he is going away soon--how soon, Mrs. Naldret?'

'In a very few days,' she answers, with a sob in her throat.

'God speed him! Ask him to see me before he goes, will you, Mrs. Naldret?'

'Yes, I will, Saul; and thank you a thousand times for the good feeling you show to him.'

'Tell him that I have joined the waits, and that he will hear my flute among them any night this week. I'll manage so that we don't go away from this neighbourhood till he bids good-bye to it.'

'Joined the waits!' she exclaims. 'Good Lord! Have you come to that?'

'That's pretty low, isn't it?' he says, with a light laugh, and with a dash of satire in his tone. 'But, then, you know--playing the flute--is one of my gifts--(I learnt it myself when I was a boy)--and if s the only thing I can get to do. Is there any tune you're very fond of, and would like to hear as you lie a-bed? If there is, we'll play it.'

'If you could play a tune to keep George at home,' says Mrs. Naldret, 'that's the tune I'd like to hear.'

'Your old Gospel of contentment, Mrs. Naldret,' he remarks.

'I like to let well alone,' she replies, with emphatic nods; 'if you'd been content with that, years ago, instead of trying to stir men up----'

'I shouldn't be as I am now,' he says, interrupting her; 'you are right--you are right. Good-night, and God bless you!'

He shuffles off, without waiting for another word, blowing on his fingers, which are almost frozen. Mrs. Naldret, who is also cold enough by this time, is glad to get to her fireside, to warm herself. Her thoughts follow Saul Fielding. 'Poor fellow!' she muses. 'I should like to have had him by the fire for a while, but Jim would have been angry. And to be sure it wouldn't be right, with the life he's been leading. But how well he talks, and how clever he is! What'll be the end of him, goodness only knows. He's made me feel quite soft. And how he loves George! That's what makes me like him. "You don't know what binds me and George together," he said. "I would lay down my life to serve him," he said. Well, there must be some good in a man who speaks like that!'

AND SO THE LAD GOES ON WITH HIS BESSIE AND HIS BESSIE, UNTIL ONE WOULD THINK HE HAS NEVER A MOTHER IN THE WORLD.

By an egregious oversight on the part of the architect, designer, or what not, the door of Mrs. Naldret's room turned into the passage, so that whenever it was opened the cold wind had free play, and made itself felt. Mrs. Naldret, bending before the fire to warm herself, does not hear the softest of raps on the panel, but is immediately afterwards made sensible that somebody is coming into the room by a chill on the nape of her neck and down the small of her back, 'enough to freeze one's marrow,' she says. She knows the soft footfall, and, without turning, is aware that Bessie Sparrow is in the room.

'Come to the fire, my dear,' she says.

Bessie kneels by her side, and the two women, matron and maid, look into the glowing flames, and see pictures there. Their thoughts being on the same subject, the pictures they see are of the same character--all relating to George, and ships, and wild seas, and strange lands.

'I dreamt of you and George last night,' says Mrs. Naldret, taking Bessie's hand in hers. She likes the soft touch of Bessie's fingers; her own are hard and full of knuckles. The liking for anything that is soft is essentially womanly. 'I dreamt that you were happily married, and we were all sitting by your fireside, as it might be now, and I was dancing a little one upon my knee.'

'O, mother!' exclaims Bessie, hiding her face on Mrs. Naldret's neck.

'I told father my dream before breakfast this morning, so it's sure to come true. The little fellow was on my knee as naked as ever it was born, a-cocking out its little legs and drawing of them up again, like a young Samson. Many a time I've had George on my knee like that, and he used to double up his fists as if he wanted to fight all the world at once. George was the finest babby I ever *did* see; he walked at nine months. He's been a good son, and'll make a good husband; and he's as genuine as salt, though I say it perhaps as shouldn't, being his mother. Is your grandfather coming into-night, Bess?

'I don't think it. He's busy getting ready a Christmas show for the window; he wants to make it look very gay, to attract business: Grandfather's dreadfully worried because business is so bad. People are not laying out as much money as they used to do.'

'Money don't buy what it used to do, Bess; things are dearer, and money's the same. Father isn't earning a shilling more to-day than he earnt ten years ago, and meat's gone up, and rent's gone up, and plenty of other things have gone up' But we've got to be contented, my dear, and make the best of things. If George could get enough work at home to keep him going, do you suppose he'd ever ha' thought of going to the other end of the world?' She asks this question, with a shrewd, watchful look into Bessie's face, which the girl does not see, her eyes being towards the fire; and adds immediately, 'Although he's not going for long, thank God.'

'It is very, very hard,' sighs Bessie, 'that he should have to go.'

'It would be harder, my dear, for him to remain here doing nothing. There's nothing that does a man--or a woman either, Bess--so much mischief as idleness. My old mother used to say that when a man's idle, he's worshipping the devil. You know very well, Bess, that I'm all for contentment. One can make a little do if one's mind is made up for it--just as one can find a great deal not enough if one's mind is set that way. For my part, I think that life's too short to worrit your inside out, a-wishing for this, and a-longing for that, and a-sighing for t'other. When George began to talk of going abroad, I said to him, "Home's home, George, and you can be happy on bread-and-cheese and kisses, supposing you can't get better." "Very well, mother," said George, "I'm satisfied with that. But come," said he, in his coaxing way--*you* know, Bessie!--"But come, you say home's home, and you're right, mammy." (He always calls me mammy when he's going to get the best of me with his tongue--he knows, the cunning lad, that it reminds me of the time when he was a babby!) "You're right, mammy," he said; "but I love Bess, and I want to marry her. I want to have her all to myself," he said. "I'm not happy when I'm away from her," he said. "I want to see her a-setting by *my* fireside," he said. "I don't want to be standing at the street-door a-saying goodnight to her"--(what a long time it takes a-saying! don't it, Bess? Ah, I remember!) "a-saying good-night to her with my arm round her waist, and my heart so full of love for her that I can hardly speak"--(his very words, my dear!)--"and then, just as I'm feeling happy and forgetting everything else in the world, to hear grandfather's voice piping out from the room behind the

shop, 'Don't you think it's time to go home, George? Don't you think that it's time for Bessie to be a-bed?' And I don't want," said George, "when I answer in a shamefaced way, 'All right, grandfather; just five minutes more!' to hear his voice, in less than a half a minute, waking me out of a happy dream, calling out, 'Time's up, George! Don't you think you ought to go home, George? Don't you think Bessie's tired, George?" "That's all well and good," said I to him; "but what's that to do with going abroad?" "O, mammy," he said, "when I marry Bessie, don't I want to give her a decent bed to lie upon? Ain't I bound to get a bit of furniture together?" Well, well; and so the lad goes on with his Bessie and his Bessie, until one would think he has never a mother in the world.'

There is not a spice of jealousy in her tone as she says this, although she pretends to pout, for the arm that is around Bessie tightens on the girl's waist, and the mother's lips touch the girl's face lovingly. All that Mrs. Naldret has said is honey to Bessie, and the girl drinks it in, and enjoys it, as bright fresh youth only can enjoy.

'So,' continues Mrs. Naldret, pursuing her story, 'when George comes home very down in the mouth, as he does a little while ago, and says that trade's slack, and he don't see how he's to get the bit of furniture together that he's bound to have when he's married, I knew what was coming. And as he's got the opportunity--and a passage free, thanks to Mr. Million'--(here Mrs. Naldret looks again at Bessie in the same watchful manner as before, and Bessie, in whose eyes the tears are gathering, and upon whose face the soft glow of the firelight is reflected, again does not observe it)--'I can't blame him; though, mind you, my dear, if he could earn what he wants here, I'd be the last to give him a word of encouragement But he can't earn it here, he says; times are too bad. He can't get enough work here, he says; there's too little to do, and too many workmen to do it. So he's going abroad to get it, and good luck go with him, and come back with him! Say that, my dear.'

'Good luck go with him,' repeats Bessie, unable to keep back her tears, 'and come back with him!'

'That's right. And, as George has made up his mind and can't turn back now, we must put strength into him, whether he's right or whether he's wrong. So dry your eyes, my girl, and send him away with a light heart instead of a heavy one. Don't you know that wet things are always heavier to carry than dry? George has got to fight with the world, you see; and if a young fellow stands up to fight with the tears running down his cheeks, he's bound to get the worst of it But if he says, "Come on!" with a cheerful heart and a smiling face, he stands a good chance of winning--as George will, you see if he don't!'

'You dear good mother!' and Bessie kisses Mrs. Naldret's neck again and again.

'Now, then,' says Mrs. Naldret, rising from before the fire, 'go and wash your eyes with cold water, my dear. Go into George's room. Lord forgive me!' she soliloquises when Bessie has gone, 'I'd give my fingers for George not to go. But what's the use of fretting and worriting one's life away now that he's made up his mind? I shall be glad when they are married, though I doubt she doesn't love George as well as George loves her. But it'll come; it'll come. Times are different now to what they were, and girls are different. A little more fond of dress and pleasure and fine ways. She was very tender just now--she feels it now that George is really going. It would be better for her if he was to stay; but George is right about the times being hard. Ah, well! it ain't many of us as gets our bread well buttered in this part of the world! But there! I've tasted sweet bread without a bit of butter on it many and many a time!'

YOU WORE ROSES THEN, MOTHER.

Having made this reflection, Mrs. Naldret thinks of her husband again, and wonders what makes him so late to-night. But in a few moments she hears a stamping in the passage. 'That's Jim,' she thinks, with a light in her eyes. A rough comely man; with no hair on his face but a bit of English whisker of a light sandy colour in keeping with his skin, which is of a light sandy colour also. Head well shaped, slightly bald, especially on one side, where the hair has been worn away by the friction of his two-foot rule. When Jim Naldret makes a purse of his lips, and rubs the side of his head with his rule, his mates know that he is in earnest. And he is very often in earnest.

'It's mortal cold, mother,' he says almost before he enters.

'There's a nice fire, father,' replies Mrs. Naldret cheerfully; 'that'll soon warm you.'

'I don't know about that,' he returns, with the handle of the door in his hand. 'Now look here,--*did* you ever see such a door as this? Opens bang into the passage.'

'You're always grumbling about the door, father.'

'Well, if I like it, it doesn't do any one any harm, does it? The architect was a born fool, that's what he was.'

To support his assertion that the architect was a born fool, Jim Naldret thinks it necessary to make a martyr of himself; so he stands in the draught, and shivers demonstratively as the cold wind blows upon him.

'Never mind the door, Jim,' says Mrs. Naldret coaxingly. 'Come and wash your hands.'

'But I shall mind the door!' exclaims Jim Naldret, who is endowed with a large organ of combativeness, and never can be induced to shirk an argument. 'The architect he made this door for warm weather. Then it's all very well. But in this weather, it's a mistake, that's what it is. Directly you open it, comes a blast cold enough to freeze one. I ain't swearing, mother, because I say blast.'

This small pleasantry restores his equanimity, and he repeats it with approving nods; but it produces little effect upon his wife, who says,

'*Will* you wash your hands and face, father, instead of maudlin?'

'All right, all right, mother! Bring the basin in here, and I'll soon sluice myself.'

Mrs. Naldret, going to their bedroom, which is at the back of the parlour, to get the soap and water, calls out softly from that sanctuary,

'Bessie's here, father.'

'Ah,' he says, rubbing his knuckles before the fire. 'Where is she?'

'Up-stairs in George's room. She'll be down presently. She's pretty low in spirits, father.'

'I suppose you've been having a cry together, mother,' By this time Mrs. Naldret has brought in a basin of water and a towel, which she places on a wooden chair, 'I daresay George'll pipe his eye a bit too, when he says good-bye to some of his mates. Ugh! the water is cold!'

'George pipe his eye! Not him! He's a man is George--not one of your crying sort.'

'I don't know about that,' gasps Jim Naldret; 'a man may be crying although you don't see the tears running down his face. Ugh!'

There was something apposite to his own condition in this remark, for Jim's eyes were smarting and watering in consequence of the soap getting into them.

'That's true, Jim. Many a one's heart cries when the eyes are dry.'

'I can't get over Mr. Million getting that passage-ticket for George. I can't get over it, mother. It's bothered me ever so much.'

'Well, it's only steerage, Jim, and you can't say that it wasn't kind of Mr. Million.'

'I don't know so much about that, mother.'

'Do you know, Jim,' says Mrs. Naldret, after a pause, during which both seem to be thinking of something that they deem it not prudent or wise to speak about, 'that I've sometimes fancied----' Here the old black cat rubs itself against her ankles, and she stoops to fondle it, which perhaps is the reason why she does not complete the sentence.

'Fancied what, mother?

'That young Mr. Million was fond of Bessie.'

'I shouldn't wonder,' he replies, with a cough. 'Who wouldn't be?'

'Yes; but not in that way.'

'Not in what way, mother?'

'You drive me out of all patience, Jim. As if you couldn't understand--but you men are *so* blind!'

'And you women are so knowing!' retorts Jim Naldret, in a tone made slightly acid because he is groping about for the towel, and cannot find it. 'Where *is* the towel, mother? That's Bessie's step, I know. Come and kiss me, my girl.'

'There!' exclaims Bessie, who has just entered the room, standing before him with an air of comical remonstrance, with patches of soapsuds on her nose and face, 'you've made my face all wet.'

'Father never *will* wash the soap off his skin before he dries it,' says Mrs. Naldret, wiping Bessie's face with her apron.

'Never mind, Bessie,' says Mr. Naldret, rubbing himself hot; 'your face'll stand it better than some I've seen. I can't wash the colour out of your cheeks.'

Bessie laughs, and asks him how does he know? and says there is a sort of paint that women use that defies water. While Mrs. Naldret tells him not to be satirical, remarking that all women have their little weaknesses.

'Weaknesses!' echoes Mr. Naldret, digging into the corners of his eyes viciously. 'It's imposition, that's what it is!'

'You'll rub all the skin off your face, if you rub like that.'

'It's a playing a man false,' continues Jim Naldret, not to be diverted from the subject, 'that's what it is. It's a----'

'Is George coming home to tea, do you know, father?' asks Mrs. Naldret, endeavouring to stem the torrent.

'No; he told me we wasn't to wait for him. It's a trading under false pretences----'

'Not coming home to tea! And here I've been laying the tablecloth for him, because I know he enjoys his tea better when there's something white on the table. Mind you remember that, Bessie. There's nothing like studying a man's little ways, if you want to live happy with him.'

'I wondered what the tablecloth was on for,' remarks Jim Naldret; and then resumes with bulldog tenacity, 'It's a trading under false pretences, that's what it is! Little weaknesses! Why----'

'Now, father, will you come and have tea?'

'Now, mother, *will* you learn manners, and not interrupt? But I can have my tea and talk too.'

Mrs. Naldret makes a great fuss in setting chairs, and a great clatter with the cups and saucers, but her wiles produce not the slightest effect on her husband, who seats himself, and says,

'Well, this is my opinion, and I wouldn't mind a-telling of it to the Queen. What do girls look forward to naturally? Why, matrimony to be sure----'

'Put another lump of sugar in father's cup, Bessie. He likes it sweet.'

'Well,' continues the irrepressible Jim, 'looking forward to that, they ought to be honest and fair to the men, and not try to take them in by painting themselves up. It's a good many years ago that I fell in love with you, mother, and a bright-looking girl you was when you said Yes, to me. You wore roses then, mother! But if, when I married you, I had found that the roses in your cheek came off with a damp towel, and that you hadn't any eyebrows to speak of except what you put on with a brush, and that what I saw of your skin before I married you was a deal whiter than what I saw of your skin after I married you,--I'd--I'd----'

'What on earth would you have done, father?' asks Mrs. Naldret, laughing.

'I'd have had you up before the magistrate,' replies Jim Naldret, with a look of sly humour. 'I'd have had you fined, as sure as my name's Jim.'

'That wouldn't have hurt me,' says Mrs. Naldret, entering into the humour of the idea, and winking at Bessie; 'my husband would have had to pay the fine.'

Jim Naldret gives a great laugh at this conclusion of the argument, in appreciation of having been worsted by these last few pithy words, and says, with an admiring look at his wife,

'Well, let you women alone!'

Then, this subject being disposed of, and Jim Naldret having had his say, Mrs. Naldret asks if he has brought home the *Ha'penny Trumpet*.

'Yes,' he answers, 'here it is. A great comfort to the poor man are the ha'penny papers. He gets all the news of the day for a ha'penny--all the police-courts----'.

'Ah,' interrupts Mrs. Naldret, 'that's the sort of reading I like. Give me a newspaper with plenty of police-court cases.'

But police-court cases have not the charm for Jim Naldret that they have for the women, with whom a trial for breach-of promise is perhaps the most interesting reading in the world.

'There's a strike in the North among the colliers,' says Jim. 'The old hands are beating the new men, and setting fire to their houses.'

'And turning,' adds Mrs. Naldret, 'the women and children into the streets, I daresay--the wretches!'

'I don't know so much about that, mother. Men are goaded sometimes, till they lose their heads. If a man puts my blood up, I hit him.'

'You, father! You hurt any one.'

'I said I'd hit him--I didn't say I'd hurt him. I'd hit him soft, perhaps; but I'd be bound to hit him if he put my blood up!'

'A strike's a wicked thing, father,' is Mrs. Naldret's commentary.

'I don't know so much about that. There's a good deal to be said on both sides.'

'There's Saul Fielding,' says Mrs. Naldret; 'getting up a strike was the ruin of him--and hurt a good many others, hurt 'em badly, as you know, Jim.'

By this time the tea-things are cleared away, the hearth is swept up, and the fire is trimmed. The picture that is presented in this humble room is a very pleasant one; Bessie and Mrs. Naldret are doing needlework more as a pastime than anything else, and Jim is looking down the columns of the *Trumpet*.

'Saul Fielding went too far,' says Jim; 'and when he had dragged a lot of men into a mess, he deserted them, and showed the white feather. I'm for my rights, and I'll stand up for them, but I'm not for violence nor unreasonable measures. Saul Fielding's fine speech misled a many, who swore by him, and would have followed him through thick and thin. He makes a speech one night that set the men on fire. I heard it myself, and I was all of a quiver; but when I was in the cold air by myself I got my reason back, and I saw that Saul Fielding was putting things in a wrong light. But other men didn't see it. Then, what does he do? Deserts his colours the very next day, and leaves the men that he's misled in the lurch.'

'He may have got in the air, as you did, Jim, and thought better of what he had said. He may have found out afterwards that he was wrong.'

'Not he! He had plenty of time to consider beforehand--seemed as if he had studied his speeches by heart--never stumbled over a word, as the others did, who were a deal honester than him--stumbled over 'em as if words was stones.'

'Well, poor fellow, he's suffered enough. From that day masters and men have been against him.'

'He's made his bed, and he must lay on it,' says Jim Naldret; 'and you know, mother, even if he could wipe that part of his life away, he's not fit company for honest men and women.'

Jim Naldret feels inclined to say a great deal more on another subject about Saul Fielding, but as the subject which he would have ventilated is a delicate one, and refers to a woman who is not Saul Fielding's wife, he refrains, because Bessie is present.

'Let Saul Fielding drop, mother.'

Mrs. Naldret deems it wise to say no more about Saul, and allows a minute or so to elapse before she speaks again.

'Anything in the paper, Jim, about that working-man that put up for Parliament?'

'He didn't get in.'

Mrs. Naldret expresses her satisfaction at this result by saying that 'it's a good job for his

family, if he's got one.'

'Why shouldn't a working-man be in Parliament, mother?' asks Jim Naldret.

'Because he can't be two things at once. If he fuddles away all his time at Parliament, he can't have time to work; and if he don't work for his living, he's not a workingman.'

'He'd work with his tongue, mother.'

'He'd better work with his hands,' says Mrs. Naldret emphatically, 'and leave the tongue work to his wife. She'd do it better, I'll be bound.'

'I've no doubt she would,' says Jim Naldret, with a chuckle. 'But that working-man in Parliament question is a problem.'

'Well, don't you bother your head about it--that's other people's business. My old mother used to say that every hen's got enough to do to look after its own chicks, and it clacks enough over that, goodness knows.'

'But I'm not a hen, mother,' remonstrates Jim; 'I'm a cock, and I like to have a crow now and then.'

'Well,' exclaims Mrs. Naldret, stitching viciously, 'crow on your own dunghill. Don't you go encroaching on other people's premises.'

IF I DID NOT LOVE HER, I WOULD NOT GO AWAY.

The entrance of George Naldret and young Mr. Million gives a new turn to the conversation, and to the aspect of affairs. George Naldret needs but a very few words of introduction. He is like his father was when his father was a young man. More comely-looking because of the difference in their ages, but his little bit of English whisker is after the same model as his father's, and his hair is also of a light sandy colour. His head is well shaped, and he has contracted his father's habit of rubbing one side of it with his two-foot rule when he is in earnest. When he came into the world, his mother declared that he was as like his father as two peas, which statement, regarded from a purely grammatical point of view, involved a contradiction of ideas. But grammar stands for nothing with some. Poor folk who have received imperfect education are not given to hypercriticism. It is not what is said, but what is meant. George's father and his father's father had been carpenters before him, and as he has taken after them, he may be said to have become a carpenter by hereditary law. Mrs. Naldret was satisfied. To have a trade at one's finger-ends, as she would have expressed it, is not a bad inheritance.

Young Mr. Million was named after his father, James, and was therefore called young Mr. Million to prevent confusion. *His* father and his father's father had been brewers, or, more correctly speaking, in the brewing interest before him, and he was supposed to take after them. There was this difference, however, between him and George Naldret. George Naldret was a thoroughly good carpenter, but it cannot be said that young Mr. Million was a thoroughly good brewer. In point of fact, he was not a brewer at all, for he knew no more of the trade than I do.

He knew a good glass of beer when he was drinking it, but he did not know how to make it; as George knew a good piece of carpentering work when it was before him; but then George could produce a similar piece of work himself. George took pride in his trade; young Mr. Million looked down upon his because it *was* a trade--he thought it ought to be a profession. Although he and his were the last who should have thought unkindly of it, for from the profits of the family brewery a vast fortune had been accumulated. Estates had been bought; position in society had been bought; a seat in the House had been bought; perhaps, by and by, a title would be bought: for eminence deserves recognition. And a man can be eminent in so many different ways. One maybe an eminent tea-dealer, or an eminent chiropodist, or an eminent dentist, if one's profits are large enough. The seat in the House was occupied at the present time by Mr. James Million senior, whose chief business in the Senate appeared to be to look sharply after his own interests and those of his class, and to vote as he was bid upon those indifferent questions of public interest which did not affect the profits of his brewery, and which were not likely to lessen his income from it. For Mr. Million's brewery, being an old-established institution, had become a sacred 'vested interest,' which it was absolute sacrilege to touch or interfere with. And it is true that 'vested interests' *are* ticklish questions to deal with; but it happens, now and then, in the course of time, that what is a 'vested interest' with the few (being fed and pampered until it has attained a monstrous growth) becomes a vested wrong to the many. Then the safety of society demands that something should be done to stop the monstrous growth from becoming more monstrous still. The name of Million was well known in the locality in which the Naldrets resided, for a great many of the beershops and public-houses in the streets round about were under the family thumb, so to speak, and it was more than the commercial lives of the proprietors were worth to supply any liquids but those that Million brewed to the thirsty souls who patronised them. And nice houses they were for a man to thrive upon--worthy steps upon the ladder of fame for a man to grow Eminent by!

Young Mr. Million was a handsome-looking fellow, with the best of clothes, and with plenty of money in his purse. Having no career marked out for him pending the time when he would have to step into his father's shoes, he made one for himself. He became a merchant in wild oats--a kind of merchandise which is popularly considered to be rather a creditable thing for young men to speculate in; and it was a proof of his industry that he was accumulating a large supply of the corn--having regard probably to its future value in the market. But in this respect he was emulated by many who deem it almost a point of honour to have their granaries well supplied with the commodity.

As the young men enter the room, Bessie's eyes brighten. She knows George's footsteps well, and has not recognised the other. George enters first, and he has drawn Bessie to him and kissed her, and she him, before she sees young Mr. Million. When she does see that heir to the family brewery, she gently releases herself from George's embrace, and stands a little aside, with a heightened colour in her face. The action is perfectly natural, and just what a modest girl would do in the presence of a comparative stranger--as young Mr. Million must have been, necessarily, he being so high in the social scale, and she so low. The young gentleman, in the most affable manner, shakes hands all round, and gives them good evening.

'Meeting George as I was strolling this way,' he says, accepting the chair which Mrs. Naldret offers him, 'and having something to say to him, I thought I might take advantage of his offer to step in, and rest for a minute or so.'

Had he told the exact truth, he would have confessed that he had no idea of coming into the house until he heard from old Ben Sparrow, at whose shop he had called, that Bessie was at Mrs. Naldret's, and that, meeting George afterwards, he had walked with him to the door, and had accepted a casual invitation to walk in, given out of mere politeness, and almost as a matter of form.

'You have the *Trumpet* there, I see,' continues young Mr. Million, addressing the master of the house; 'is there anything particular in it?'

'No, sir,' replies Jim, 'nothing but the usual things--strikes, elections, and that like. There's always plenty stirring to fill a newspaper.'

'That there is,' says the young brewer; 'I'm sorry to hear of the strikes spreading. They make things bad in every way.'

'That they do, sir,' chimes in Mrs. Naldret; 'let well alone, I say.'

Young Mr. Million assents with a motion of his head. Perhaps he would have spoken if his attention had not been fixed upon Bessie, whom George has drawn within the circle of his arm.

'Women can't be expected,' says Jim Naldret, with rather less politeness than he usually shows to his wife in company, 'to understand the rights and wrongs of this sort of thing. It's only the horse in the shafts that feels the weight of the pull.'

'Well,' says young Mr. Million in a careless manner, 'I'm no politician; I leave that to my father. So, without venturing an opinion in the presence of one who has studied these questions'--with a condescending nod to Jim Naldret--'I can't do better than side with Mrs. Naldret, and say with her. Let well alone.' With a graceful bow to that worthy creature, who receives it without

gratitude, for it does not please her to find herself trapped into taking sides with a stranger, however much of a gentleman he may be, against her husband.

'Mr. Million came to tell me,' says George during the lull that follows, clearing his throat, 'that the Queen of the South sails earlier than was expected. It goes out of the Mersey the day after to-morrow.'

He does not look at any one of them as he says this, but they all, with the exception of young Mr. Million, turn their anxious eyes to George. The Queen of the South is the name of the ship in which George is to sail for the other end of the world.

'So soon!' exclaims Mrs. Naldret, with a motherly movement towards her son.

'So soon!' echoes Bessie faintly, clinging closer to her lover.

And 'Why not stop at home?' is on the mother's tongue. 'Even now, why not stop at home, and be contented? But she knows what George's answer would be, so she restrains her speech. 'I want my Bessie,' he would have answered, 'and I want a home to bring her to. If I did not love her, I would not go away, but I would be content to work here as you have done all your lives, and live as you have done, from hand to mouth.'

To cheer them, young Mr. Million tells them the latest best news from the other side of the world--how cheaply a man could live; how much larger a workman's earnings were there than here; what a demand there was for skilled labour; and what chances there were for every man whose head was screwed on the right way.

'Suppose a man doesn't wish to work at his trade,' he says, 'and takes it into his head to make a venture for three or four months. There are the gold-fields. All over New South Wales and New Zealand new gold-fields are being discovered. They say that the natives of New Zealand are bringing in great lumps of gold from the north, and that the ground there has never been turned over, and is full of gold. Once in the colonies, it takes no time to get to these places; and even if a man is not fortunate enough to do well, he can come back to his trade. The experiment that occupies three or four months in making is not a great slice out of a young man's life, and the prize that's likely to be gained is worth the venture. Then at these new places, supposing George does not care to run the risk that lies in gold-digging, but determines to stick to his trade, what better one can he have than that of a carpenter? Houses and shops must be built, and they must be built of wood. Who is to build them? Why, carpenters! Think of the scope there is for good workmen. Why, a carpenter must be almost a king in those places! If I hadn't been born into a fortune,' he concludes, 'I would give three cheers for Captain Cook, and be off without a day's delay.'

'When he bids them good-night, as he does presently, seeing that silence falls upon them and that they wish to be left alone, he does not leave a bad impression behind him. But although he has not addressed half a dozen words to the girl, he sees with his mind's eye Bessie's bright face, and no other, as he walks through the cold air. Now, what on earth could a pretty girl like Bessie have to do with the stock of wild oats which young Mr. Million was so industriously collecting?

WITH THE DAWNING OF A NEW YEAR, BEGIN A NEW LIFE.

When Saul Fielding left Mrs. Naldret he made his way through the narrow streets, shivering and stamping, until he came to a house, the lower portion of which was devoted to the sale of plum- and peas-pudding, and food of that description. The side door which led to the upper portion of the house was open, and Saul ascended the dark stairs until there were no more stairs to ascend, and entered a room, the low roof of which shelved in one part almost to the floor. A common lamp was alight, the flame being turned very low down, more, it is to be presumed, for the sake of economy than for safety, for there was nothing in the room of the slightest value. What little furniture there was was rickety and broken: two cane chairs, nearly bald; the few ragged pieces of cane that were left in the frames were tattered and of various lengths, and mournfully proclaimed, 'See what we have come to!' while one of the chairs was so completely decrepit, that it had lost its backbone, and had so little life left in it, that it wheezed when sat upon; a turn-up bedstead, which made a miserable pretence of being something else; a deal table, which once could flap its wings, but could do so no longer; on the table two cups, which were not of a match, but this was really of the smallest consequence, for one was chipped and one was without a handle; and a metal teapot, the surface of which was so battered, that it might be likened to the face of a worn-out prizefighter who had played second best in a hundred fierce encounters. But, common and poor as was everything in the room, everything was as clean and tidy as orderly hands could make it.

Saul Fielding turned up the light of the lamp, and the lamp spat and spluttered in the operation with a discontented air of being ill-fed; this discontent was plainly expressed in the top of the wick, which was lurid and inflamed. There were signs in the room of a woman's care, and Saul Fielding sat down upon the wheezy chair, and waited with his head resting upon his hand. He had not long to wait; the sound of light steps running up the stairs caused him to rise, and look towards the door.

'Jane!'

She nodded and kissed him, and asked him if he were hungry.

'No,' he answered; 'where have you been to?'

'Only on a little errand. Come, you *must* be hungry. You've had no tea, I know.'

She took the remains of a loaf, and a yellow basin containing a little dripping, from a cupboard, and cut the bread and spread the dripping solicitously. Then she pressed him to eat.

'I shall have some with you,' she said.

To please her, he forced himself to eat.

'It's very cold, Jane.'

'Very, Saul.'

She was a woman who once was very fair to look at, who was fair now, despite her poverty. She was not more than twenty-five years of age, but she looked older; there was no wedding-ring on her finger, and she was too poor for adornment of any kind about her person. There was beauty in her, however; the beauty that lies in resignation. And now, as Saul Fielding looked at her furtively, he noticed, with evident inward fear, a certain kind of sad resolution in her manner which tempered the signs of long suffering that dwelt in her face. He put his hand timidly upon her once, and said in a troubled voice.

'You have no flannel petticoat on, Jane.'

'No, Saul,' she answered cheerfully; 'I have pledged it.'

An impressive silence followed. As the darkness that fell upon Egypt could be felt, so the silence that fell upon this room spoke: with bitter, brazen tongue.

'I have been out all the afternoon,' she said presently. 'First I went to----you know where.' Her soft voice faltered, and carried the meaning of the vague words to his sense.

'And saw her?' he asked wistfully.

'Yes; she was playing on the door-step. She looked so beautiful! I--I kissed her!'

All the love that woman's heart can feel, all the tenderness of which woman's love is capable, were expressed in the tone in which she uttered these simple words. She placed her fingers on her lips, and dwelt upon the memory of the kiss with tearful eyes, with heart that ached with excess of love.

'Did I tell you that last week I tried again to get work, Saul?'

'No,' he said; 'you failed!' As if he knew for certain with what result.

'Yes; I failed,' she repeated sadly.

'I ask myself sometimes if I am a man,' exclaimed Saul, in contempt of himself, spurning himself as it were; 'if I have anything of a man's spirit left within me. Mrs. Naldret said something of that sort to me this very night--not unkindly, but with a good purpose. When I think of myself as I was many years ago, it seems to me that I am transformed. And the future! Good God! what lies in it for us?'

'I am a tie upon you, Saul.'

'A tie upon me!' he said, in a tone of wonder. 'Jane, you are my salvation! But for you I should have drifted into God knows what. You are at once my joy and my remorse.'

He took from the mantelshelf a broken piece of looking-glass, and gazed at the reflection of his face. A bold and handsome face, but with deeper lines in it than his years, which were not more than thirty-two or three, warranted. Strong passion and dissipation had left striking marks behind them, but his clear blue eyes were as yet undimmed, and shone with a lustre which denoted that there was vigour still in him. His mouth was large, and the lips were the most noticeable features in his face; they were the lips of one to whom eloquence came as a natural gift, firm, and tremulous when need be. The change that he saw in himself as he looked back to the time gone by gave point and bitterness to his next words.

'I was not like this once. When you first saw me, Jane, these marks and lines were wanting--they have come all too soon. But no one is to blame but I. I have brought it all on myself. On myself! On you!--you suffer with me, patiently, uncomplainingly. You have a greater load than I to bear; and you will not let me lighten it.'

'I will not let you, Saul! I don't understand.'

'Because every time I approach the subject, I try to approach it by a different road.'

'Ah, I know now,' she said softly.

'Jane, I ask you for the twentieth time.' He held out his hands supplicatingly to her. 'Let me do what I can to remove the shame from you. Let me do what I can to atone for my fault. As you love me, Jane, marry me!'

'As I love you, Saul, I refuse!'

He turned from her, and paced the room; she watched him with steady loving eyes, and the signs of a sad, fixed resolution deepened in her face.

'Come and sit by me, Saul.'

He obeyed her, and she drew his head upon her breast and kissed his lips.

'There's no question--no doubt of the love between us, Saul?'

'None, Jane.'

'If some chance were to part us this night, and I was never to look upon your face again----'

'Jane!'

--'And I was never to look upon your face again,' she repeated with a cheerful smile, 'I should, if I lived to be an old woman, and you to be an old man, never for one moment doubt that you loved me through all the years.'

'It is like you, Jane; your faith would not be misplaced.'

'I know it, and I know that you would be to me the same--you would believe that no other man could hold the place in my heart that you have always held.'

He took her in his arms, and said that she was his anchor; that as nothing on earth could shake her faith in him, so nothing on earth could shake his faith in her; after what she had said (although he knew it before, and would have staked his worthless life on it) could she still refuse to allow him to make her the only reparation it was in his power to make?

She waived the question for the present and said,

'We are at the lowest ebb, Saul.'

'Ay,' he answered.

'Then you must not speak of drifting,' she said tenderly; 'we have drifted low enough. Remember, Saul,' and she took his hand in hers, and looked into his eyes, 'we have not ourselves alone to think of. There is another. It only needs resolution. Come--let us talk of it Here, there is no hope.'

'There seems none, Jane; all heart has left me.'

'Elsewhere things might be better for you.'

'For us,' he said, correcting her. 'What is better for you is better for me,' she replied. 'I heard today that George Naldret----'

'God bless him!'

'Amen! God bless him! I heard to-day that he was going away sooner than was expected.'

'I heard so too, Jane; and I went round to Mrs. Naldret's tonight to see him if I could. But he had not come home.'

'Saul,' she said, hiding her face on his shoulder, and pressing him in her arms, as one might do who was about to lose what she loved best in this world, 'we have suffered much together; our love for each other seems to keep us down.'

'It is I--I only who am to blame. I commenced life badly, and went from bad to worse.'

She placed her hand upon his lips, and stopped farther self-accusation.

'It is a blessing for many,' she said, 'that those new lands have been discovered. A man can commence a new life there without being crushed by the misfortunes or faults of the past, if he be earnest enough to acquire strength. It might be a blessing to you.'

'It might,' he assented, 'if you were with me.'

'You, with your gifts, with your talent for many things, might do so well there. Saul, turn that lamp down; the light glares, and hurts my eyes.'

He turned down the lamp; the sullen wick flickered, once, twice, thrice, and the room was in darkness.

'Let it be, Saul; don't light it. I love to talk to you in the dark. It reminds me of a time----do you remember?'

Did he remember? There came to him, in the gloom of the mean room, the memory of the time, years ago, when he first told her that he loved her. In the few brief moments that followed, after the light had gone out, the entire scene was presented to him; every word that was uttered by him and by her came to him. It was in the dark that he had told her; it was in the dark that he vowed to be faithful to her, and she to him. It seemed as if it might have been yesterday, for he held her in his arms now, as he had held her then, and he felt her heart beating against his. But the misery of the present time was too pressing to forget for more than a brief space, and he raised his head from her breast, and faced the gleams of the clear bright cold night, as they shone through the garret-window.

'If I were to tell you,' she resumed, 'that I have felt no sorrow because of the position we are in--not as regards money, though that cannot be worse, but as regards our living together, not being married--I should tell you what is not true. I have felt bitter, bitter sorrow--bitter, bitter shame. When friends fell off from me, I suffered much--when the dearest one I had, a girl of my own age, said, "Father forbids me to speak to you because you are leading a wrong life; when you are married, perhaps father will not be so hard upon you, and we may be friends again,--though never as we were, Jane! never as we were!" I turned sick, Saul, because I loved her.'

She paused a moment, and he, with a full sense of his own unworthiness, drew a little away from her. What she was saying now was all the more bitter because hitherto no word of implied reproach had passed her lips. She knew his thoughts, and in her tenderness for him, put forth her hand to draw him closer to her; but withdrew it immediately without fulfilling her purpose, as though it might make her waver.

'I said to myself, Saul knows what is right; when he is in a position he will say to me, Come, Jane; and I pictured to myself our going to some quiet church one morning, without any one knowing it but ourselves, and coming back married. But it was not to be; the part you took in the strike crushed you and kept you down. The masters were against you naturally; and I knew that as my friends had fallen off from me, so your friends and fellow workmen had fallen off from you. I blamed myself for it, for it was my counsel that caused you to desert the men as you had

deserted the masters. I did not see the consequences when I spoke; I should have held my tongue.'

'Jane,' said Saul gloomily, 'you were right; I had my doubts that very night, after I had made the speech that inflamed me in the making as much as it inflamed the men in the hearing. I lost my head; no wonder they turned against me afterwards. I should have done the same by them. But in acting as I did, I acted conscientiously. What, then, did I do, when I began to feel the consequences of my own act? Sought for consolation in drink, and but for your steady, unwavering faith--but for your patient endurance, and your untiring efforts to bring me back to reason--might have found a lower depth even than that. But patient love prevailed. Death will overtake me, or I will overtake it, when I break the promise I gave you not long ago!'

'I know it,' she said, with a bright look which he could not see, her back being towards the light, 'and that is why I can trust you now; that is why I have courage to say what I am about to say. There is no fear between us of misapprehension of each other's words, of each other's acts; and therefore I do not hesitate. Saul, if I have done my duty by you--and I have striven to do it, with all my heart and soul--it remains for you to do your duty by me.'

He had no word to say in reply; that he had failed in his duty to her, that upon her had fallen the greater part of the misery, and all the shame, of their lot, he was fully conscious. But he had never heard her speak like this before; her voice was firm, though tender, and he held his breath, waiting for her next words.

'It remains for you to do your duty by me.' As she repeated these words it required the strongest effort of her will to keep the beating of her heart and her inward suffering from affecting her voice. She was successful in her effort; for knowing what would occur within the next few hours, the imminence of the coming crisis gave her strength, and her voice was clear and steady.

'How--in what way?' he asked, in an agitated tone.

'Be sure of one thing, Saul,' she cried, turned aside for an instant only by the agitation in his voice; 'be sure that I love you, wholly, heartfully!'

'I *am* sure of it. Teach me my duty. I will do it.'

She steadied herself again.

'Saul, we cannot go on as we are. We have come low--very low; but worse is before us, if we are content to let it come, without an effort to avoid it. Listen. The greatest happiness that can fall to my lot is to be your wife.'

'I believe it,' he said.

'But not as you are, Saul! Tear yourself from your present surroundings--tear yourself from this place, where there is no hope for you nor for me! If we were at opposite ends of the world, there is a tie that binds us which neither of us can ever forget. If she were in her grave, her lips would seek my breast, her little hands would stretch themselves out to you, to caress your face! What kind of happiness would it be for you to be able to say, Come, Jane; I have a home for you, for her?'

He repeated, with his lips, 'What kind of happiness!' but uttered no sound.

'Make the effort!--away from here. If you succeed--never mind how humble it is, never mind how poor--I will be your wife, loving you no more than I love you now, and you will repay me for all that I have suffered. If you fail---- But you will not fail, Saul. I know it! I feel it! Make the effort; for the sake of my love for you, for the sake of yours for me. I think, if it were placed before me that you should make the effort, and, failing, die, or that we should remain as we are, I should choose to lose you, and never look upon your face again---- Here! We are near the end of this sad year. Christmas is coming, Saul. Let it be the turning over of a new leaf for us. Nerve yourself--I will not say for your own sake, for I know how poor an incentive that would be to you--but for mine, and with the dawning of a new year, begin a new life!'

'And this is the duty that remains for me to do, Jane?'

'This is the duty.'

Not from any doubt of her, or of the task she set before him, did he pause, but because he was for a while overpowered by the goodness of the woman who had sacrificed all for him--who loved him, believed in him, and saw still some capacity for good in him. When he had conquered his emotion, he said in a broken tone,

'And then, should such a happy time ever come, you will let me make the poor reparation--you will marry me?'

'How gladly!' she exclaimed, 'O, how gladly!'

'No more words are needed than that I promise, Jane?'

'No more, Saul.'

'I promise. With all my strength I will try.'

He knelt before her, and, with his head in her lap, shed tears there, and prayed for strength, prayed with trustfulness, though the road was dark before him. Lifting his head, he saw the light of the clear cold sky shining through the window at her back. With her arms clasped round his neck, she leant forward and kissed him, and as he folded her in his embrace, he felt that there were tears also on her face.

'The world would be dark without you, dear woman,' he said.

Again she kissed him, and asked if it was not time for him to go.

He answered. Yes; and yet was loth to go.

'Good-night, Jane.'

'Good-night, dear Saul.'

With the handle of the door in his hand, he turned towards her, and saw her standing with the light shining upon her.

DEAR LOVE, GOOD-BYE.

It was three o'clock in the morning before Saul Fielding came home. The bell of Westminster proclaimed the hour with deep-sounding tongue. Saul ascended the stairs quietly. He did not wish to disturb any one in the house--least of all, Jane, if she were asleep. 'Although,' he thought, dwelling in love upon her, 'the dear woman wakes at my lightest footfall.' He crept into the room softly, and paused, with hand upraised and listening ear. 'She is asleep,' he whispered gladly. He stepped gently to the bedside and laid his hand lightly upon the pillow; it was cold. 'Jane!' he cried, with a sudden fear upon him. His hand travelled over the bed; it was empty. So strong a trembling took possession of him that he could not stand, and he sank, almost powerless, on the bed. 'What is this? he asked of himself. 'Why is she not abed? Jane! Jane! Where are you?' Although he spoke in a tone scarcely above a whisper, every word he uttered sounded in the dark room like a knell, and seemed to come back to him charged with terrible meaning--as though some one else were speaking. 'Let me think,' he muttered vaguely. 'How did I leave her? She was not angry with me. Her words were full of hope. She kissed me, and stood--there!' He looked towards the window, and saw the outlines of her face in the light--saw her eyes gazing tenderly, lovingly, upon him. He knew that what he saw was but a trick of the imagination; but he moved towards the light, and clasped a shadow in his arms. 'The world is dark without you, dear woman!' he sobbed, with closed eyes, repeating almost the last words he had said to her. 'The world is dark without you! Where are you? Have you left me?' The table shook beneath his hand, as he rested upon it to steady himself. But he could not control his agitation; it mastered him. With trembling hands he struck a match and lit the lamp; then saw with certainty that Jane was not in the room. Mechanically he took from the table a sheet of paper with writing upon it, which the light disclosed. 'Jane's writing,' he muttered, and then read:

'Dear Love,--I have left you for your good--for mine. I had this in my mind when I spoke to you to-night. I have had it in my mind for a long time. It is the only secret I have ever had which you did not share. We have been so unfortunate in the past, and so clear a duty remains before us, that we should be undeserving of better fortune if we did not strive ourselves to better it. I rely implicitly upon your promise. Tear yourself away from this place, and begin a new life. As long as I live, not a day will pass without my praying for a better fortune for you and for me to Him who sees all things, and who my heart tells me approves of what I am doing now. Pray to Him also, dear Love. He will hear you, and pity. Remember what is the greatest happiness that can fall to my lot, and remember that I shall not be unhappy--loving you and having you always in my thoughts--while I think that you are working towards a happier end. I have no fears in leaving you. I know how you will keep your promise--and you have said so much to-night to comfort me! I treasure your words. They are balm to my heart.

I have taken service with a respectable family, who live a long way from here, and I have adopted an assumed name. The address I enclose is where you can write to me. You will not, I know, seek to turn me from my purpose. I shall write to you to the care of Mrs. Naldret; for the sake of George's friendship for you she will receive the letters. Tell George.

Pear Love, good-bye! All my prayers are with you. Let them and the memory of me sustain your heart; as the consciousness of your love for me, and my faith in God's goodness, will sustain mine.

Till death, and after it,

Your own

He read the letter twice, first with only a vague sense of its meaning, but the second time with a clearer understanding. Sobs came from his chest, tears came from his eyes, the hand that held the paper trembled, as he read. He knew that she was right. But it was hard to bear--bitterly hard to bear. How lonely the room looked--how mean and miserable and desolate! Faint as he was--for he had been standing in the cold streets for hours, playing with the waits, and nothing but a sup of water from a drinking fountain had passed his lips--he had no consciousness of physical weakness. All his thoughts were of Jane, all his heart and soul and mind were charged with tenderness for his dear woman. He looked at the words 'Dear Love,' until he heard her voice speaking them. He had no thought of following her; her happiness depended upon his obeying her, and he would obey her. He had resolved upon that immediately. But, O, if he could hold her in his embrace once more! If he could hear her dear voice again! If, with her arms around him, he could tell her that he would be faithful to his promise! He dashed the tears from his eyes. 'She is thinking of me now,' he sobbed; 'she is awake and praying for me now! All the suffering of our parting was hers. She took it all upon herself, dear soul! She knew, and I did not; and her heart was bleeding while she shed the light of hope upon mine! What does she say here, dear soul, to lessen my pain? "You have said so much to-night to comfort me! I treasure your words. They are balm to my heart." It is like her--it is like her, to write those words. She knew, dear woman, she knew, dear heart, that they would comfort *me!* But I want strength! I want strength!' His eyes travelled over the letter again, and again he read the words, 'Pray to Him also, dear Love. He will hear you, and pity.' Pressing the paper to his lips, Saul Fielding sank upon his knees, and bowed his head upon the bed.

TOTTIE IS READY TO TEAR OLD BEN SPARROW LIMB FROM LIMB.

As nearly all the persons with whom this history has to deal are almost in the same station of life, and live within a stone's throw of each other, it is not a difficult task for us to transport ourselves to the little parlour in the rear of old Ben Sparrow's grocer's shop, where Ben Sparrow himself is at present considering the mechanism of a curious and complicated piece of work, the separate parts of which are lying before him. Although the parlour and the shop adjoin each other, Ben Sparrow looks upon the parlour as being a long way off, like a country house, as a place where he can obtain repose from the cares of the counter and shelves. And it really is a snug, cozy retreat.

Ben Sparrow came into the world exactly at midnight of the 21st of October 1805, a few hours after the battle of Trafalgar was fought and won; and the doubtful compliment was at once passed on the new arrival of being the very smallest baby that ever was seen. But then women go into extremes in these matters, and their statements that this is the most beautiful baby in the world, and this the smallest, and this the chubbiest, and this the darlingest, must be taken with very large pinches of salt. On that occasion the very smallest baby in the world acted in precisely the same manner as he would have done if he had been the very largest baby in the world. Looking upon the world as his own especial dunghill (as we all of us do), he immediately began to crow, and sounded his trumpet with the weakest of lungs to show that he had made his appearance upon the stage. The sound of Westminster bells was ringing in his ears as he gathered up his little toes and legs and clenched his little fists with an air of saying, Come on! to his brothers and sisters in the profession; and in after-days he often declared jocosely that he perfectly well remembered hearing his first twelve o'clock proclaimed by the tongue of old Westminster. Between that time and this, Ben Sparrow had grown from a very small baby to a very small man, and many eventful things had occurred to him. When he came to man's estate--the only estate he ever came into--he entered into business as a grocer; married, and lost his wife, who left behind her one child, a son, who had 'gone wrong,' as the saying is, and whose place knew him no more. The 'ups and downs' of life are generally believed to be a very common experience; but they could scarcely have been so with Ben Sparrow, he had so very many downs and so very few ups (if any) in the course of his career. Still he managed to plod on, somehow or other, until the present time, when he and his granddaughter, Bessie Sparrow, whom you have seen, and Tottie, a child of whom you have had a glimpse, after she had been put to bed by Bessie, are living together in the small house of which the grocer's shop forms part.

This short biography being concluded, we come upon Ben Sparrow, sitting in his parlour, contemplating the separate parts of the curious piece of work above referred to. The only other person in the room is Tottie, who is perched on a high chair, with a rail in front, to prevent her making an attempt to walk in the air, and whose attention is divided between the old man and certain sweet things which are spread upon the table. Such as three large fat figs--luscious young fellows, new, ripe, and with so tempting an air about them as to make their destruction appear inevitable. (Tottie is ready to act as executioner; her eager eyes attest that they would have short

shrift with her.) Such as half-a-dozen or so sticks of cinnamon, not as fresh-looking as the figs, being indeed rather wrinkled specimens of spice; but, notwithstanding their snuffy colour, they have an inviting odour about them, and tickle the nose tantalisingly. (Tottie would not say them nay, and is ready to devote them to destruction on the first word of command.) Such as a few dozen of plump dried currants, of exquisite sweetness. (As Tottie well knows, from experience of their fellows, not honestly come by; for, notwithstanding her tender years, Tottie has a vice, as you shall presently see.) Such as two or three bunches of muscatel raisins, rich-looking, princes among grapes, with a bloom upon their skins, which speaks eloquently of luscious juices within. (Tottie's eyes wander to these, and her mouth waters, and her fingers wait but for the opportunity. If some kind fairy would but cry 'Shop!' now, and call for a quarter of a pound of brown sugar, or an ounce of tea--the best one-and-fourpenny--or a ha'porth of barley-sugar! But business is slack, as Ben Sparrow will tell you, with a doleful shake of the head, and there appears no such fairy, in the form of a slattern with shoes down at heel, or of a bold-faced girl with her baby in her arms, and with a blue handkerchief tied crosswise over her bosom, or of a gutter-student, capless, with straggling-hair, or of a man of any age, weak-eyed with shaking limbs: no such fairy calls 'Shop!' in Tottie's interest, and taps the counter with the nimble penny.) Such as two whole halves (the prettiest of paradoxes) of candied lemon-peel, with such an appetising fragrance oozing out of them, with such delicious patches, of sugar clinging to their aldermanic insides and outsides--pearls in mussels are valueless as a comparison--that the precious things of the world, such as dolls and boxes of wooden soldiers (would they were all so!), and oyster-shells and pieces of broken china to play at dinners and teas with, fade in the contemplation of them. (At least, such are Tottie's feelings, as she looks and longs. O, for the fairy!) Such, to conclude with, as a few shreds of mace, and a clove or two--scarcely worth mentioning in the presence of their superiors.

These delectable joys of life being spread upon the table, immediately under Tottie's nose, and Tottie's attention being divided between them and their lawful owner, Ben Sparrow, it will not be difficult to see which of the two possessed the greater charms for her. A rapid glance at Ben Sparrow's face, a lingering gaze upon fruit and spice, another rapid glance (with a slight reproach in it this time) at Ben Sparrow's face, and, finding no benevolent intention there, a more fixed and longing gaze upon the treasures of the earth--thus it goes without a word on either side (the thoughts of each being so intensely engrossing), and thus it might have continued for goodness knows how long, but that Ben Sparrow, with a cheery laugh, taps Tottie's cheek with his forefinger, and cries, in a tone of satisfaction,

'Now, I've got it!'

(Tottie wishes *she* had.)

'Now, I've got it,' cries the old man again; 'all complete.'

Tottie shifts restlessly in her high chair.

'And Tottie shall see me make it,' says Ben, with beaming face, rubbing his hands, and shifting the fruit and the spice about much the same as if they form pieces of a puzzle, and he has found the key to it. 'Especially,' adds Ben, 'as Tottie will sit still, and won't touch.'

'No, I never!' exclaims Tottie.

This is Tottie's oath, which she is much given to swearing when her honour is called into question. Tottie's 'No, I never!' is in her estimation worth a volume of affidavits, but it is much to be feared that her sense of moral obligation is not of a high order.

'And as Tottie's a good little girl----'

'Tottie's a dood little girl!'

There is no expression of doubt in the nods of the head with which Tottie strengthens this declaration.

'And'll sit still, she *shall* see me make it.'

The good old fellow laughs. He does not seem to realise how difficult is the task he has set Tottie. To sit still, with these treasures in view! Here an agonising incident occurs. A small piece of candied sugar has become detached from one of the halves of lemon-peel, and Ben Sparrow, with an air of abstraction, picks it up, and puts it--in his own mouth! Tottie watches him as he moves it about with his tongue, and her own waters as the sweet dissolves in her imagination. She knows the process as well as Ben, and appreciates it more, and she sighs when the candy is finally disposed of.

'You see, Tottie,' says Ben, taking her into his confidence, 'business is very slack, and Christmas is coming, Tottie.'

Tottie gives a nod of acquiescence.

'So I think to myself--another nod from Tottie; she also is thinking to herself--'if I can put some thing in the window that'll make the people look at the figs----'

Here Tottie introduces an artful piece of diplomacy. 'Tottie can spell fig,' she says, and proceeds to do it smilingly--'F-I-G, fig.'

But Ben, intent upon his scheme, does not see the point of Tottie's interruption, and proceeds:

'--Something that'll make 'em look at the figs, and the currants, and the raisins--something new and spicy'--(Ben laughs at this joke, and repeats it)--'something new and spicy, perhaps it'll wake 'em up, and bring 'em in here instead of going to another shop. For they want waking up, Tottie, they want waking up badly.'

Solemn nods from Tottie proclaim the serious consideration she has given to the general sleepiness and indifference of Ben Sparrow's customers.

Ben Sparrow picks up a fat currant and contemplates it with as much interest as a geologist would contemplate a new fossil. Tottie's eyes follow his movements; she sits like Patience on a monument, and another sigh escapes her as Ben Sparrow (again abstractedly) puts the currant in his mouth, and swallows it. Draw a veil mercifully over Tottie's feelings.

'It was in the middle of the night,' says Ben Sparrow with all the impressiveness demanded by the historical fact, 'that I first thought of making ME, and putting ME in the window to attract custom. I was a good deal puzzled about my legs, and my stomach got into my head, and I couldn't get it out; but little by little all my limbs and every other part of me came to me until the idea was complete. And now we'll try it--now we'll set to work and make a MAN! And if you're a good girl, and'll sit still, you shall see ME made.'

Tottie's experience in literature is very limited--extending no farther, indeed, than b-a-t bat, c-a-t cat, r-a-t rat, d-i-g dig, f-i-g fig, p-i-g pig--and she knows nothing of the terrible story of Frankenstein; therefore, she is not at all frightened at the idea of seeing a man made, nor has she any fear that it will turn out to be a monster. On the contrary, if Ben Sparrow's thoughts would only take a benevolent turn in the shape of a fig for Tottie, or a few plums for Tottie, or some candied sugar for Tottie, she would be prepared to enjoy the feat which Ben is about to perform as much as if it were the best bit of fun in the world.

'Now, then,' commences Ben, with a whimsical glance at Tottie, who smiles back at him like a true diplomatist, 'I don't know what part is generally made first, but perhaps it'll be as well to commence with the stomach. Here it is--here's my stomach.'

He takes one of the halves of the candied lemon-peel, and places it before him, round side up.

'There's a little too much sugar in me,' he says, with a more whimsical glance than the first; 'it'll make me rather too heavy, I'm afraid. And besides, Tottie, it ain't true to nature. My inside ain't got such a coating as this.'

He breaks a piece of candied sugar from the inside of his stomach, looks at Tottie, notices her wistful eyes, and gives it to her. She eats it eagerly, and so quickly as to cause amazement to Ben

Sparrow, who says,

'You shouldn't eat so fast, Tottie. Good little girls don't eat so fast as that.'

Tottie, with feminine duplicity, accepts this warning in an inverted sense, and cries, with her mouth full of sugar,

'Tottie's a dood little girl!' as if indorsing a statement made by her grandfather. But Tottie's thoughts are not upon the good little girl; at the present moment she resembles a savage. She has tasted blood, and thirsts for more.

'It's a fatter stomach than mine,' proceeds Ben, laying his hand upon his stomach of flesh, the stomach he came into the world with; 'it's rounder and plumper, and would fit the Lord Mayor or an alderman, but it'll do, I daresay. Now for my neck.'

He picks up the thickest piece of cinnamon, and measures it with his eye, breaking the stick in two. 'I mustn't make my neck too long--nor too short--and I take the thickest piece, Tottie, because it's got to support my head. Like this.' He makes a hole in the end of the lemon-peel, and sticks the cinnamon in firmly. 'Now to stick my head on, Tottie.'

He selects the largest of the fat figs, and attaches it to his neck. 'What's the next thing? My eyes, to be sure. Currants.' Remarkably like eyes do they look when they are inserted in the face of the fat fig. Then he takes a clove for his nose, and, making a thin slit in the fig for his mouth, inserts an appropriate morsel of mace. All this being successfully accomplished, he holds himself up (as far as he goes) for his own and Tottie's inspection and approval. Tottie claps her hands, and laughs, but subsides into a quieter humour at a guilty thought that steals into her mind. She thinks what a delightful thing it would be to take her grandfather (as far as he goes) and eat him bit by bit.

'I begin to look ship-shape,' observes Ben Sparrow, gazing admiringly at the unfinished effigy of himself. 'You see, Tottie, what the people want nowadays is novelty--something new, something they haven't seen before. Give them that, and you're all right' (Which vague generality appears to satisfy him.) 'Now, here it is--here's novelty--here's something they've never seen before; and if this don't bring custom, I don't know what will.'

Tottie gives a grave and silent assent; she cannot speak, for her mind is bent upon cannibalism. She is ready to tear the old man limb from limb.

'But,' continues Ben Sparrow, unconscious of the horrible thought at work in the mind of the apparently innocent child before him, 'I must get along with myself, or I shall never be finished. I haven't been in any battle that I know of, and I wasn't born a cripple, so my limbs must be all right when I appear in public. Now for my arms. More cinnamon! I think I may call cinnamon my bones.'

When two pieces of cinnamon are stuck into the sides of the candied lemon-peel, they look so naked that he says,

'I must put sleeves on my arms.'

And impales raisins upon them, and sticks five small slips of mace in each of the last raisins, which serve for fingers.

'Now for my legs, and there I am. More cinnamon!'

Two sticks of cinnamon stuck in the bottom of his candied stomach, and then clothed with raisins, form his legs, and there he *is*, complete.

'I think I'll do,' he says complacently.

At this moment a voice calls 'Shop!' and a fairy, in the shape of a shoeless ragged girl, taps upon the counter. Ben Sparrow goes into the shop to serve, and Tottie is left alone with his effigy. Now it has been mentioned above that Tottie has a vice, and this is it: she is afflicted, not with a raging tooth, but with a tooth so sweet as to weaken her moral sense, so to speak: she is unable to resist temptation when it presents itself to her in the shape of sweetmeats or fruit, and her notions as to the sacredness of such-like property are so loose that (no one being by to see her do it) she helps herself. And yet it is a proof that she possesses a wakeful conscience, that she turns her back upon herself when she pilfers, as if she would wish to make herself believe that she is unconscious of what she is doing. Thus, seeing, say, a bowl of currants near, and no person within sight, she will approach the bowl stealthily, and, turning her back to it, will put her hand behind her, and take a fistful, with an air of thinking of something else all the while. And it is a proof that the moral obligation of her conscience is not entirely dormant, that, after the act is committed and enjoyed, she will, under the influence of a human eye, instantly defend herself without being accused, by 'No, I never! no, I never!' This express admission of guilt she can no more resist than she can resist the temptation itself. At the present time the sweet effigy of Ben Sparrow is lying within reach upon the table. Shutting her eyes. Tottie stretches out her hand, and plucking her grandfather's left leg bodily from his candied stomach, instantly devours it, cinnamon, raisins, and all--and has just made the last gulp when Ben Sparrow, having served his

customer, reënters the parlour. He casts a puzzled look at his dismembered effigy, and mutters,

'Well! if I didn't think I had made my two legs, may I be sugared!' Which sweet oath is exactly appropriate to the occasion. Then he turns to Tottie, who is gazing unconsciously at vacancy, with a wonderfully intense expression in her eyes, and she immediately shakes her head piteously, and cries,

'No, I never! no, I never!'

Ben Sparrow, having his doubts aroused by this vehement asseveration of innocence, says mournfully,

'O, Tottie! Tottie! I didn't think you'd do it! To begin to eat me up like that!'

But Tottie shakes her head still more vehemently, and desperately reiterates, 'No, I never! no, I never!' With the frightful consciousness that the proofs of her guilt are in her inside, and that she has only to be cut open for them to be produced.

Ben Sparrow, with a grave face, makes himself another leg, moving himself, however, out of Tottie's reach with reproachful significance. An unexpected difficulty occurs at this point. Being top-heavy he cannot balance himself upon his legs; but Ben is of an ingenious turn of mind, and he hits upon the expedient of shoring himself up from behind with stout sticks of cinnamon. Then, setting himself up, he gazes at himself in admiration. Tottie's eyes are also fixed upon the effigy; it possesses a horrible fascination for her.

HERE AND THERE ARE FORGET-ME-NOTS.

All night long Saul Fielding kneels by the side of his bed, absorbed in the memory of the woman whom he loves, and who, out of her great love for him, has deserted him. At first his grief is so great that he cannot think coherently; his mind is storm-tossed. But after a time the violence of his grief abates, and things begin to shape themselves in his mind. The night is cold, but he does not feel the winter's chill. The wind sighs and moans at his window, but he does not hear it. As it leaves his lattice, and travels through the courts and streets, it bears upon its wings the influence of the grief it has witnessed, and it sobs to the stone walls, 'There kneels a man in woe!' It gathers strength when it leaves the packed thoroughfares, which, huddled together like a crowd of beggars, seem to seek warmth in close contact, and becomes angry when it reaches the wide streets, angrier still when it reaches the woods, where the trees tremble as it rushes past them. Say that it rushes onward and still onward, and that we have the power to follow it--that we see it merge into other winds, and become furious--that we see its fury die away--that we leave the winter and the night behind us--that we travel ahead of it over lands and seas until we come to where spring and daylight are--that we travel onward and still onward, until noon and spring are passed, and we come to where bright sun and summer are. Where are we? Thousands, upon thousands of miles away; but the time is the same, for as the warm wind kisses us we look back and see the man kneeling by the side of his bed. It is winter and night, and there kneels the man. It is summer and day, and here is another man among the mountains lying on the earth, looking at the clouds. And the time is the same. The thoughts of both these men are in the past. What connection can there be between these two in such adverse places, seasons, and circumstances? They have never touched hands. What link can bind them? Heart-links? Perhaps. It would not be so strange. It may be that at this present moment, in some distant part of the world of which we have only read or dreamt, links in your life's chain and mine are being forged by persons whose faces we have never seen.

He is desolate. Jane has gone from him. She has left words of comfort behind her, but he may never look upon her face again. She has given him a task to fulfill. 'If I have done my duty by you,' she said, 'and I have tried to do it, it remains for you to do your duty by me.' He will be true to his dear woman, as she has been to him. He will strive to perform the task she has set before him--he will strive to find a way. Ay, if he dies in the attempt. He will consider presently how he shall commence. In the mean time, he must think of Jane.

He falls into a doze, thinking of her, and with her in his mind the past comes to him. The aspirations which filled his boyish mind--his love for books--his desire to rise above his surroundings--his reasonings upon the relation of this and that, and his theoretical conclusions, which were to suddenly divert the common custom of things, as if a creation could in a moment crumble into dust the growth of centuries--his delight when he found that he was an orator, and could move an assembly of men to various passions--his meeting with Jane---- He went no farther. The memory of her as she was when he first saw her, a bright flower--ah, how bright, how trustful and womanly!--stopped farther thought, and for a time no vision appears of his downfall, his weakness, his disgrace, his sinking lower, lower, until he is almost a lost man. It comes to him

presently with all its shame; but when he wakes, the chaos of images in his mind resolves itself into this: his life is before him, full of weeds, like an untended garden, but here and there are Forget-me-nots, and each one bears the name of Jane.

The morning light steals in upon his vigil, and still he has not decided how or in what way he shall commence his new life. In truth he is powerless. He has no weapons to fight with. His old confidence in himself, his pride, his strength of will, are covered with the rust of long weakness. Rising from his knees, he breaks the crust of ice upon the water in his pitcher, and bathes his face. The cold water seems to bring strength to him. He looks about the room, and everything within the poor walls speaks of Jane's love and care for him. The fire is laid with the last few sticks of wood and the last few lumps of coal. The old kettle, filled, is on the hob. The last pinch of tea is in the cup; the remains of the loaf are on the table. Not a thing is forgotten. 'Dear woman!' he murmurs. 'It is like you!' He paces the room slowly, striving to think of some path by which he can obtain a home for Jane, and thereby win her and reward her. It is useless, he knows, to seek for work here in the neighbourhood where he is known. He is known too well, and has sunk too low. Who would believe in his profession of amendment? Besides, what is the use of trying? He is of the same trade as George Naldret, and even George, a better workman than he, has resolved to leave, and try his fortune elsewhere, because of the difficulty he finds in saving sufficient money to buy a home for the girl he desires to marry. Even George is compelled to emigrate---- He stops suddenly in the middle of the room, and draws himself up with a spasmodic motion. Jane's words come to him: 'It is a blessing for many that these new lands have been discovered. A man can commence a new life there, without being crushed by the misfortunes or faults of the past, if he be earnest enough to acquire strength. It might be a blessing to you.' 'A new life in a new land!' he says aloud. 'All the weakness and shame of the past wiped away because they will not be known to those around me. I should feel myself a new man--a better man; my strength, my courage would come back to me!' So strong an impression does the inspiration of the thought make upon him, that he trembles with excitement. But can he leave Jane--leave the country which holds her dear form? Yes, he can, he will; the memory of her will sustain him; and she will approve, as indeed she has done already by her words. 'It is the only way!' he cries; 'the only way!' Thus far he thinks, and then sinks into a chair, despairing. The means! How can he obtain the means? He has not a shilling in the world, nor any friends powerful enough to help him. Heaven's gate seems to be more easily accessible to him than this new land across the seas. But he does not allow himself to sink into the lowest depth of despondency. Jane stands before him; her words are with him; like wine they revive his fainting soul. 'Come, Saul,' he cries aloud to himself, resolutely. 'Come--think! Cast aside your weakness. Be your old self once more!' These words, spoken to himself as though they came from the lips of a strong man, sound like a trumpet in his ears, and really strengthen him. Again he thinks of George Naldret. 'Mr. Million gave him his passage ticket,' he says; 'would Mr. Million give me one?' No sooner has he uttered the words than the current of his thoughts is diverted, and he finds himself speculating upon the cause of Mr. Million's generosity to George. Friendship? No, it can scarcely be that. There can be no friendship between George and Mr. Million. Kindness? Perhaps; and yet he has never heard that Mr. Million was noted for the performance of kindly actions. These considerations trouble him somewhat on George's account, although he cannot explain to himself why the fact of Mr. Million giving George a free passage ticket to the other end of the world should cause him uneasiness. 'I wonder how it came about,' he thinks. 'I never heard George speak of emigrating until the ticket was promised to him. At all events, if George has any claim upon him, I have none. But Mr. Million is a public man, and may be in favour of emigration. It will cost him but little to assist me. There are Government emigration ships which take a man over for almost nothing, I have heard. A line of recommendation from Mr. Million in my favour would be sufficient, perhaps. I will try; I will try. If I knew a prayer that would make my appeal successful, I would say it.'

BATTLEDOOR AND SHUTTLECOCK.

As a public man, James Million, Esquire, M.P. for Brewingham, felt it necessary to his position to spend two or three hours in his study every morning, and to 'make-believe' to be busy. Had you asked James Million what he was, he would not have told you that he was a brewer or a capitalist, but would have replied briefly and emphatically, 'A public man, sir.' Now, to be a public man, you must have a shuttlecock; and whether it was that Mr. Million had a real sympathy for the institution known as the working man, or because the working man drank large quantities of Million's Entire and Million's Treble X, it is certain that he set up the working man as his shuttlecock; and it is quite as certain that he set it up without in the least understanding it, being, indeed, a most unskilful player at any game in which his own interests were not directly involved. The game of battledoor and shuttlecock is a popular one with us from childhood upwards, but I am not aware that any close observer and noter of curious things has ever calculated how many shuttlecocks an ordinary battledoor will outlast. Popular as the game is with children, it is more popular with public men, who, battledoor in hand, are apt (in their enthusiasm and love for the game) to run into exceedingly wild, extremes when a new

shuttlecock, with spick and span new feathers, is cast among them. Such a superabundance of energy do they in their zeal impart into the game that they often sorely bruise the poor shuttlecock, and so knock it out of all shape and proportion that the members of its family find it impossible to recognise it. How many a poor shuttlecock have you and I seen on its last legs, as one might say, in a desperate condition from being much hit and much missed and much trodden into the mud, and with feathers that would rival those of a roupy old hen in the last stage of dissolution! and looking upon it in melancholy mood, may we not be excused for dwelling sadly upon the time (but yesterday!) when its feathers were new and crimson-tipped, and when it proudly took its first flight in the air?

In appearance, James Million, the eminent brewer, was a small, flabby man, with a white face on which the flesh hung loosely. It had been said of him that his morals were as flabby as his flesh--but this was invented by a detractor, and if it conveyed any reproach, it was at best a hazy one. He had a curious trick with his eyes. They were sound and of the first water--not a flaw in them, as diamond merchants say; but whenever there was presented for his contemplation or consideration a question of a perplexing or disagreeable nature, he would close one of his eyes, and look at it with the other. It was a favourite habit with him to walk along the streets so, with one eye closed; and a man who set himself up for a satirist, or a wag, or both, once said: 'Jimmy Million is so moral that he doesn't like to look on the wickedness of the world; so he shuts one eye, and can only see half of it, and thereby saves himself half the pain.'

To James Million, as he sits in his study, comes a servant, who, after due tapping at the door, so as not to disturb the ruminations of the legislator, announces a man in the passage who desires to see Mr. Million.

'Name? asks Mr. Million.

'Saul Fielding,' answers the servant, and adds, 'but he says he does not think you know him.'

'What does he look like?'

The servant hesitates; he has not made up his mind. Although Saul Fielding is shabbily dressed, he is clean, and Jane's watchful care has made his wardrobe (the whole of which he wears on his back) seem better than it is. Besides, there is 'an air' about Saul Fielding which prevents him being placed, in the servant's mind, on the lowest rung of vagabondism.

'Is he a poor man? Is he a working man? demands Mr. Million impatiently.

'He looks like it, sir,' replies the servant, not committing himself distinctly to either statement.

Mr. Million has an idle hour before him, which he is not disinclined to devote to the workingman question, so he bids the servant admit the visitor.

'Wait a minute,' says Mr. Million to Saul Fielding as he enters the room. Mr. Million evidently has found some very knotty problem in the papers before him, for he bends over them, with knitted brows and studious face, and shifts them about, and makes notes on other pieces of paper, and mutters 'Pish!' and 'Psha!' and 'Very true!' and 'This must be seen to!' with many remarks indicative of the engrossing nature of the subject which engages his attention. After a

sufficient exhibition of this by-play, which doubtless impresses his visitor with a proper idea of his importance and of the immense interest he takes in public matters, he pushes the papers aside with a weary air, and looks up, with one eye closed and one eye open. What he sees before him does not seem to afford him any comfort: for it is a strange thing with public players of battledoor and shuttlecock, that although they have in theory a high respect for their shuttlecocks, they have in absolute fact a very strong distaste for them. Seeing that he is expected to speak, Saul Fielding commences; he is at no loss for words, but he speaks more slowly than usual, in consequence of the heavy stake he has in the interview.

'I have ventured to call upon you, sir,' he says, 'in the hope that you will take some interest in my story, and that you will extend a helping hand to a poor man.'

Somewhat fretfully--for careful as he strives to be, Saul Fielding has been unwise in his introduction, which might be construed into an appeal for alms--somewhat fretfully, then, Mr. Million interposes with

'A working man?'

'I hope I may call myself so--although, strictly speaking, I have done but little work for a long time.'

Mr. Million gazes with curiosity at his visitor, and asks, in a self-complacent, insolent tone, as if he knows all about it,

'Not able to get work, eh?

'I have not been able to get it, sir.'

'But quite willing to do it if you *could* get it?'

'Quite willing, sir more than willing--thankful.'

Saul Fielding knows that already he is beginning to lose ground,' but his voice is even more respectful and humble than at first--although the very nature of the man causes him to speak with a certain confidence and independence which is eminently offensive to the delicate ears of the friend of the working man.

'Of course!' exclaims Mr. Million triumphantly and disdainfully. 'The old cry! I knew it. The old cry! I suppose you will say presently that there is not room for all, and that there are numbers of men who are in the same position as yourself--willing to work, unable to obtain it.'

Saul Fielding makes no reply; words are rushing to his tongue, but he does not utter them. But Mr. Million insists upon being answered, and repeats what he has said in such a manner and tone that Saul cannot escape.

'I think, sir, that there are many men who are forced to be idle against their will; that seems to be a necessity in all countries where population increases so fast as ours does. But I don't complain of that.'

'O!' cries Mr. Million, opening both his eyes very wide indeed. 'You don't complain of that! You are one of those glib speakers, I have no doubt, who foment dissatisfaction among the working classes, who tell them that they are down-trodden and oppressed, and that masters are fattening upon them! I should not be surprised to hear that you are a freethinker.'

'No, sir, I am not that,' urges Saul Fielding, exquisitely distressed at the unpromising turn the interview has taken; 'nor indeed have I anything to complain of myself. I am too crushed and broken-down, as you may see.'

'But if you were not so,' persists Mr. Million, growing harder as Saul grows humbler, 'if you were in regular work, and in receipt of regular wages, it would be different with you--eh? You would have something to complain of then doubtless. You would say pretty loudly that the working man is underpaid, and you would do your best to fan the flame of discontent kept up by a few grumblers and idlers. You would do this--eh? Come, come,' he adds haughtily, seeing that Saul Fielding does not wish to answer; 'you are here upon a begging petition, you know. Don't you think it will be best to answer my questions?'

'What is it you wish me to answer, sir?' asks Saul Fielding sorrowfully.

'The question of wages. I want to ascertain whether you are one of those who think the working classes are underpaid.'

Saul Fielding pauses for a moment; and in that brief time determines to be true to himself. 'Jane would not have me do otherwise,' he thinks.

'I think, sir,' he says, firmly and respectfully, 'that the working classes--by which I mean all in the land who have to work with their hands for daily bread--do not receive, as things go, a fair equivalent for their work. Their wages are not sufficient. They seem to me to be framed upon a basis which makes the work of ekeing them out so as to make both ends meet a harder task than

the toil by which they are earned. The working man's discontent does not spring from his work; he does that cheerfully almost always. It springs out of the fact, that the results of his work are not sufficient for comfort, and certainly not sufficient to dispel the terrible anxiety which hangs over the future, when he is ill and unable to work, perhaps, or when he and his wife are too old for work.'

'O, indeed!' exclaims Mr. Million. 'You give him a wife!'

'Yes, sir; his life would be a burden indeed without a woman's love.'

Mr. Million stares loftily at Saul Fielding.

'And children, doubtless!'

'Happy he who has them! It is Nature's law; and no man can gainsay it.' The theme possesses a fascination for Saul Fielding, and he continues warmly, 'I put aside as distinctly outrageous all that is said of the folly and wickedness of poor people marrying and having large families. This very fact, which theorists wax indignant over--theorists, mind you, who have wives and families themselves, and who, by their arguments, lay down the monstrous proposition that nature works in the blood according to the length of a man's purse--this very fact has made England strong; had it been otherwise, the nation would have been emasculated. Besides, you can't set natural feeling to the tune of theory; nor, when a man's individual happiness is concerned, can you induce him to believe in the truth of general propositions which, being carried out in his own person as one of the units, would make his very existence hateful to him.'

Mr. Million opens his eyes even wider than before; such language from the lips of the ragged man before him is indeed astonishing.

'What more have you to say? he gasps. 'You will want property equally divided----'

'No, sir, indeed,' interrupts Saul Fielding, daring to feel indignant, even in the presence of so rich a man, at the suggestion. 'The man who makes honestly for himself is entitled to possess and enjoy. I am no socialist.'

'You would, at all events,' pursues Mr. Million, 'feed the working man with a silver spoon?--You would open the places of amusement for him on the Sabbath?'

'I would open some places and shut others.'

'What places, now?'

'The museums, the public galleries. I would give him every chance--he has a right to it--to elevate himself during the only leisure he has.'

'And in this way,' demands Mr. Million severely, 'you would desecrate the Sabbath!'

For the life of him Saul Fielding cannot help saying,

'A greater desecration than even that can be in your eyes takes place on the Sabbath in places that are open in the name of the law.'

'You refer to----'

'Public-houses. If they are allowed to be open, what reasonable argument can be brought against the opening of places the good influence of which is universally acknowledged? It is the withholding of these just privileges that causes much discontent and ill-feeling.'

This is quite enough for Mr. Million. This man, ragged, penniless, has the effrontery to tell the rich brewer to his face that he would have the public picture-galleries and museums of art opened on the Sabbath-day, and that he would shut the public-houses. Mr. Million can find no words to express his indignation. He can only say, stiffly and coldly,

'I have heard quite enough of your opinions, sir. Come to the point of your visit. You see'--pointing to the papers scattered about the table--'that I am very busy.'

'I came, sir,' he says sadly, 'in the hope that, seeing my distress, you would not have been disinclined to assist me--not with money, sir,' he adds swiftly, in answer to an impatient look of dissent from Mr. Million, 'but with your good word. But I am afraid that I have injured my cause by the expression of my opinions.'

'In what way did you expect that I could aid you?' asks Mr. Million carelessly, as he settles himself to his papers.

'I have been especially unfortunate in my career, sir. As I told you, I am willing to work, but am unable to obtain it. If I could emigrate; if I could get into a new country, where labour is scarce, things might be better for me.'

The poor man is helpless at the rich man's foot; and the rich man plays with him, as a cat with

a mouse.

'Well,' he says, 'emigrate. The country would be well rid of such as you.'

Saul Fielding takes no notice of the insult. He is not to be turned aside from his purpose, although he knows full well that he has missed his mark.

'I have no means, sir; I am poor and helpless.'

'How do you propose to effect your object, then?'

'There are Government emigrant ships which take men out, I have heard, for very little--for nothing almost. A line of recommendation from you would be sufficiently powerful, I thought, to obtain me a passage.'

'Doubtless, doubtless,' this with a smile; 'but you are a man of some perception, and having observed how utterly I disagree with your opinions--which I consider abominable and mischievous to the last degree--you can hardly expect me to give you the recommendation you ask for. May I ask, as you are a perfect stranger to me, for I have no recollection of you in any way, to what I am indebted for the honour you have done me by choosing me to give you a good character?'

'You are a public man, sir, and I have heard a friend to the working man. And as you had helped a friend of mine to emigrate by giving him a free passage in a ship that sails this week----'

'Stop, stop, if you please. *I* help a friend of yours to emigrate by giving him a free passage! I think you are mistaken.'

'If you say so, sir, I must be. But this is what George Naldret gave me to understand.'

'And pray who is George Naldret?' demands Mr. Million haughtily; 'and what are his reasons for emigrating?'

'George Naldret,' returns Saul Fielding, in perplexity, 'is almost the only friend I have in the world, and he is emigrating for the purpose of putting himself into a position to marry more quickly than his prospects here will allow him.'

'As you are introducing me,' says Mr. Million, with an air of supreme indifference, 'to your friends, perhaps you would like also to introduce me to the young lady--for of course' (with a sneer) 'she is a young lady--he desires to marry.'

'Her name is Sparrow--Bessie Sparrow, granddaughter to an old grocer.'

Mr. Million becomes suddenly interested, and pushes his papers aside with an exclamation of anger.

'What name did you say?'

'Miss Bessie Sparrow.'

The rich brewer ponders for a moment, evidently in no pleasant mood. Then suddenly rings a bell. A servant appears.

'Is my son in the house?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Tell him to come to me instantly.'

Saul Fielding waits gravely. Seemingly, he also has found new food for contemplation. Presently young Mr. Million appears.

'You sent for me, sir.'

'Yes, James. Do you know this person?' with a slight wave of the hand in the direction of Saul Fielding, as towards a thing of no consequence. Saul Fielding knows that his mission has failed, but does not resent this contemptuous reference to him. He stands, humble and watchful, before father and son.

'I have seen him,' says young Mr. Million, 'and I should say he is not a desirable person in this house.'

'My opinion exactly. Yet, influenced by some cock-and-a-bull story, he comes here soliciting my assistance to enable him to emigrate. The country would be well rid of him, I am sure; but of course it is out of my power to give such a person a good character to the emigration commissioners.'

'Out of anybody's power, I should say,' assents young Mr. Million gaily. 'To what cock-and-a-bull story do you refer?'

'He tells me--which is news to me--that I have given a free passage ticket to a friend of his, George--George--what did you say?'

'George Naldret, sir.' Saul Fielding supplies the name in a manner perfectly respectful.

'Ay--George Naldret. Such a statement is in itself, of course, a falsehood. Even if I knew George Naldret, which I do not, and desired to assist him, which I do not, the fact of his being engaged to be married to any one of the name of Sparrow--a name which means disgrace in our firm, as you are aware-would be sufficient for me not to do so.'

Young Mr. Million steals a look at Saul Fielding, whose face, however, is a mask; and in a hesitating voice says: 'I think I can explain the matter; but it is not necessary for this person to remain. You do not know, perhaps, that he was the chief mover in a strike a few years ago, which threatened to do much mischief.'

'I am not surprised to hear it,' says the rich brewer; 'the opinions he has expressed have prepared me for some such statement concerning him. He would desecrate the Sabbath-day by opening museums and picture-galleries, and he would curtail the liberty of the subject by closing public-houses, and depriving the working man of his beer! Monstrous! monstrous! He has nothing to say for himself, I suppose.'

'No, sir,' answers Saul Fielding, raising his head, and looking steadily at young Mr. Million, 'except that I believed in the truth of what I told you, and that I don't know whether I am sorry or glad that I made the application to you.'

The rich brewer has already touched the bell, and the servant comes into the room.

'Show this person to the door,' Mr. Million says haughtily; 'and if he comes again, send for a policeman. He is a dangerous character.'

Saul Fielding's lips wreathe disdainfully, but he walks out of the room, and out of the house, without a word of remonstrance. This chance has slipped from him. Where next shall he turn? He walks slowly onwards until he is clear of the rich brewer's house, and then stops, casting uncertain looks about him. As a sense of his utter helplessness comes upon him, a young woman brushes past him without seeing him. He looks up. Bessie Sparrow! She is walking quickly, and seems to see nothing, seems to wish to see nothing. Without any distinct purpose in his mind, but impelled by an uncontrollable undefinable impulse, Saul Fielding turns and follows her. A gasp of pain escapes him as he sees her pause before Mr. Million's house. She rings the bell, and the door is opened. She hands the servant a letter, and the next moment she is in the house, shut from Saul Fielding's view. The terror that comes upon him is so great that the street and the sky swim before his eyes, and he clings to a lamp-post for support.

'O, George!' he groans. 'O, my friend! How will you bear this? Good God! what bitterness there is in life even for those who have not fallen as I have done!'

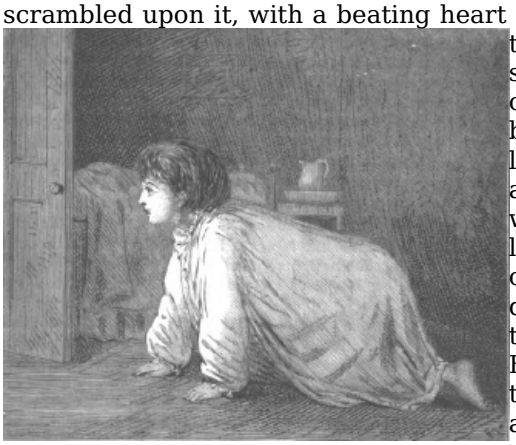
TOTTIE'S DREAM.

When Tottie was put to bed, it was no wonder that she was haunted by the sweet effigy of old Ben Sparrow, and that his stomach of candied lemon-peel and his head of rich figs and currants presented themselves to her in the most tempting shapes and forms her warm imagination could devise. As she lay in bed, looking at the rushlight in the washhand basin, the effigy appeared bit by bit in front of the basin until it was complete, and when it winked one of its currant eyes at her--as it actually did--the light of the candle threw a halo of glory over the form. Her eyes wandering to the mantelshelf, she saw the effigy come out of the wall and stand in the middle of the shelf; and turning to the table, it rose from beneath it, and sat comfortably down; with its legs of cinnamon and raisins tucked under it like a tailor. When she closed her eyes she saw it loom in the centre of dilating rainbow circles, and in the centre of dark-coloured discs, which as they swelled to larger proportions assumed bright borderings of colour, for the express purpose of setting off more vividly the attraction of the figure. Opening her eyes drowsily, she saw the old man come down the chimney and vanish in the grate, and as he disappeared, down the chimney he came again, and continued thus to repeat himself as it were, as if he were a regiment under full marching orders. Whichever way, indeed, Tottie's eyes turned, she saw him, until the room was full of him and his sweetness, and with his multiplied image in her mind she fell asleep.

No wonder that she dreamt of him. Tottie and Bessie slept in the same room, and Tottie dreamt that long after she fell asleep--it must have been long after, for Bessie was in bed--she woke up suddenly. There she was, lying in bed, wide awake, in the middle of the night. The room was dark, and she could not see anything, but she could hear Bessie's soft breathing. She was not frightened, as she usually was in the dark, for her attention was completely engrossed by one

feeling. A frightful craving was upon her, which every moment grew stronger and stronger. This craving had something horrible in it, which, however, she did not quite realise. In the next room slept old Ben Sparrow, who, according to the fancy of her dream, was not made of blood, and flesh, and bone, but of lemon-peel, fig, and currants and raisins. All the sweet things in the shop had been employed in the manufacture, and there they lay embodied in him.

Tottie knew nothing of theology; knew nothing of the value of her soul, which, without a moment's hesitation, she would have bartered for figs and candied lemon-peel. And there the delicious things lay, in the very next room. If she could only get there!--perhaps he would not miss an arm or a leg. But to eat the old man who was so kind to her! She had a dim consciousness of the wickedness of the wish, but she could not rid herself of it. Thought Tottie, 'He won't know if he's asleep, and perhaps it won't hurt him. I know it would do me good.' Her mouth watered, her eyes glistened, her fingers twitched to be at him, her stomach cried out to her. She could *not* withstand the temptation. Slowly and tremblingly she crept out of bed, and groped along the ground towards the door. Bessie was asleep. Everybody was asleep. The house was very quiet. Everything favoured the accomplishment of the horrible deed. 'Nobody will know,' thought Tottie. Thoroughly engrossed in her desperate cannibalistic purpose, and with her teeth grating against each other, Tottie turned the handle of the door and opened it; but as she looked into the dark passage Ben Sparrow's door opened, and a sudden flood of light poured upon her. It so dazzled her, and terrified her, that she fled back to her bed on all-fours, and scrambled upon it, with a beating heart and a face as white as a ghost's. Sitting there glaring at



the door, which she had left partly open in her flight, she saw the light steal into the room, and flying in the midst of it, old Ben Sparrow. He was not quite as large as life, but he was ever so many times more sweet and delicious-looking. As old Ben Sparrow appeared, the room became as light as day, and Tottie noticed how rich and luscious were the gigantic fig which formed his head, the candied lemon-peel which formed his stomach, the raisins which clothed his legs and arms; and as for the ripeness of his dark, beady, fruity eyes, there was no form of thought that could truly express the temptation that lay in them. Ben Sparrow hovered in the air for a few moments, and then steadied himself, as it were: he stood bolt upright, and, treading upon nothing; advanced slowly and solemnly, putting out one leg carefully, and setting it down firmly upon nothing before he could make up his mind to move the other. In this manner he approached Tottie, and sat down on her bed. For a little while Tottie was too frightened to speak. She held her breath, and waited with closed lips for him to say something. But as grandfather did not move or speak, her courage gradually returned, and with it, her craving for some of him. She became hungrier than the most unfortunate church-mouse that ever breathed; her rapacious longing could only be satisfied in one way. Timorously she reached out her hand towards his face; he did not stir. Towards his eyes; he did not wink. Her finger touched his eye; it did not quiver--and out it came, and was in her hand! Her heart throbbed with fearful ecstasy, as with averted head she put the terrible morsel in her mouth. It was delicious. She chewed it and swallowed it with infinite relish, and, when it was gone, thirsted for its fellow. She looked timidly at the old man. There was a queer expression in his fig face, which the loss of one of his eyes had doubtless imparted to it. 'It doesn't seem to hurt him,' thought Tottie. Her eager fingers were soon close to the remaining eye, and out that came, and was disposed of in like manner. Tottie certainly never knew how good Ben Sparrow was until the present time. She had always loved him, but never so much as now. The eyeless face had a mournful expression upon it, and seemed to say sadly, 'Hadn't you better take me next?' Tottie clutched it desperately. It wagged at her, and from its mace lips a murmur seemed to issue, 'O, Tottie! Tottie! To serve me like so this!' But Tottie was ravenous. No fear of consequences could stop her now that she had tasted him, and found how sweet he was. She shut her eyes nevertheless, as, in the execution of her murderous purpose, she tugged at his head, which, when she had torn from his body, she ate bit by bit with a rare and fearful enjoyment. When she looked again at the headless figure of the old man, one of the legs moved briskly and held itself out to her with an air of 'Me next!' in the action. But Tottie, hungering for the lemon-peel stomach, disregarded the invitation. It was difficult to get the stomach off, it was so tightly fixed to its legs. When she succeeded, the arms came with it, and she broke them off short at the shoulder blade, and thought she heard a groan as she performed the cruel operation. But her heart was hardened, and she continued her feast without remorse. How delicious it was! She was a long time disposing of it, for it was very large, but at length it was all eaten, and not a piece of candied sugar was left. As she sucked her fingers with the delight of a savage, a sense of the wickedness of what she had done came upon her. Her grandfather, who had always been so kind to her! She began to tremble and to cry. But the arms and legs remained. They *must* be eaten. Something dreadful would be done to her if they were discovered in her bed; so with feverish haste she devoured the limbs. And now, not a trace of the old man remained. She had devoured him from head to foot She would never see him again--never, never! How dreadful the table looked, with him *not* on it! How Tottie wished she hadn't done it! She was appalled at the contemplation of her guilt, and by the thought of how she would be punished if she were found out. In the midst of these fears the light in the room vanished, and oblivion fell upon Tottie in the darkness that followed.

I CAN SEE YOU NOW, KISSING HER LITTLE TOES.

The next day, being George's last day at home, was a day of sorrow to all the humble persons interested in his career. He, was to start for Liverpool by an early train on the following morning, and was to pass his last evening at Ben Sparrow's, with the old man and Bessie and Tottie and his mother and father. He had decided to bid Bessie good-bye in her grandfather's house. Bessie was for sitting up all night, but he said gently,

'I think, Bessie, that mother would like to have me all to herself the last hour or two. You know what mothers are! By and by, heart's treasure! you will have the first claim on me; but now mother looks upon me as all her own, and it will comfort her heart, dear soul! to let it be as I say.'

There were tears in George's eyes as he looked down upon the face of his darling, and his heart almost fainted within him at the thought of parting from her. And, 'Do you love me, Bess?' he asked, for the thousandth time.

'With all my heart and soul,' replied Bessie, pressing him in her arms. And so, with his head bowed down to hers, they remained in silent communion for many minutes. They were sitting in Ben Sparrow's parlour, and the old man had left the young people by themselves, finding occupation in his shop, in the contemplation of his effigy, and in weighing up quarters of a pound of sugar. There was a woful look in Ben Sparrow's face as he stood behind his counter; times were hard with him, and his till was empty.

'Bess, darling,' said George, waking up from his dream. She raised her tearful eyes to his. He kissed them. 'As I kiss away your tears now, my dear, so I will try to take sorrow and trouble from you when we commence our new life.'

'I know it, George; I know it,' she said, and cried the more.

'But that is not what I was going to say. I was going to say this. Listen to me, dearest: If it were not for you, I shouldn't go; if it were not for you, I should stay at home, and be content. For I love home, I love the dear old land, I love mother and father, and the old black cat, and the little house I was born in. And it's because of you that I am tearing myself from these dear things. I am going to earn money enough to make a home for you and me; to make you more quickly all my own, all my own! How my heart will yearn for you, dear, when I am over the seas! But it will not be for long; I will work and save, and come back soon, and then, my darling, then!----' The tenderness of his tone, and the tenderness there was in the silence that followed, were a fitter and more expressive conclusion to the sentence than words could have made. 'I shall say when I am in the ship, I am here for Bessie's sake. When I am among strangers, I shall think of you, and think, if I endure any hardship, that I endure it for my darling--and that will soften it, and make it sweet; it will, my dear! I shall not be able to sleep very much, Bess, and that will give me all the more hours to work--for you, my darling, for you! See here, heart's treasure; here is the purse you worked for me, round my neck. It shall never leave me--it rests upon my heart. The pretty little beads! How I love them! I shall kiss every piece of gold I put in it, and shall think I am kissing you, as I do now, dear, dearest, best! I shall live in the future. The time will soon pass, and as the ship comes back, with me in it, and with my Bessie's purse filled with chairs and tables and pots and pans, I shall see my little girl waiting for me, thinking of me, longing to have me in her arms as I long to have her in mine. And then, when I *do* come, and you start up from your chair as I open the door!----Think of that moment, Bess--think of it!'

'O, George, George, you make me happy!'

And in such tender words they passed the next hour together, until George tore himself away to look after some tools, which he was to take with him to coin chairs and tables and pots and pans with. But if he did not wish his tools to rust, it behoved him not to bring them too close to his eyes, for his eyelashes were dewy with tears.

Now, late as it was in the day for such common folk as ours, Tottie had not yet made her appearance downstairs. The first in the morning to get up in the house was old Ben Sparrow, and while he was taking down his shutters, and sweeping his shop and setting it in order, Bessie rose and dressed, and prepared the breakfast. Then, when breakfast was nearly ready, Bessie would go upstairs to dress and wash Tottie; but on this particular morning, on going to the little girl's bedside, Tottie cried and sobbed and shammed headache, and as Tottie was not usually a lie-abed, Bessie thought it would do the child good to let her rest. And besides being as cunning as the rest of her sex, Bessie was the more inclined to humour Tottie's whim, because she knew that George would be sure to drop in early; and if Tottie were out of the way, she and her lover could have the parlour all to themselves. George being gone, however, there was no longer any reason for Tottie keeping her bed; so Bessie washed and dressed the child, and was surprised, when taking her hand to lead her downstairs, to see Tottie shrink back and sob and cry that she didn't want to go.

'Come, be a good child, Tottie,' said Bessuel 'grandfather's downstairs, and he wants to play with you.'

At this Tottie sobbed and sobbed, and shook her head vehemently. She knew very well that it was impossible for Ben Sparrow to be downstairs, for had she not eaten him in the night, every bone of him? She was morally convinced that there was not a bit of him left. Grandfather play with her! He would never play with her any more; she had done for him! Her fears were so great that she fancied she could feel him stirring inside of her. But although she was rebellious, she was weak, and so, shutting her eyes tight, she went into the parlour with Bessie. Then she ran tremblingly into a corner, and stood with her face to the wall, and her pinafore over her head; and there Bessie, having more pressing cares upon her just then, left her. When Tottie, therefore, heard the old man's voice calling to her, she sobbed, 'No, I never! No, I never!' and was ready to sink through the floor in her fright; and when the old man lifted her in his arms to kiss her, it was a long time before she could muster sufficient courage to open her eyes and feel his face and his arms and his legs, to satisfy herself that he was really real. And even after that, as if she could not believe the evidence of her senses, she crept towards him at intervals, and touched him and pinched his legs, to make assurance doubly sure.

Ben Sparrow found it hard work to be playful to-day, and Tottie had most of her time to herself. If the anxiety depicted on his face were any criterion, his special cares and sorrows must have been of an overwhelming nature. In the afternoon young Mr. Million came in, spruce and dandified, and handsome as usual. The young gentleman was not an unfrequent visitor at the little grocer's shop, and would often pop in and chat for an hour with Ben Sparrow; he would sit down in the back parlour in the most affable manner, and chat and laugh as if they were equals. Bessie was not at home when he came this afternoon, and he seemed a little disappointed; but he stopped and chatted for all that, and when he went away, the old grocer brightened, and his face looked as if a load were lifted from his heart. His brighter mood met with no response from Bessie, when she came in shortly afterwards. Some new trouble seemed to have come on her since the morning--some new grief to which she hardly dared give expression. She had been stabbed by a few presumably chance and careless words spoken by a neighbour--need it be told that this neighbour was a woman? No weapon can be keener than a woman's tongue, when she chooses to use it to stab. The woman who had uttered the words was young--a year older than Bessie--and it was known at one time that she was setting her cap at Bessie's sweetheart. But she had met with no encouragement from George, who, being wrapt heart and soul in Bessie, had no eyes for other women. George often nodded a laughing assent to a favourite saying of his mother's, that 'One woman was enough for any man; more than enough, sometimes,' Mrs. Naldret would occasionally add. The stab which Bessie received shall be given in the few words that conveyed it.

'So George goes away to-morrow morning,' was the woman's remark to Bessie as she was hurrying home with heavy heart.

'Yes,' sighed Bessie; 'to-morrow morning.'

'Ah,' said the woman, 'he'll be nicely cut up at leaving. I daresay he'd give a good deal, if he could take some one with him.'

'I am sure he would,' said Bessie, thinking that by 'some one' herself was meant.

'O, I don't mean you,' said the woman, seeing the interpretation that Bessie put upon her words.

'Who do you mean, then?' asked Bessie, looking up quickly.

The woman laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

'Well!' she exclaimed. 'Some girls *are* blind! Thank goodness, the best man in the world couldn't blind me so!'

'What do you mean?' demanded Bessie, in an agitated tone, all the blood deserting her face. 'What have you to say against George?'

The woman laughed again.

'You've no cause to be jealous, Bessie,' she said, 'it's only a child. But I *do* think, if I was George's sweetheart'--Bessie's lip curled, and this little expression made the woman's tone more venomous--'I *do* think,' she added with scornful emphasis, 'that if I was George's sweetheart--O, you needn't curl your lip, Bessie!--I should ask him--who--Tottie's--father--was! A woman isn't worth that'--with a snap of her finger--'if she hasn't got a spirit.'

And George's discarded left Bessie white and trembling, with this wound in her heart.

Bessie looked after the woman, dazed for a few moments by the accusation conveyed in the words; then she became suddenly indignant, and the blood rushed back to her face and neck; it dyed her bosom, and she knew it and felt it, and felt the stab there also. Then she hurried home.

Ben Sparrow did not notice her agitation at first; he was too much rejoiced at the lifting of a

heavy weight from him. In the morning ruin had stared him in the face; a small creditor had come down upon him; had given him twenty-four hours to pay an account which, trifling as it was, he was not possessed of. But young Mr. Million had been to see him and had saved him. He would be able to pay this hard creditor--I am ashamed to say for how trifling an amount--in the morning, and he was exultant 'I am only too glad,' this young gentleman had said, 'to have the opportunity of rendering a service to Bessie's grandfather.' When he departed, old Ben Sparrow actually danced in his parlour in thankfulness for the danger escaped.

'Bessie,' cried Ben Sparrow as his granddaughter entered, 'young Mr. Million has been here.'

Bessie nodded, scarcely heeding the words.

'He's a gentleman,' continued Ben Sparrow, 'every inch of him; to forget the past, as he does.'

'What past, grandfather?' asked Bessie. 'Forget what?'

'O, nothing--nothing, my dear,' exclaimed Ben hurriedly, and coughing as if something had come up or gone down the wrong way. 'What I say is, he's a gentleman, every inch of him.'

'You said that before, grandfather.'

'Did I? yes, of course. But I'm an old man, Bessie, and you must make allowances. We can't be all bright and fresh, and always happy as my dear child is.'

Bessie kissed Ben Sparrow's neck, and laid her head oh his shoulder. 'Always happy, grandfather! Am I always happy?'

'Of course you are, dear child, and it's natural and right and proper. Sorry and grieved, of course, because our sweetheart's going away--but he'll be back soon, never fear. And we'll talk of him every day and every night, my dear, and the time'll fly away'--he blew a light breath--'like that! Ah, my dear! it's only the old that knows how quickly time flies!'

Bessie said nothing, but pressed closer to the old shield that had sheltered her from babyhood to womanhood.

'And now see,' said the old shield, 'what young Mr. Million brought for you. And you're to wear them at once, he said, and I say so too, and I promised him you would, for he's coming here tonight, and is going to do me such a kindness as only the kindest heart in the world could do.'

Ben Sparrow took from his pocket a little box, and opened it, and produced therefrom a piece of tissue-paper, and from the tissue-paper a pair of pretty turquoise earrings set in gold. Bessie scarcely looked at them, and allowed Ben to take from her ears the pair of old ear-rings she had worn for ever so many years, and replace them with Mr. Million's pretty present.

'You look, Bessie,' said old Ben, falling back and contemplating her, 'you look like a Princess! and it's my opinion, my dear, that you are every bit as good as one.'

He held a piece of looking-glass before her, and desired her to look at herself. To please him she said they *were* very pretty, and then said, suddenly coming to what was uppermost in her mind, 'Grandfather, I want you to tell me about Tottie.'

'About Tottie, my dear!' exclaimed Ben Sparrow wonderingly.

'Yes,' replied Bessie, sitting down, 'about Tottie. All I know is that you came and asked me once if I would mind if you brought a little friendless girl home to live with us, and if I would take care of her.'

'And you said Yes, gladly, for it would be company for us, and would make the place pleasant. And I'm sure neither you nor me have ever repented it. If Tottie was our own flesh and blood we couldn't be fonder of her. I shouldn't know what to do without her now I've got so used to her. I'll tell you the story by and by, my dear, when George has gone----'

'No,' interrupted Bessie, so impetuously as to cause old Ben to jump; 'now! I want to know now. Ah, dear grandfather! you have always been so good to me that I can't help being a tyrant.'

'You a tyrant!' cried Ben, appealing with raised hands to the walls and the furniture to join him in the repudiation of the astonishing statement. 'That's a good one, that is. Well, my dear, as you want to know at once, and as you're such a tyrant--ha, ha! I can't help laughing, my dear--here goes. It's now three years gone, Bess--before George and you began to keep company, my dear--that George comes and tells me a story of a poor little thing that had been thrown helpless upon the world. "Such a pretty little thing!" says George, "and not a friend but me to look after her! I wish I knew some one," says George, "who would take care of the dear; I'm sure I could never be grateful enough to them." Then I asked how old the child was, and whether she did not have relations. "Yes," said George, "she had two, but they had no home and were altogether in too bad a position to take care of the little one." Then I thought of you, my dear, and thought it would be company for my Bessie and for me, and that if we grew to love the child, there would be nothing to repent of. I told George this, and George confessed that he had the same thing in his mind too, and that was the reason why he spoke to me about it--hoping that I would say what I had said.

And so, to cut a long story short, one night a woman came to the door with little Tottie in her arms, and kissed the child a many times, and George brought Tottie in. I didn't see the woman's face, but I fancied that she was crying. I have often wished since that I had seen her face, the poor creature seemed in such distress. You remember, Bessie, when you came home an hour afterwards, and found me sitting before the fire with Tottie in my lap, warming her little toes, how you fell in love with her directly, and how happy she made us, and how this very parlour was, because Tottie was with us, really made a great deal more cheerfuller than ever it had been before! You remember the wonderful dimples that came into her face when she looked at us, and broke out a-smiling, as much as to say, 'How d'you do, old Ben and young Bess? I'm very glad to see you!' Why, it was as good as a play! I can see you now kissing her little toes, and can see her crowing and laughing when you kissed her neck--so fat, and so full of creases! and I can see her clenching her little fist and flourishing it in the air as much as to say, "In this fist I've got a hundred-pound note, and all the world and his wife sha'n't take it from me!" Dear, dear! the child *has* been a comfort to us, and it was a bright day when she came into the house, the poor little thing! Then George says, "You're not to be expected to keep Tottie for nothing, Mr. Sparrow; and here's three shillings a week, and when she gets a big girl perhaps we'll be able to spare more." And he's paid the three shillings a week regular, and has brought little things for her now and then, such as a frock, you know, or a flannel petticoat, or a little pair of shoes. And that's the whole of the story, Bess.'

Bessie had listened very attentively to the narration of Tottie's history, and now said, after a pause, with a strange hesitation in her voice,

'Grandfather, did George never tell you--who--Tottie's--father--was?

'No, my dear. I remember once it coming up between us somehow, but George turned it off, and said it didn't matter to Tottie, who seemed as happy as the day was long--and so she was, and is, my dear.'

At that moment 'Shop!' was called, and Ben Sparrow hurried in to attend to his customer, and the subject dropped.

ONE KISS FOR HOPE, ONE FOR FAITH, AND ONE FOR LOVE.

Tea was over and cleared away in the little back parlour, and Bessie and old Ben Sparrow sat looking sadly into the fire. Tottie was also present in her high chair, but there was nothing of sadness in her thoughts. She was enjoying, in anticipation, what was spread upon the table; for after the fashion of humble folk, preparations had been made for 'a party' on this last evening which George was to spend with them. There was a bottle of 'sherry wine' on the table, and another of port, which old Ben had bought at a large grocer's shop over Westminster-bridge, at a cost, for the two bottles, of two shillings and fourpence; and that the wine was of an old and rich vintage, was proved by the mildew and sawdust which clung to the bottles. There were six wine-glasses of different shapes and patterns; and there was a plate of almonds and raisins, and another of figs, and some small seed-cakes, and four oranges cut in quarters; so that, altogether, the table presented quite a festive appearance. There was nothing festive, however, in the countenances of Bessie and her grandfather; their faces were as sad as their thoughts. It was but natural. And yet they would have been loth to have confessed to each other the exact tenor of their contemplations.

A bustle in the shop caused Ben Sparrow to jump from his chair.

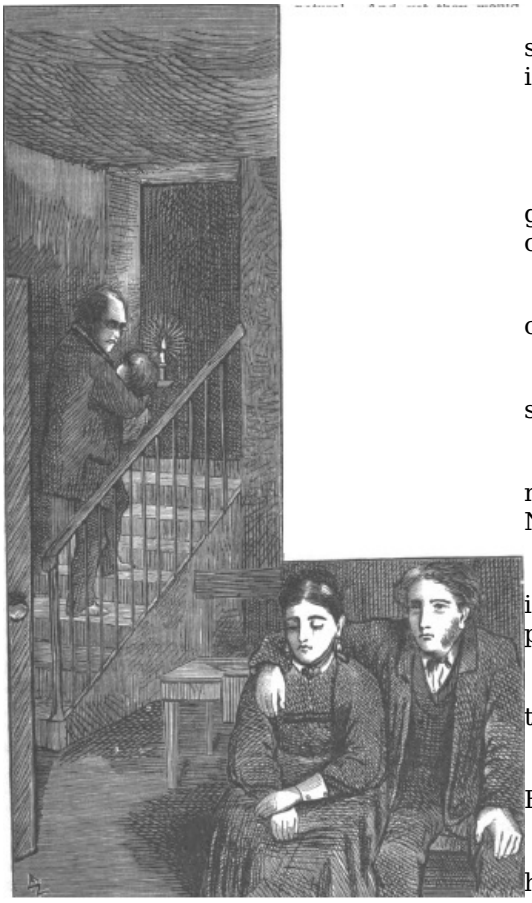
'That's Mr. and Mrs. Naldret,' he said, and opened the parlour-door and gave them welcome.

'Well, Bessie,' said Mrs. Naldret, and 'Well, my girl,' said Jim Naldret, and they both kissed her, and shook hands with old Ben, who bustled about doing nothing, while Bessie assisted Mrs. Naldret to take off her bonnet and things. Mrs. Naldret had with one glance taken in the preparations for the party, and approved of them.

'What a pretty pair of earrings!' exclaimed Mrs. Naldret, admiring the turquoise trifles in Bessie's pink ears, and, 'Well, George is a sly one!' said Jim Naldret, pinching the pretty ears.

'George didn't give them to her,' said Ben Sparrow, rubbing his hands; 'no, nor me either. I'm not rich enough; though if I could afford it, Bessie should have had such a pair long ago, and a gold chain and a watch as well.'

'She's pretty enough to have them,' said Jim Naldret.



'And good enough,' added Ben. 'Well, I *am* glad to see you! But I wish it was to welcome George back instead of wishing him good-bye. Eh, Bess?'

'Yes, grandfather,' replied Bessie, with a heavy sigh.

Mrs. Naldret said nothing; she was thinking who had given Bessie the turquoise ear-rings; she knew they could not have cost less than four pounds at least.

'There's George,' said Jim Naldret, as the shop-door opened.

Bessie turned eagerly to the door, but Ben Sparrow stepped before her and said in a hurried agitated tone,

'I should like to have a few quiet words with George, my dear; I sha'n't have another opportunity. Mrs. Naldret won't mind.'

That worthy woman nodded, and Ben Sparrow, going into the shop, stopped George's entrance into the parlour.

'Don't go in for a minute,' said Ben; 'I want to speak to you.'

'All right, grandfather; but I must have a kiss of Bessie first. Bessie!'

The girl ran into the shop at his call, and nestled in his arms for a moment.

'There! there!' exclaimed old Ben, taking Bessie's hand gently and kindly. 'Go inside, Bess, my dear. That's all George wanted with you. We'll be in presently.'

Bessie went into the parlour, and George's heart was like a nest from which the dearly-loved bird had flown. That little embrace, with Bessie, warm and soft and tender in his arms, contained such exquisite happiness as to be painful.

'I'll not keep you two minutes,' said Ben Sparrow; 'come to the door, so that we may not be heard.'

They went to the shop-door, and into the street, which they paced slowly as they conversed.

'As I was sitting inside by the fire, just now, George,' resumed Ben, 'there came into my mind something which I think I ought to speak of before you go away. It brought back old-time memories, too. You see, my dear boy, I am an old man, and there's no telling what may happen. It is a comfort to me that Bessie will have a good man for a husband--for I believe you to be good, and--and a man, George!'

'Indeed, Mr. Sparrow, I will do my best. It will be my happiness to make her happy.'

'I believe it will be, George, and that's why I'm glad she will be yours. I have nothing to give her, George, nothing. I am so poor that I don't know which way to turn sometimes to pay little pay little bills.'

'I want nothing with her, Mr. Sparrow. I want no better fortune than Bessie herself.' He was overflowing with love for his dear girl.

'She's good enough to be a Princess,' said Ben proudly, 'good enough to be a Queen.'

'She's my Princess and my Queen,' replied George; 'and she's a good girl and will be a good wife, and that's better than all.'

'That it is--that it is. But don't interrupt me, George. I thought once I should be better off than I am, but something went wrong with me, and I lost all my little savings. Since then, I have been going down, till sometimes I think I can't go down any lower.' Old Ben Sparrow paused here, and before he resumed closed his eyes, and put his hand over them, as if with his inner sense of sight he were looking into the past. 'George, I am going to speak of Bessie's father--and my son; it is only right that I should, for you may meet him.'

'Meet him, Mr. Sparrow!'

'Yes,' replied the old man in a quiet tone, 'I daresay you have heard that he ran away, years ago, in disgrace. Bessie was quite a little thing then, and I don't think any one has been so unkind as to speak of it to her. To tell you the truth, George, she believed years ago that her father was dead, and it is best that she should not be told different. And he may be dead, George, for all I

know. He was employed as one of old Mr. Million's collectors, and he used money that didn't belong to him. He used my money, too, and put my name to papers without my knowing; so that when he ran away, to prevent something worse happening, I had to pay, which brought me down, and kept me down, George. This is a solemn secret between us, George, and must never again be spoken of.'

'I understand, sir.'

'But I thought it right that you should know before you go away. It don't alter your opinion of Bessie, does it, George? does it, my boy?'

'Alter my opinion of Bessie!' exclaimed George warmly. 'It gives her a greater claim on me. I love her more for it, dear girl, knowing how unhappy it would cause her to know this. Of course, it must be kept from her!'

'Dear boy, God bless you! God bless you, dear boy!' cried old Ben Sparrow, with the tears running down his face. 'And, George--when you make a little money, and come home with it to make Bessie happy, be contented. Don't go striving after riches, as my son did, and forgot the meaning of honesty and the happiness there is in contentment. From the time he ran away, I have never had a line from him. But I heard that he was seen in Australia, and if he is alive, you may meet him, for there are not many people there. Strange things *do* happen, George! You may meet him, and know him. I daresay he has grown something like me, but taller and more gentlemanly. Ah, that was his ruin, wanting to be a gentleman! Well, if you do meet him, George,' and the old man took George's hand and pressed it hard, and twined his fingers with George's nervously; 'if you do, give him--my--my love, George--my dear love--and tell him to write to me, and that his old father forgives him, George--that he forgives him! And tell him about you and Bessie, and how beautiful Bessie has grown, and how she's fit to be a Princess'----Old Ben broke down here, and George put his arm round the old man's neck, and patted him on the back, and said, 'Yes, yes, Mr. Sparrow, I understand, I understand. I'll do all that you wish and in the way that you wish. And now that I know, I'll look out for him. What part of Australia do you think he's in?'

'I don't know, George; but Australia can't be very large. I've done right to tell you, George, haven't I?'

'Yes, quite right.'

With that, they went into the house, and joined the party in the parlour. It was not a very merry one, and the conversation chiefly consisted of tender reminiscences and hopeful anticipation. George tried to be gay, but broke down, and if it had not been for old Ben Sparrow chirruping out a line of 'Cheer, boys, cheer, there's wealth for honest labour,' now and then, it would have been difficult to keep matters going. But a diversion was occasioned in the course of the evening by the arrival of young Mr. Million, who came in to shake hands with George, he said, and to wish him good-bye. George was sitting in the corner, with Tottie on his knee; the child was in a state of repletion, having feasted her full on the pleasures of the table, and was curled up in George's arms, feeling very sleepy. Bessie, sitting next to George (he had a spare arm for her waist, Tottie notwithstanding), cast strangely disturbed glances at her lover and the child, and her heart was bleeding from the wound inflicted upon it by what she had heard that afternoon. Every time George stooped and kissed Tottie, Bessie's wound opened, and she was almost distracted with doubt and grief and love. Young Mr. Million was very sunny and bright--a sunbeam lighting up the sad clouds. He gave just a glance at the earrings in Bessie's ears, and Bessie blushed as she rose to allow George to shake hands with him. No one saw the glance but Mrs. Naldret, and she looked gravely at Bessie. Young Mr. Million was profuse in his good wishes for George; he wished the young man all sorts of luck, and hoped he would soon be back. Every one was gratified at the heartiness with which young Mr. Million expressed his good wishes--every one but Mrs. Naldret; but then nothing seemed to please her to-night.

'I must drink your health, George,' said the young brewer.

Ben Sparrow asked him with a grand air whether he would take sherry wine or port, and he chose sherry, and said that Miss Sparrow should fill his glass for him. Bessie filled his glass and handed it to him with a bright flame in her cheeks; her hand shook, too, and a few drops of the wine were spilt upon the table, which young Mr. Million said gaily was a good omen.

'And here's good luck to you, George, and a prosperous voyage,' he said, and shook hands with George and wished him good-bye, and shook hands also with all in the room. Old Ben Sparrow looked at him very anxiously, and when the young prince with a quietly significant glance at the old man, proposed that Miss Sparrow should open the shop-door for him, Ben said, 'Yes, yes, certainly, sir,' and almost pushed Bessie into the shop. Now what made Mrs. Naldret open the parlour-door, and seat herself so that she could see the shop-door? It may have been done unconsciously, but certain it is that, seeing something pass between young Mr. Million and Bessie as they shook hands at the shop-door, she gave a sudden cry, as if overtaken by a spasm. Bessie ran in at the cry, and then Mrs. Naldret saw in one quick flash, what no one else saw (for Bessie slipped it into her pocket), a letter in Bessie's hand! The matron said it was nothing, merely a stitch in her side; and turned from the maid to her son, around whose neck she threw her arms, and kissed him again and again.

'Why, mother!' exclaimed George, for Mrs. Naldret was beginning to sob convulsively. 'Come, bear up, there's a dear soul! or we shall all be as bad as you!'

Mrs. Naldret repressed her sobs, and pressed him closer to her faithful breast, and whispered,

'Ah, George, there are a many women in the world for you, but there's only one mother!'

He whispered back to her, 'There's only one woman in the world for me, and that's my darling Bessie; and there is only one other who is as good as she is, and that's the mother I hold in my arms.'

And all she could reply to this was, 'O, George, George! O, my dear, dear boy!' with a world of love and pity in her voice.

And so the sad evening passed away, until George said, Hadn't father and mother better go home? He would soon be with them. They knew that he wanted to say good-bye to Bessie, who sat pale and tearful, with her hand in his; and they rose to go, saying he would find them up when he came home.

'I know that, dear mother and father,' he said, and went with them to the door, and kissed them, and came back with the tears running down his face.

'I'll tell you what, George,' whispered old Ben Sparrow in George's ear. 'You shall say good-bye to Tottie and me, and we'll go to bed; and then you'll have Bessie all to yourself. But don't keep too long, my dear boy, don't keep too long.'

Tottie had been fast asleep for more than an hour, and George took her in his arms without waking her.

'Good-bye, Tottie,' he said; 'good-bye, little one!' He kissed her many times, and the child, stirred by his caresses, raised her pretty little hand to his face. He kissed her fingers, and then resigned her to old Ben, who, with his burden in his arms, grasped George's hand tight, and bade him good-bye and God speed.

'And don't forget, George,' he said, with a secret look towards Bessie.

'No, Mr. Sparrow,' George replied, 'I'll bear in mind what you told me.'

'God bless you, then, and speed you back!'

With this the old man ascended the stairs, with Tottie in his arms, turning over his shoulder to give George a parting look, and humming 'Cheer, boys, cheer!' softly, to keep up the spirit of the lovers.

They had listened with a kind of strained attention to the old man's voice, and when it was hushed, and silence fell upon them, George turned to Bessie, and in an instant she was in his arms, lying on his breast. A long silence followed. George heard Bessie's heart beat plainer than the tick of the old-fashioned clock, which stood like a ghost in a corner of the room. Not another sound could be heard but the ticking of the old clock and the beating of their hearts. As Bessie lay in her lover's arms, she thought whether it would be generous in her to question him about Tottie. The very asking of the question would imply a doubt. A voice whispered to her, 'Trust him; perfect love means perfect confidence.' But the woman's words were present to her also; and George was paying for the child. She would not admit the thought of anything dishonourable in George; but the sting of the doubt was in her. Would it not be better for her to ask a simple question, which George could easily answer, than to be tormented with doubt during the long months he would be away from her? Would it not be simple justice to Tottie? for if she were not satisfied, she might grow to hate the child. And Bessie really loved the pretty little forsaken one. The maternal instinct was in her, like the seedling of a flower in the ground, waiting for the summer-time to ripen it into the perfect beauty of motherly love. She loved children.

And here, a word. Whether out of place or not, it must be written. Trust not that woman who has no love for little ones. She is unworthy of love.

How long the lovers remained silent they did not know. But the time flew all too swiftly, for the solemn tongue of Westminster proclaimed the hour. Each clang was like a knell. It was midnight.

Midnight! What solemn reflections arise at such a moment, if the mind be attuned to them! If the world were spread before us like a map, what varied emotion and feeling, what unworthy striving, what unmerited suffering, what new lives born to pain, what old lives dying out in it, what thoughts dark and bright, what flowers of tender love, what weeds of ruthless circumstance, what souls born in the mire and kept there, what hope, what remorse, what sounds of woe and pleasant fountain-voices with sparkles in them, what angel-lights and divine touches of compassion, would, in the brief space occupied by the striking of the hour, there be displayed! And so that bell may toll, night after night, for generation after generation, until a time shall come--say in a hundred years--when every human pulse that at this moment beats throughout the world, when every heart that thrills and thirsts, when every vainful mortal that struts and boasts

and makes grand schemes for self's exaltment, shall lie dead in earth and sea! Such thoughts should make us humble.

The bell awoke the lovers from their dream, and they spoke in low tones of the future and the hopes that lay in it for them.

'When I come back with a little bit of money, my darling,' said George, 'I shall be content to settle down to my trade, and we shall jog along as happy as can be. We couldn't settle down without pots and pans, and these I am going away to earn. I can see our little home, with you sitting by the fireside, or waiting at the door for me to give me a kiss when my day's work is done. Then I shall come round to mother's old way, with her bread-and-cheese and kisses. That will be good enough for me, my darling, with you to give me the kisses.'

And he gave and took an earnest of them there and then.

So they talked of one thing and another until One o'clock was tolled by the Westminster bell, and during all that time Bessie had not found courage to speak of what was in her mind. George had noticed the ear-rings in Bessie's ears, but had not spoken of them, thinking that Bessie would have drawn his attention to them. But Bessie's wound was too fresh; the pain and bewilderment of it were all engrossing. She had no thought for anything else.

'And now I must go, my darling,' said George, as they stood by the shop-door; 'for mother and father are waiting for me.' He took her face between his hands and kissed her lips. 'One kiss for hope; one for faith; and one for love.'

Bessie raised her face again to his, and whispered as she kissed,

'And one for confidence.'

'And one for confidence,' he repeated, as heartily as his sadness would allow.

'There should be no secrets between us, George dear.'

'Certainly there should not be, darling,' he replied, 'though you've been keeping one from me all the night, you puss!'

'I, George!'

'Yes, you, dearest. You have never told me who gave you those pretty ear-rings.'

Upon such slight threads often do our dearest hopes hang! Bessie, yielding to the weak impulse, to play off confidence for confidence, said,

'Never mind those, George. I want to ask you something first.'

At this moment the sound of music came to them, and the waits commenced to play the dear old air of 'Home, sweet home.'

'That's Saul's doing,' thought George. 'Good fellow! What will become of him during the time I am away?' As he and Bessie stood linked in a close embrace, the soft strains floated through the air into their hearts.

'There shall be no secrets between us, George, in our own home, sweet home!'

'None, darling.'

'And you'll not be angry with me for saying something?'

'What can my dear girl say to make me angry? and at such a time!'

'Then tell me, George--about Tottie.'

'The dear little thing! What about her, dearest?'

'George, is she an orphan?'

How long seemed the interval before he replied! Tick--tick--tick--went the clock, so slowly! O, so slowly, now!

'No, Bessie.'

How strangely his voice sounded! But he held her closer to him, and she had no power to free herself from his embrace. Indeed, she would have fallen had he loosed her.

'Do not be angry with me, George,' she whispered, slowly and painfully. 'She has a father living?'

Another long, long pause, and then, 'Yes,' from George, in the same strange tone.

'Tell me his name, George.'

He held her from him suddenly, and with his hands upon her shoulders, looked her steadily in the face. But her eyes drooped in the light of his earnest gaze.

'I cannot, Bessie,' he said; 'I must not. When we are married I will tell you all. There shall be no secrets between us in our home, sweet home. Till then, be satisfied.'

Softer came the dear old air to Bessie's ears. But the tenderer meaning in it was gone for her. She turned from her lover petulantly.

'I did not think you would refuse me this, George.'

Wiser, stronger, than she, he said,

'Do not let this trivial matter come between us, my dear;' and would have taken her to his heart again, but she did not meet him as before. 'This trivial matter!' Was he so lost to honour and to love for her? Something of her mind he saw in her face, and it made his blood hot. 'Good God,' he thought, 'is it possible she suspects me?' Then he strove to soothe her, but she would not be soothed. She said but little now; but her face was white with misery; doubt tore at the wound in her heart. She knew the pain she was inflicting upon him by the pain she felt herself. But she could not yield; she could not say, 'I know you are true to me. I will be satisfied, and will wait.' So his efforts were vain, and two o'clock struck, and their agony was not over. The tolling of the bell, however, brought to him the picture of his father and mother waiting up at home for him. 'I *must* go,' he said hurriedly. 'Good-bye, dear Bessie, and God bless you! Trust to me, and believe that no girl ever had more faithful lover.'

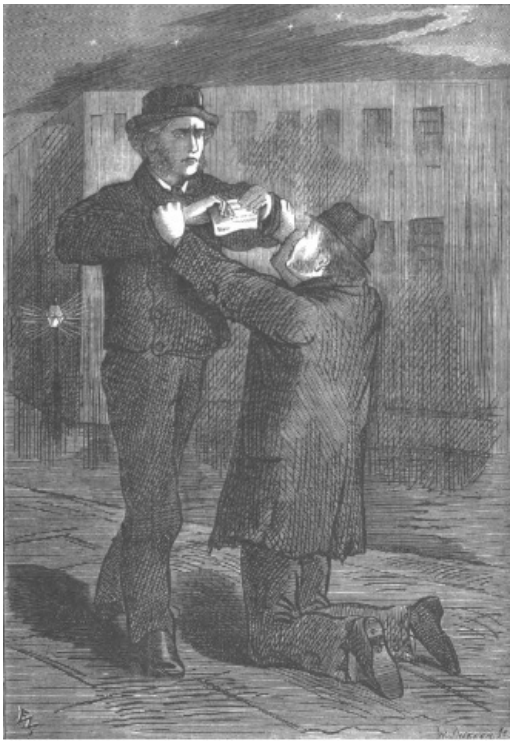
In spite of her coldness, he pressed her close to his breast, and whispered assurances of his love and faithfulness. Then tore himself away, and left her almost fainting in the shop, love and doubt fighting a sickening battle in her heart.

YOU ALONE, AND MY MOTHER, ARE TRUE; ALL THE REST OF THE WORLD IS FALSE.

The night was very cold, and George felt the keen wind a relief. He took off his hat, and looked around. The street was still and quiet; the last strains of 'Home, sweet home,' had been played, and the players had departed. All but one, and he waited at the end of the street for George to come up to him.

'What, Saul!'

'George!'



They clasped hands.

'I am glad you are here, Saul. I should not have liked to go without wishing you good-bye.'

'I waited for you, George. I knew you were in there. Mother and father sitting up for you, I suppose?'

'Yes. In a few hours I shall go from here; then I shall be alone!'

'As I am, George.'

'Nay, Saul, you have Jane.'

'She has left me, dear woman. I may never see her face again. It is for my good, George, that she has done this. You do not know how low we have sunk. George,' and here his voice fell to a whisper, 'at times we have been almost starving! It could not go on like this, and she has left me, and taken service somewhere in the country. She has done right. As I suffer, as I stretch out my arms in vain for her, as I look round the walls of my garret and am desolate in the light of my misery, I feel and confess she has done right. Here is her letter. Come to the lamp; there is light enough to read it by.'

George read the letter, and returned it to Saul, saying, 'Yes, she is right. What do you intend to do?'

'God knows. To try if I can see any way. But all is dark before me now, George.'

'I wish I could help you, Saul.'

'I know, I know. You are my only friend. If it ever be in my power to repay you for what you have done----' He dashed the tears from his eyes, and stood silent for a few moments, holding George's hand in his. 'George,' he said, in unsteady tones, 'in times gone by you and I have had many good conversations; we passed happy hours together. Words that have passed between us are in my mind now.'

'In mine too, Saul.'

'We had once,' continued Saul in the same strange unsteady tones, 'a conversation on friendship. I remember it well, and the night on which it took place. We walked up and down Westminster-bridge, and stopped now and then, gazing at the lights on the water. There is something grand and solemn in that sight, George; I do not know why, but it always brings to my mind a dim idea of death and immortality. The lights stretch out and out, smaller and smaller, until not a glimmer can be seen; darkness succeeds them as death does life. But the lights are there, George, although our vision is too limited to see them. You remember that conversation, George?'

'As if it had taken place this night, Saul. I can see the lights, and the darkness that follows them.'

'We agreed then upon the quality of friendship, but gave utterance to many generalities.' Saul paused awhile, and then said slowly, 'I am considering, George, whether I rightly understand the duties that lie in friendship.'

'Faithfulness, trustfulness.'

'Yes, those; and other things as well. Say that you had a friend, and had learnt something, had seen something, of which he is ignorant, and which he should know; say it is something that you would keep from your friend if you were false instead of true to him----'

'I should be a traitor to friendship,' interrupted George warmly, 'if I kept it from him. If I were truly his friend, I should seek him out and say what I had learnt, what I had seen.'

'Even if it contained pain, George; even if it would hurt him to know?'

'Even if it contained pain; even if it would hurt him to know. There is often pain in friendship; there is often pain in love. You have felt this, Saul, yourself. I have too, dear friend! Often into life's sweetness and tenderness pain creeps, and we do not know how it got there.'

George uttered this in a gentle tone; he was thinking of Bessie. 'Come, friend,' he said, seeing that Saul hesitated to speak, 'you have something to tell your friend. If you are true to him, tell it.'

Thus urged, Saul said: 'First answer me this. When did you first think of emigrating?'

'I did not think of it at all, before it was put in my head.'

'By whom?'

'By young Mr. Million. One night, not very long ago now, he met me, and got into conversation with me. Trade had been a little slack, and I had had a few idle days. This made me fret, for I saw that if things went on in the same way it might be years before I could save enough to buy furniture to make a home for Bessie. I let this out in conversation with young Mr. Million, and he sympathised with me, and said it was a shame, but that if he were in my place he would put himself in a position to marry his sweetheart in less than a year. How? I asked. By emigrating, he said. It staggered me, as you may guess, Saul. The idea of going away had never entered my head. He went on to say that his father took a great interest in working men, and was very interested also in emigration; that only that morning his father had mentioned my name and had said that he had a passage ticket for the very ship that is going out of the Mersey to-morrow, Saul--and that if I had a mind to better myself, he would give the ticket to me. I thanked him, and told him I would think of it. Well, I *did* think of it, and I read about wages over the water, and saw that I could do what he said. He gave me the ticket, and that's how it came about.'

'George,' said Saul pityingly, for things that were at present dark to George seemed clear to him, 'Mr. Million never heard your name until this morning.'

'Stop!' exclaimed George, passing his hand over his eyes with a bewildered air. 'Speak slowly. I don't know that I understand you. Say that again.'

Saul repeated: 'Mr. Million never heard your name until this morning. I went to his house, thinking that as he had helped you, he might help me; and he scoffed at me, and taunted me bitterly. He had no more to do with getting your ticket than I had. Every word young Mr. Million told you about the passage and about his father was false.'

'Good God!' cried George. 'What could be his motive, then, in telling me these things, and in obtaining this passage ticket for me?'

'Think, George,' said Saul; 'there is such a thing as false kindness. He *may* have a motive in wishing you away. I could say more, but I cannot bring my tongue to utter it.'

'You must, Saul, you must!' cried George, in a voice that rang through the street. They had walked as they conversed, and they were now standing outside his mother's house. 'You must! By the friendship I have borne for you! By the memory of what I have done for you!' The door of his house was opened as he spoke. His mother had heard his voice, and the agony in it, and came to the door. George saw her standing there, looking anxiously towards him, and he said in a voice thick with pain, 'Stay here until I come out. By the love you bear to Jane, stop until I come. My mother will know--she is far-seeing, and I may have been blind.'

He hurried to his mother, and went into the house with her. For full half an hour Saul waited in suspense, and at the end of that time George came out of the house, staggering like a drunken man. Saul caught him, and held him up. His face was as the face of death; a strong agony dwelt in it.

'I have heard something,' he said, in a tone that trembled with passion and pain and weakness. 'My mother has doubted for a long time past. She took a letter from him secretly to-night! Those earrings she wore he gave her. O, my God! Tell me, you, what more you know! By the memory of all you hold dear, tell me!'

'George, my dear,' said Saul, in a broken voice, 'a few moments after I quitted Mr. Million's house, I saw her enter it.'

A long, long silence followed. The stars and the moon shone brightly, but there was no light in the heavens for George. A sob broke from him, and another, and another.

'For God's sake,' exclaimed Saul, 'for your mother's sake, who suffers now a grief as keen as yours, bear up! Dear friend, if I could lay down my life for you, I would!'

'I know it. You alone, and my mother, are true; all the rest of the world is false! He wished to get rid of me, did he, and this was a trap! The false lying dog! But when I meet him!---- See here! Here is the ticket he gave me. If I had him before me now, I would do to him as I do to this----'

He crumpled the paper in his hand, and tore it fiercely in twain. Saul caught his arm, and stayed its destruction.

'No, no, George!' he cried, but his cry was like a whisper. 'Don't destroy it! Give it, O, give it to me! Remember the letter that Jane wrote to me. Think of the future that is open to me, to her, unless I can see a way. The way is here! Here is my salvation! Let me go instead of you!' He fell upon his knee's and raised his hands tremblingly, as if the Death-Angel were before him, and he was not prepared. 'If I live, I will repay you, so help me, the Great God!'

George muttered, 'Take it. For me it is useless. May it bring you the happiness that I have lost!'

Saul kissed his friend's hand, which fell from his grasp. When he looked up, his friend was gone. And the light in the heavens that George could not see, shone on the face of the kneeling man.

PART II.

THEY SAW, UPON ONE OF THE NEAREST PEAKS, A MAN STANDING, WITH SUNSET COLOURS ALL AROUND HIM.

We are in the land of a thousand hills. Height is piled upon height, range upon range. The white crests of the mountains cut sharp lines in the clear cold air, and the few trees that are dotted about stand like sentinels on the watch. On one of the far heights, some trees, standing in a line, look like soldiers that have halted for rest; and the clumps of bush that lie in the valleys and on the sides of the hills are like wearied regiments sleeping.

In dear old England the roses are blooming, and the sun is shining; but here it is night, and snow-shadows rest on the mountains and gullies. Among the seemingly interminable ranges, ice-peaks glitter like diamond eyes. Round about us where we stand there is but little wood growth; but in the far distance, beyond the eye's reach, are forests of trees, from the branches of which garlands of icicles hang fantastically; and down in the depths the beautiful fern-leaves are rimmed with frosted snow. We are in the new world.

Creation might have been but yesterday. Even these white canvas tents, lying in the lap of Night, in the centre of the forest of peaks, do not dispel the illusion. They are clustered in the saddle of a gully almost hidden from sight by jealous upland. But look within, and you will see that the old world is marching on to the new. Sturdy men, asleep upon canvas beds, are resting from their toil. Some are from old Devon, England's garden land; some from the Cornwall mines; some from the motherland's fevered cities. Rest, tired workers! Sleep for a little while, strong, brown-bearded men! Over your spirits, as you dream and sometimes smile, it may be that the eternal light of a new childhood is slowly breaking!

Hark! What cry is this that reaches the ear? Come nearer. A baby's voice! And now we can hear the soft voice of the mother, singing her child to sleep with an old familiar nursery rhyme. Dear words! Dear memories! Sweet thread of life! When it snaps, the world is dark, and its tenderness and beauty have departed from our souls. The mother's soft voice is like a rill dancing

down a hill in the sun's eye. How sweet it sounds!

What brings these men, women, and children here among the wilds? For answer, take--briefly told--what is not a legend, but veritable new-world history.

Two men, adventurers from the old world, attracted thence by the news of gold discoveries, travelled into new country in search of an eldorado which they could keep to themselves until their fortunes were made. They travelled over mountain and plain, and searched here and searched there, for weeks and months without success, until, almost starving and penniless, they found themselves on the banks of a swiftly-flowing river. This river, here wide, here narrow, here confined between rocky precipices, here widening on the plains, presented strange contrasts during the year. In the winter, the mountain snows which fed it came tumbling furiously over the rocks; then its waters rushed madly through the defiles and overflowed the plains. In the summer, peace came to it; the warm sun made it drowsy, and it fell asleep. It curled itself up in its bed, as it were, and left its banks bare and dry. The snow-torrents from the mountains brought with them something rarer than snow--gold. The precious metal grew in the mountain rocks, and when the furious water tore it from its home, and carried it to the river, it sank into the river's bed and banks, and enriched every fissure and crevice in its stony bottom. When the two adventurers camped by the river's side it was summer, and the banks were dry. They tried for gold, and found it. In a few hours they unearthed twenty ounces, and they looked at each other with wild eyes. Not a soul was within many miles of them; only the birds and the insects knew their secret. But they could not work without food. Some twenty miles from the scene of their discovery was a sheep-farming station. Thither they walked in the night, so that they might not be observed, and slept during the day. Pleading poverty, they bought at the station a little meat and flour, and walked in the daylight away from the river. But when night fell, they warily retraced their steps, and crept through the dark like thieves, until they came to the precious banks. For weeks and months they worked in secret, and lived like misers, never daring to light a fire, for fear the smoke might be seen; the very wind was their enemy. Their flesh wasted, their faces became haggard, their hair grew tangled and matted, they became hollow-eyed; and when, after many months of suffering, they had amassed as much pure gold as they could carry, they walked painfully and wearily through bush and plain for a hundred and sixty miles, until they came to a city with a few thousand inhabitants, where, skeletons among men, they told their story, and for the first time showed their treasure. Delirium seized the city; men became almost frantic with excitement; and the next day half the inhabitants were making preparations to journey to Tom Tiddler's ground. Surely enough the river's banks proved a veritable gold-mine; and after a time fresh discoveries were made. Came there one day a man, almost dead, from the snow mountains, with lumps of gold in his pockets; but the perils of those regions were great, and men thought twice before they ventured. Life, after all, is more precious than gold. Some adventurers went forth: and never returned to tell their story. Then it was said they were killed by starvation, not by the perils of the weather; or because they had no guns, and tents, and blankets with them. Said some, 'Let us take food sufficient for months, and whatever else is necessary.' They took more; they took wives, those who had them. Believe me, woman was worth more than her weight in gold. So in the summer they went into Campbell's Ranges, and pitched their tents there. And those they left behind them, wrapt in their eager hunt for gold, forgot them for a time. The town nearest to the Ranges was many miles away; it was composed of a couple of score of tents and huts, and perhaps two hundred persons lived there. Wandered into it, looking about him strangely, wistfully--for old-world's ways were upon him, and old-world thoughts were stirring in his mind--a man, tall, blue-eyed, strong; No man is long a stranger in the new world, and this wayfarer talked to one and another, and heard from a butcher the story of the two adventurers working on the river's banks until they were worn to skin and bone.

'But they got gold!' exclaimed the new-comer.

'Almost more than they could carry,' was the answer.

The man looked about him restlessly; the eager longing of his soul was for gold, but in him it was no base craving.

'If one could get into the mountains now,' he said, 'where the gold comes from!'

Said the butcher: 'Some went, and didn't come back.'

'They lie over there?' said the man, looking towards the hills.

'Ay,' replied the butcher, 'them's Campbell's Ranges, There's a party prospecting there now, I've heard. They'll get gold, sure; but it requires courage.'

'Courage!' exclaimed the man, not scornfully and arrogantly, but sweetly and gently. 'Who dares not, deserves not. And when a great thing is at stake!---- Thank you, mate. Good-day!'

And then he walked in the direction of Campbell's Ranges, stopping to buy a little flour on his way. He could not afford much; his means were very small.

The rough diggers often spoke among themselves of the manner of his first coming to them. They were working in the gullies, which were rich with gold; some were burrowing at the bottom

of their mines, some were standing by the windlasses, hauling up the precious dirt. They had been working so from sunrise, and their hearts were light; for the future was as glowing as the bright colours of the sun were when they turned out to work--as glowing as the beautiful colours in the sky were now. It was sunset. The gold-diggers standing in the sun's light, with strong chests partly bared, with strong arms wholly so, were working with a will. Now and then snatches of song burst from their lips, now and then jests and good-humoured words were flung from one to the other. The women were busy outside their tents, lighting fires to prepare for supper; three or four children were playing with a goat and a dog; a cat--yes, a cat!--stepped cautiously out of a tent, and gazed solemnly about. And all around them and above them were the grand hills and mountains, stretching for miles on every side. It was a wonderful life amidst wonderful scenes. Close contact with the grandeur of nature and with its sublime influences humanised many of the rough men, and melted them to awe and tenderness. The hills were full of echoes; when the thunder came the titanic hollows sent the news forth and brought it back again: it was like God's voice speaking with eternal majesty. As the diggers looked up from their work, they saw, upon one of the nearest peaks, a man standing, with sunset colours all around him.

MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD, PURER THAN DIAMONDS, ARE THESE SWEET AND DELICATE WAYS.

Their first thought was, 'Is he alone? Are there more behind him?' for they were jealous of being overwhelmed by numbers. He looked down upon the busy workers, and with slow and painful steps came across the hills, and down the valley towards them. Pale, patient-looking, footsore, ragged, and with deep lines on his face, he stood in the midst of them, a stranger among the hills.

'Are these Campbell's Ranges?' he asked humbly.

'Yes, mate.'

The man who answered him had just emptied a bucket of fresh-dug earth on to a little hillock by the side of his mine. The stranger saw specks of gold among it. There was no envy in the look that came into his eyes. It was like a prayer.

'Where do you come from?' asked the gold-digger.

The stranger mentioned the name of the town.

'Did you come in search of us?'

'I heard that there was a party of men working in Campbell's Ranges, and that there was plenty of gold here; so I came.'

'By yourself?'

'By myself. I know no one. I have been but a short time in the colony.'

'You have no tent?'

'I had no money to buy one.' He murmured these words in so soft a tone that the gold-digger did not hear them.

'No blankets?'

'For the same reason.'

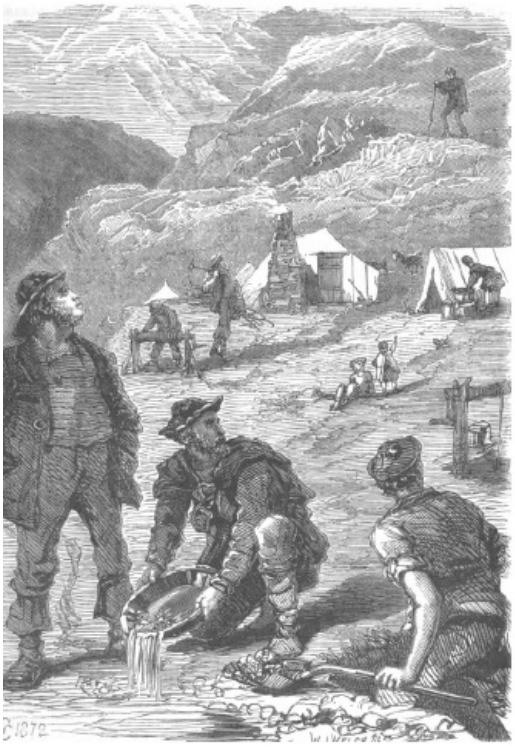
Again he murmured the reply, so that the questioner did not know his destitute condition.

'No pick or shovel?'

The stranger shook his head sadly, and was turning away, when the gold-digger said:

'Well, mate, the place is open to all; but we want to keep ourselves as quiet as possible.'

'I shall tell no one.'



He turned from the worker, and sat himself upon the ground at a short distance from the human hive, out of hearing. The gold-diggers spoke to one another, and looked at him, but made no advance towards him. The women also raised their heads and cast many a curious glance at the stranger, who sat apart from them. He, on his part, sent many a wistful glance in their direction, and watched the fires and the children playing. Behind the hills sank the sun, and night drained the fiery peaks of every drop of blood. Before the hills grew white, the gold-diggers left off work, and contrary to their usual custom, took their buckets and tools to their tents, and took the ropes from their windlasses. There was a stranger near them.

'He seems decent,' said the women.

'You can never tell,' replied the men, shaking their heads in doubt.

Now and then they came from their tents to see if the stranger were still there. He had not moved. It was from no want of humanity that they did not call to him, and offer him food and a shelter. How did they know that he did not belong to a party of bushrangers, whose object was plunder? They let off their firearms and reloaded them. But if they had known this man's heart and mind; if they had known that he was penniless, friendless, that his feet were sore, and that he had not tasted food since yesternight; if they had known the trouble of his soul, and the dim hope which kept up his heart and his strength--they would have played the part of good Samaritans without a moment's hesitation. The darker shadows came down upon the valleys, and wrapt the man and his misery from their gaze and comprehension. They could see the faint outline of his form: nothing more. What were his thoughts during this time? 'They suspect me; it is natural. If I can keep my strength, I may find gold tomorrow, and then they will sell me food perhaps. If not----there are women among them. I may be able to touch their hearts.' He gazed around and above him--at the solemn hills, at the solemn sky, and thought, 'For myself I should be content to die here, and now. But for her--for her! Give me strength, great God--sustain me!' He knelt, and buried his face in his hands; and when the moon rose, as it did soon after, it shone upon his form. A woman, standing at the door of her tent, was the first to see him in his attitude of supplication. She hurried in to her husband, who was nursing a little daughter on his knee.

'David,' she said, 'that man is praying. There can be no harm in him, and he has no shelter. He may be in want of food.'

'Poor man!' said the little daughter.

The father lifted her gently from his knee, and went out without a word. The touch of a hand upon his shoulder roused the stranger, and he looked into David's face.

'What are you doing?' asked David.

'Praying.'

'For what?'

'For strength, for comfort I need both. Turn your face from me! I am breaking down!'

A great sob came from the stranger's heart. David, with averted face, stood steady and silent for full five minutes. Then placed his hand upon the stranger's shoulder, and spoke:

'Come with me. I can give you a shelter to-night. My wife sent me to you.'

'God bless her!'

'Amen. Come, mate.'

The stranger rose, and they walked together to the tent, where the woman and child awaited them. The stranger took off his cap--it was in tatters--and looked at the woman and her child, and stooped and kissed the little girl, who put her hand on his face, and said pityingly:

'Poor man! Are you hungry?'

'Yes, my child.'

That the man and the woman should turn their backs suddenly upon him and make a perfectly unnecessary clatter, and become unnecessarily busy, touched the stranger's sensitive heart, and the unspoken words were in his mind, 'God be thanked! There is much good in the world.'

More precious than gold, purer than diamonds, are these sweet and delicate ways.

'Now, David,' cried the woman briskly, 'supper's ready.'

And David and his wife, notwithstanding that they had made their meal an hour ago, sat down with the stranger, and ate and drank with him. When supper was over, David said:

'We'll not talk to-night; you must be tired. You slept out last night, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'And without a blanket, I'll bet!'

'Yes.'

'A good night's rest will do you good.'

Upon this hint his wife brought some blankets, and gave them to the stranger. She and her husband and child slept in the back part of the small tent, the wall of division being strips of green baize. Before turning in, David said:

'You had best have a look round you in the morning; I can lend you a pick and shovel. My name's David.'

'Mine is Saul Fielding.'

* * * * *

By his patience and gentleness he soon made his way to the hearts of the residents in this small colony. First, the children loved him; the liking of the mothers followed naturally; and within a month every man there was his friend. Love is not hard to win. Try, you who doubt. Try, with gentleness and kindness, and with charitable heart.

* * * * *

It is full three months after Saul' Fielding's introduction to the small settlement in Campbell's Ranges. Of human beings there are fifty souls, all told. Four women--wives--seven children, and thirty-nine men. Of other living creatures there are at least a dozen dogs--(what is your gold-field without its dogs?)--three goats, wise, as all goats are, in their generation, a large number of poultry (some of them in the shell), and a cat. The shade of Whittington would rejoice if it knew that this cat cost an ounce of gold--and a pinch over.

It is June and winter, and the snow-season is in its meridian. The workers are snow-bound; the heights all around them are more than man-deep in snow. But they have no fear. They have made wise preparations for the coming of the enemy, and up to the present time they have escaped hurt. They have wood and provisions to last them for full six months. That they are cut off from the world for a time daunts them not. Their courage is of the Spartan kind. They have been successful far beyond their expectations, and nearly every man there is worth his hundred ounces of gold. Some have more, a few less. Saul has eighty ounces, and he keeps it next to his heart,

sewn in his blue serge shirt David's wife reproved him once for carrying the weight about.

'It is nearly seven pounds weight, Saul Fielding,' she said; 'it must weigh you down.'

'Weigh me down, David's wife! he replied, with a sweet look in his eyes. 'It is a feather's weight. It bears me up! It is not mine; it belongs to the dearest woman in the world. The little bag that contains it contains my salvation!'

David and Saul were mates; they dug and shared, and he lived with the father, mother, and child. The man he called David, the woman David's wife, the child David's daughter. He said to David's wife one day:

'When I go home and join my dear woman, she and I every night of our lives will call down a blessing for David and David's wife, and David's daughter.'

He often said things to David's wife that brought tears to her eyes.

'We shall go home, too,' said David's wife, 'and we shall see her.'

'Please God,' returned Saul, and whispered, 'Come, happy time!'

How tender his heart grew during this time! How he blessed God for His goodness! What beauty he saw in every evidence of the great Creator! He made the rough men better, and often in the evening they would gather round him while he read to them, and talked with them. The Sabbath-day, from the time he came among them, was never passed without prayer. And so they had gone on during the summer and the autumn, digging and getting gold, singing songs to the hills while they dug and delved; the men had built stronger huts for the women and children, in anticipation of the winter, and they all lived happily together. Then the snow began to fall. It came light at first, and dropped softly to the ground round about the huts of the small community, as if it were bringing to them a message of love from the clear bright sky. They laughed when they saw it, for it warmed their hearts with visions of the dear old land over the seas. It brought back to them memories of their schoolboy days. 'After the snow,' they said, 'the primroses;' and in their fancy they saw the old country's sweet flower: The children played with it, and pelted each other with snow-balls, and the men joined in the sport. The goats scampered up the hills in mad delight, and sent snow-sprays in the air with their hoofs. The women looked on lovingly, and the little gully was filled with pleasant mirth; and the echoes laughed after them. At night they clustered round their fires, and raised up pictures for the future. They talked of their gold, not greedily, but gratefully; they blessed the land which gave them its treasures willingly; and in their dreams they dreamed of dear old England and of the dear faces at home--the dear old faces which would smile upon them again by and by, please God! And while they dreamt, and while their hearts were light, and while within them reigned the peace which came from pleasant thought, the soft snow fell and fell. Day after day passed, week after week, and still it fell. After many weeks had thus passed, Saul woke in terror one night. He did not know what, had occasioned the fear that was upon him. Was it caused by a dream? He could remember none. He felt as if a spirit's voice had spoken to him. He rose and listened. He heard nothing. Everything around was wrapt in peace and silence. Softly he dressed himself, so as not to disturb the sleepers, and went out of the tent. The snow was falling fast. How white and pure were the hills! In the far distance they and the sky seemed one. He took a pole, and feeling his way carefully, walked across the near hills, ankle deep, knee deep, waist deep, breast deep. And yet he had not walked far, not five hundred yards. The terror that was upon him now assumed a tangible shape. He was in a snow prison! Nature held him fast; had built up barriers between him and Jane. Was it destined that he should never get away from these snow-bound hills? Suppose the snow continued to fall for weeks and months! 'Jane!' he cried. And the echoes cried 'Jane! Jane!' dying away mournfully. The sound frightened him, and he called no more. Then his reason came back to him. They could keep the snow away from their tents; all they had to do was to shovel it down; all they had to do was to be vigilant. He comforted himself with this thought, and slowly, painfully, retraced his steps to his tent, and crept among his blankets again. As he lay, he heard a moan. How every little sound frightened him! It was but the wind. But the moan grew louder, grew into a shriek, and rushed past the tent, and over the hills, like an angry spirit. And it brought the Snow-Drift with it! But he did not think of that, as he lay shivering. He did not know the new danger that threatened him. 'God shield you, dear woman!' he murmured, as he fell into a doze. 'God bring me to you!'

All night long the wind shrieked and whistled through the tents; the men, tired out with their exertions, did not wake. But the women did, and lay and trembled. David's wife awoke.

'David!' she whispered, but he did not hear her.

'What's the matter, mother?' murmured her daughter.

'Nothing, child, nothing. It's only the wind. Hush! we mustn't wake father. Go to sleep, darling!'

The sun rose late the next morning, and a dim blood-veil was in the sky, which made some of them think that it was night still. The miners found the snow round their huts to be three feet deep. They looked anxious at this.

'We can master the snow,' they whispered to one another, 'but the snow-drift will master us.'

Even as they spoke, the wind, which had lulled, began to moan again, and before they had been working an hour shovelling away the snow, the wind-storm, bringing the snow with it from the heights over which it rushed, blinded them, and drove them into their tents for shelter. They could not hold their feet. 'Let us hope it'll not last long,' they said; and they took advantage of every lull to work against their enemy, not like men, but like heroes.

'What makes you so downcast, Saul?' asked David; he had not begun to lose heart.

Saul looked in silence at David's wife and David's daughter; they were at the far end of the hut.

'You are not frightened, Saul, surely?' said David.

'Not for my self, David,' whispered Saul. 'But tell me. What kind of love do you bear for your wife and child?' David's look was sufficient answer. 'I have a perfect love for a woman also, David. If she were here, as your wife is with you, I could bear it, and so could she. David, we are beset by a terrible danger. Listen to the wind. I am afraid we may never get out of this.'

David's lips quivered, but he shook away the fear.

'We mustn't lose heart, Saul, and we must keep this danger from the wife and little one. There's men's work before us, and we must do it--like men!'

'Trust me, David,' said Saul; 'my heart beats to the pulse of a willing hand;' and said no more.

The wind-storm continued all the day with such violence, that it was impossible for the men to work. As the day advanced, the blood-veil in the sky died away, and when the night came, the moon's light shone clear and cruel, bright and pitiless.

Worn out with hard toil and anxiety, Saul Fielding lay down that night, and tried to sleep. 'I must have strength for to-morrow,' he thought. The fierce wind had grown faint, and it moaned now among the hills like a weak child. Saul smiled gladly, and accepted it as a good omen. He hugged his gold close, and vowed that he would not risk another season of such danger. 'If I do not get an ounce more,' he thought, 'I will be content. What I have will be sufficient for the home and for Jane. Jane, dear Jane!' Her name always came to him like a prayer, and with 'Jane' on his lips, and 'Jane' in his thoughts, he fell asleep and dreamt of her. He dreamt that he and the others had escaped from their snow-prison, and that he was on his way home. Blue waters were beneath him, bright clouds were above him, a fresh breeze was behind him, and the ship dipped into the sea and rose from it, like a light-hearted god. The sailors were singing, and he sang with them as he lent a hand with the ropes. He looked across the sea and saw Jane standing on a far-off shore, with glad face turned towards him. 'I am coming, Jane! he cried, and she smiled, and held out her arms to him. Nearer and nearer he approached to the haven of his hopes; nearer and nearer, until, although they were divided by many miles of water, he could speak to her, and hear her speak. 'See!' he cried, and held out his bag of gold. As she raised her eyes with thankfulness to the heavens, David's wife and David's daughter appeared suddenly by his side. 'Here are the friends who saved me, Jane,' he cried. 'David is below, asleep, and his wife is here, knowing your story and mine. She insists upon saying that you are her sister; she is a good woman. The shame of the past is gone.' As he said these words, a sudden and terrible wind sprang up; and the dark clouds, rushing down from the heavens, shut Jane from his sight. In a moment everything was changed. The ship seemed as if it were being torn to pieces; the waters rose; and the cries of the sailors were indistinguishable amidst the roaring of the wind. 'My God!' he heard David's wife cry, and at that moment he awoke, and rising swiftly to his feet, saw a candle alight in the tent, and David's wife standing in her nightdress on his side of the green baize which divided the tent. Her face was white with terror. 'My God!' she cried again; 'we are lost!' The storm that had arisen in his dream was no fancy. It was raging now among the hills furiously.

'Go into your room,' said Saul hurriedly. 'I will be dressed in a minute.'

In less than that space of time he was up and dressed, and then David tore the green baize aside.

'Saul,' he said, 'this is terrible!' And stepping to Saul's side, whispered, 'If this continues long, our grave is here.'

Saul went to the door of the tent, and tried to open it; he could not. The wind had brought with it thousands and thousands of tons of snow from the heights, and they were, walled up. Saul felt all round the sides of the tent. The snow was man-high. Only the frail drill of which the tent was made kept it from falling in, and burying them. In an instant Saul comprehended their dread peril.

'The tree!' he cried, as if an inspiration had fallen upon him. 'The tree!'

Just outside the tent, between it and the tent next to it, stood a great pine-tree, the only tree among the tents. Many a time had it been suggested to cut down this tree for firewood, but David had prevented it. 'Wait,' he had said, 'until we want it; when firewood runs short, and we can't

get it elsewhere, it will be time enough.' So the tree had been saved from the axe, and stood there like a giant, defying the storm, Saul piled up the rough seats and the tables which comprised the furniture of the tent, and climbing to the top of them, cut a great hole in the roof of the tent. It was daylight above, and the snow was falling fast Saul saw the noble tree standing fast and firm in the midst of the storm. With a desperate leap he caught a branch, and raised himself above the tent. And when he looked upon the awful scene, upon the cruel white snow in which the tents all around him were embedded, and nearly buried, his heart throbbed despairingly.

But this was no time for despair. It was the time for action. When he had secured his position in the tree, he stooped over the tent.

'David!' he cried. David's voice answered him.

'This is our only chance,' he said loudly; he spoke slowly and distinctly, so that those within the tent might hear him. 'Here we maybe able to find safety until the storm abates and the snow subsides. Listen to me, and do exactly as I say. Get some provisions together and some water; and the little brandy that is left. Make them up in a bundle. Tie rope and cord round it, and let me have it. Quickly!'

Before he finished speaking, David's wife was busy attending to his instructions.

'Answer me, Saul,' cried David. 'What do you see of our mates?'

Saul groaned, 'Do not ask me, David! Let us thank God that this tree was left standing.'

David climbed on to the table in a few minutes, with the bundle of provisions in his hands. He was lifting it for Saul to take hold when the pile upon which he was standing gave way, and he fell heavily to the ground.

At this moment, a movement in the tent nearest to the tree arrested Saul's attention. One of the men inside had thought also of the tree, and had adopted Saul's expedient of cutting through the roof of the tent. His head now appeared above the rent. He saw Saul, but he was too far away to reach the tree.

'Give me a hand, mate!' he cried. 'Give me a hand, for God's sake!'

'One moment,' replied Saul, deeply anxious for the fate of David, for he heard the generous-hearted digger groan, and heard David's wife sobbing. 'Keep your hold and stand firm for a little while. You are safe there for a time. There is something here in my own tent I must see to at once.' Then he called, 'David! David! Are you hurt?'

The voice of David's wife answered him with sobs and cries. 'He can't move, Saul! He can't move! O, my poor dear David! He has broken his leg, he says, and his back is hurt. What shall I do? O, what shall I do?'

But although she asked this question, she--true wife and woman as she was--was attending to the sufferer, not thinking of herself.

'God pity us!' groaned Saul, and raised his hand to the storm. 'Pity us! pity us! he cried.

But the pitiless snow fell, and the soft flakes danced in the air.

Then Saul cried, 'David's wife! The child! the child!'

'Let me be, wife,' said David; 'I am easier now. Pile up those seats again; make them firm. Don't hurry. I can wait I am in no pain. Lift our little daughter to Saul, and the provisions afterwards.'

She obeyed him; she piled the seats one above another. Then brought the child to David. He took her in his arms, and kissed her again and again.'

'My pet! my darling!' he moaned. 'Kiss father, little one!'

And the rough man pressed this link of love to his heart, and kissed her face, her hands, her neck, her lips.

'Now, wife,' he said, and resigned their child to her. David's wife stood silent for a few moments with the child in her arms, and murmured a prayer over her, and blessed her, and then, keeping down her awful grief bravely like a brave woman, climbed to the height, and raised her arms to Saul with the child in them. Only her bare arms could be seen above the tent's roof.

'Come, little one,' said Saul, and stooping down, at the risk of his life, clutched the child from the mother's arms, and heard the mother's heart-broken sobs.

'Is she safe, Saul?'

'She is safe, dear woman.'

Other heads rose from other tents and turned despairingly about. But no help for them was near. They were in their grave.

David's wife raised the provisions to Saul, and went down to her husband.

'Wife,' said David, 'leave me, and see if you can reach Saul. It will be difficult, but you may be able to manage it.'

She looked at him tenderly.

'My place is here, David,' she said; 'I shall stay with you, and trust to God. Our child is safe, in the care of a good man.'

He tried to persuade her, but she shook her head sweetly and sadly, and simply said, 'I know my duty.' He could say no more, for the next moment he swooned, his pain was so great. Then his wife knelt by him, and raised his head upon her lap.

Meanwhile, the man in the next tent who had called to Saul to give him a hand had not been idle. He found a plank and was raising it to the roof, with the purpose of resting it upon a branch of the tree. As with more than a man's strength he lifted the plank forward, Saul heard a thud beneath him, and looking down saw that the walls of the tent in which David and his wife were had given way, and that the snow was toppling over. He turned his head; he was powerless to help them. The tears ran down his face and beard, and he waited, awe-struck by the terror of the time. He thought he heard the voice of David's wife cry,

'Good-bye, my child! God preserve you!'

In a choking voice, he said solemnly to David's little daughter,

'Say, God bless you, mother and father!'

'The child repeated the words in a whisper, and nestled closer to Saul, and said,

'I'm so cold! Where's mother and father? Why don't they come up?

Saul, with a shiver, looked down. Nothing of David or of David's wife did he see. The tent was not in sight. The snow had covered it. And still it fell, and still it drifted.

The digger who occupied the next tent had fined his plank; not a moment was to be lost; his tent was cracking. Creeping along the plank, with the nervous strength of desperation, clinging to it like a cat, he reached the tree and was saved for a time. As he reached it, the plank slipped into the snow. And still it fell, and rose higher and higher. Men signalled to each other from tent to tent, and bade God bless each other, for they felt that, unless the snowdrift and snowfall should instantly cease, there was no hope for them. But still it fell; fell softly into the holes in the canvas roofs and sides, into the chambers below; crept up to them inch by inch; wrapt yellow gold and mortal flesh in soft shrouds of white, and hid the adventurers from the light of day.

Only three remained. Soul, and David's little daughter, in the uppermost branches of the tree. The digger from the nearest tent clinging to a lower branch.

This man was known by the name of Edward Beaver; a silent man at best, and one who could not win confidence readily. His face was covered with hair fast turning gray. Between him and Saul but little intercourse had taken place. Saul had not been attracted by Beaver's manner, although often when he looked at the man, a strange impression came upon him that he knew the face. Saul spoke to Beaver once, and asked him where he cane from; but Beaver answered him roughly, and Saul spoke to him no more. In this dread time, however, Beaver's tongue was loosened.

'This is awful,' he said, looking up at Saul.

Saul looked down upon the white face which was upturned to his, and the same strange impression of its being familiar to him stole upon him like a subtle vapour. An agonising fear was expressed in Beaver's countenance; he was frightened of death. He was weak, too, having just come out of a low fever, and it needed all his strength to keep his footing on the tree.

'Do you think we shall die here?' he asked.

'I see no hope,' replied Saul, pressing David's little daughter to his breast. The child had fallen to sleep. Saul's soul was too much troubled for converse, and the morning passed almost in silence. Saul lowered some food and drink to Beaver. 'I have very little brandy,' he said; 'but you shall share and share.' And when Beaver begged for more, he said, 'No, not yet; I must husband it. Remember, I have another life here in my arms to care for.'

The day advanced, and the storm continued; not a trace of the tents or of those who lay buried in them could be seen. The cruel white snow had made a churchyard of the golden gully!

Night fell, and brought darkness with it; and in the darkness Saul shuddered, with a new and sudden fear, for he felt something creeping up to him. It was Beaver's voice creeping up the tree, like an awful shadow.

'Saul Fielding,' it said, 'my time has come. The branches are giving way, and I am too weak to hold on.'

'God help you, Edward Beaver,' said Saul pityingly.

And David's little daughter murmured in her sleep, 'What's that, mother?' Saul hushed her by singing in a soft tender voice a nursery rhyme, and the child smiled in the dark, and her arms tightened round Saul's neck. It was a good thing for them that they were together; the warmth of their bodies was a comfort, and in some measure a safeguard to them.

When Saul's soft singing was over, he heard Beaver sobbing, beneath him. 'I used to sing that once,' the man sobbed in weak tones, 'to my little daughter.'

'Where is she now?' asked Saul, thinking of those he loved at home.

'Bessie! Bessie!' cried Beaver faintly. 'Where are you? O my God! if I could live my life over again!'

Saul thought of George's Bessie as he asked, 'Where do you come from? What part do you belong to?'

It was a long time before he received an answer, and then the words crept up to him, faint and low, through the darkness, as though the speaker's strength were waning fast.

'From London--from Westminster.'

'From Westminster!' echoed Saul, and Beaver's face appeared to his imagination.

'I must tell you,' gasped the dying man; 'I must tell you before I die. You may be saved, and you will take my message home.'

'I will, if I am spared,' replied Saul, in a voice which had no hope in it.

'I have been a bad son and a bad father. My name is not Beaver--it is Sparrow, and my father, if he is alive, lives in Westminster.'

'Old Ben Sparrow, the grocer!' cried Saul, in amazement 'I know him! I saw him a few weeks before last Christmas. You are Bessie Sparrow's father; I thought your face was familiar to me.'

'Bad son! bad father!' muttered the man. 'O my God! the tree is sinking! the branch is giving way! Tell me, quickly, for mercy's sake. My daughter--Bessie--she is alive, then? Tell me of her.'

'She was well when I saw her,' replied Saul, with a groan, thinking of George and his lost

hopes. 'She has grown into a beautiful woman.'

'Thank God! If you ever see her again, tell her of me--ask my father to forgive me. Take the love of a dying man to them. I have gold about me--it is theirs. Say that I intended to come home, and ask forgiveness, but it has been denied me. God has punished me! I am sinking!----'

A cry of agony followed, and the wind took it up, and carried it over the hills. Then all was hushed, and the erring son and father spoke no more.

Saul offered up a prayer for Bessie's father, and waited sadly for *his* time to come.

As the night waned, the fierce wind grew softer, and sighed and moaned, repentant of the desolation it had caused. What a long, long night it was! But at length the morning's light appeared, and then Saul, looking down, saw that he and David's little daughter were the only ones left. Stronger grew the light, until day had fairly dawned. As Saul looked over the white expanse, he felt that there was no hope for him, and his mind began to wander. Long-forgotten incidents of his childhood came to him; he saw his father and mother, long since dead; he saw a brother who had died when he himself was a child; he saw Jane as she was when he first met her, as she was on that sad night when she told him of the duty that lay before him; he saw George and the lights on Westminster-bridge. All these visions rose for him out of the snow. And fields and flowers came, and he wandered among them hand in hand with Jane, as they had done on one happy holiday. It did not seem strange to him that there was no colour in any of these things; it caused no wonder in his mind that all these loved ones and the fields and flowers, perfect in form and shape, were colourless, were white and pure as the snow which stretched around him on every side. They were dear memories all of them; emblems of purity. And in that dread time he grew old; every hour was a year. But in the midst of all the terror of the time he pressed David's little daughter closer and closer to his breast, and committed their souls to God. So that day passed, and the night; and the sun rose in splendour. The white hills blushed, like maidens surprised. With wild eyes and fainting soul, Saul looked around; suddenly a flush of joy spread over his face. Upon a distant mount, stood Jane. 'Come!' he cried. And as Jane walked over the snow hills towards him, he waited and waited until she was close to him; then sinking in her arms, he fell asleep.

PART III.

I HAVE COME TO RETURN YOU SOMETHING.

On the afternoon of the day on which the Queen of the South (with George Naldret in it, as was supposed) sailed out of the Mersey for the southern seas, young Mr. Million, with a small bouquet of choice flowers in his hand, made his appearance in the old grocer's shop. Ben Sparrow, who was sitting behind his counter, jumped up when the young brewer entered, and rubbed his hands and smirked, and comported himself in every way as if a superior being had honoured him with his presence. Young Mr. Million smiled pleasantly, and without the slightest condescension. The cordiality of his manner was perfect.

'Quite a gentleman,' thought old Ben; 'every inch a gentleman!'

Said young Mr. Million: 'As I was passing your way, I thought I would drop in to see how you and your granddaughter are.'

'It's very kind and thoughtful of you, sir,' replied old Ben Sparrow. 'Of course, we're a bit upset at George's going. Everything is at sixes and sevens, and will be, I daresay, for a few days. Bessie's inside'--with a jerk of his head in the direction of the parlour--'she's very sad and low, poor dear.'

'We mustn't let her mope, Mr. Sparrow,' remarked young Mr. Million, striking up a partnership at once with the old grocer.

'No, sir,' assented Ben; 'we mustn't let her mope; it ain't good for the young--nor for the old, either. But it's natural she should grieve a bit. You see, sir,' he said confidentially, 'George is the

only sweetheart Bessie's ever had. She ain't like some girls, chopping and changing, as if there's no meaning in what they do.'

'We must brighten her up, Mr. Sparrow. It wouldn't be a bad thing, if you were to take her for a drive in the country, one fine day. The fresh air would do her good.'

'It would do her good, sir. But I couldn't leave the shop. Business is dreadfully dull, and I can't afford to lose a chance of taking a few shillings--though, with the way things are cut down, there's very little profit got nowadays. Some things almost go for what they cost. Sugar, for instance. I don't believe I get a ha'penny a-pound out of it.'

Young Mr. Million expressed his sympathy, and said it ought to be looked to. He would speak to his father, who was a 'friend of the working-man, you know.'

'I don't know how to thank you, sir,' said Ben gratefully. 'Indeed, I haven't thanked you yet for the kindness you----'

'I don't want to be thanked,' interrupted young Mr. Million vivaciously. 'I hate to be thanked! The fact is, Mr. Sparrow, I am an idle young dog, and it will always give me pleasure to do you any little service in my power. I will go in, and say How do you do? to Miss Sparrow, if you will allow me.'

'Allow you, sir!' exclaimed Ben. 'You're always welcome here.'

'I brought this little bunch of flowers for her. Flowers are scarce now, and the sight of them freshens one up. Although, Mr. Sparrow, your granddaughter is a brighter flower than any in this bunch!'

'That she is, sir; that she is,' cried Ben, in delight; adding to himself, under his breath, 'Every inch a gentleman! His kindness to George and me is a-maz-ing--A-MAZ-ING!'

The idle young dog, entering the parlour, found Bessie very pale and very unhappy. She was unhappy because of the manner of her parting from George last night; unhappy and utterly miserable because of the poisoned dagger which had been planted in her heart.

'I was passing through Covent garden,' said the idle young dog, in gentle tones, thinking how pretty Bessie looked even in her sorrow, 'and seeing these flowers, I thought you would do me the pleasure to accept them.'

Bessie thanked him, and took them listlessly from his hand. Tottie, who was playing at 'shop' in a corner of the room, weighing sand in paper scales, and disposing of it to imaginary customers as the best fourpenny-ha'penny moist (is this ever done in reality, I wonder!), came forward to see and smell the flowers. The idle young dog seized upon Tottie as a pretext for taking a seat, and, lifting the child on his knee, allowed her to play with his watch-chain, and opened his watch for her, and put it to her ear, so that she might hear it tick--a performance of which she would never have tired. His manner towards Bessie was very considerate and gentle, and she had every reason to be grateful to him, for he had been a good friend to her grandfather and her lover. Certainly he was one of the pleasantest gentlemen in the world, and he won Tottie's heart by giving her a shilling--the newest he could find in his pocket. Tottie immediately slipped off his knee, and went to her corner to brighten the coin with sand; after the fashion of old Ben Sparrow, who often polished up a farthing with sand until he could see his face in it, and gave it to Tottie as a golden sovereign. Tottie valued it quite as much as she would have done if it had been the purest gold.

The idle young dog did not stay very long; he was no bungler at this sort of idling, and he knew the value of leaving a good impression behind him. So, after a quarter of an hour's pleasant chat, he shook hands with Bessie, and as he stood smiling at her, wishing her good-day, with her hand in his, the door suddenly opened, and George Naldret appeared.

His face was white and haggard, and there was a wild grief in his eyes. The agony through which he had passed on the previous night seemed to have made him old in a few hours. He stood there silent, looking at Bessie and young Mr. Million, and at their clasped hands. It was but for a moment, for Bessie, with a startled cry--a cry that had in it pain and horror at the misery in his face--had taken her hand from young Mr. Million's palm; it was but for a moment, but the new expression that overspread George's face like an evil cloud was the expression of a man who had utterly lost all faith and belief in purity and goodness: and had thus lost sight of Heaven.

Bessie divined its meaning, and gave a gasp of agony, but did not speak. Not so, young Mr. Million.

'Good Heavens!' he cried, with a guilty look which he could not hide from George's keen gaze. 'George, what has happened?'

George looked at young Mr. Million's outstretched hand, and rejected it disdainfully and with absolute contempt. Then looked at the flowers on the table--hothouse flowers he knew they were--then into Bessie's face, which seemed as if it were carved out of gray-white stone, so fixed did it grow in his gaze--then at the earrings in her ears: and a bitter, bitter smile came to his lips--a

smile it was pity to see there.

'These are pretty flowers,' he said, raising them from the table; in the intensity of his passion his fingers closed upon the blooming things, and in a moment more he would have crushed them--but he restrained himself in time, and let them drop from his strongly-veined hand. 'I beg pardon,' he said, 'they are not mine. Even if they belong to you--which they do, of course--I can have no claim on them now.'

He addressed himself to Bessie, but she did not answer him. She had never seen in his face what she saw now, and she knew that it was the doom of her love and his.

'I have come to return you something,' he said, and took from his breast a pretty silk purse. It was hung round his neck by a piece of black silk cord, and he did not disengage it readily. It almost seemed as if it wished not to be taken from its resting-place.

As he held it in his hand, he knew that his life's happiness was in it, and that he was about to relinquish it. And as he held it, there came to Bessie's mind the words he had spoken only the night before: 'See here, heart's-treasure,' he had said, 'here is the purse you worked for me, round my neck. It shall never leave me--it rests upon my heart. The pretty little beads! How I love them! I shall kiss every piece of gold I put in it, and shall think I am kissing you, as I do now, dear, dearest, best!'

'Take it,' George said now.

She held out her hand mechanically, and as George touched her cold fingers he shivered. Both knew what this giving and taking meant. It meant that all was over between them.

Old Ben Sparrow had come into the room, and had witnessed the scene in quiet amazement; he did not see his way to the remotest understanding of what had passed. But he saw Bessie's suffering, and he moved to her side. When the purse was in her hand he touched her, but she repulsed him gently. Some sense of what was due to herself in the presence of young Mr. Million came to her, and her womanly pride at George's rejection of her in the presence of another man came to her also, and gave her strength for a while.

George's hand was on the door, when young Mr. Million, who was deeply mortified at George's manner towards himself, and who at the same time thought it would be a gallant move to champion Bessie's cause, laid his hand on George's sleeve, and said:

'Stay; you owe me an explanation.'

'Hands off!' cried George, in a dangerous tone, and a fierce gleam in his eyes. 'Hands off, you sneaking dog! I owe you an explanation, do I? I will give it to you when we are alone. Think what kind of explanation it will be when I tell you beforehand that you are a false, lying hound! Take care of yourself when next we meet.'

Every nerve in George's body quivered with passion and pain.

'You can't frighten me with bluster,' said young Mr. Million, who was no coward, 'although you may try to frighten ladies with it. As my presence here is likely to cause farther pain to a lady whom I esteem'--with a respectful look towards Bessie, which caused George to press his nails into his palms--'I will take my leave, unless Mr. Sparrow wishes me to stay as a protection to him and his granddaughter.'

'No, sir; I thank you,' replied Ben Sparrow sorrowfully. 'George Naldret can do my child no more harm than he has done already.'

'Then I will go;' and he moved towards the door, 'first saying, however, that I tried to be this man's friend--'indicating George with a contemptuous motion of his hand, and repeating, 'that I tried to be his friend----'

'You lie!' cried George.

'--Thinking,' continued young Mr. Million, with quiet disdain, 'that he was better than others of his class. But I was mistaken. Mr. Sparrow, you exonerate me from all blame in what has taken place?'

'Entirely, sir,' said Ben Sparrow, in a sad and troubled voice.

'I wish you and your grandchild good-day, then, and leave my hearty sympathy behind me.'

With these words, and with a triumphant look at George, the idle young dog took his departure. Then, after a brief pause, George said:

'I have nothing more to stop for now.'

And, with a look of misery, was about to depart, when Tottie ran to his side, and plucking him by the coat, looked up into his face.

'Don't go,' said Tottie; 'stop and play.'

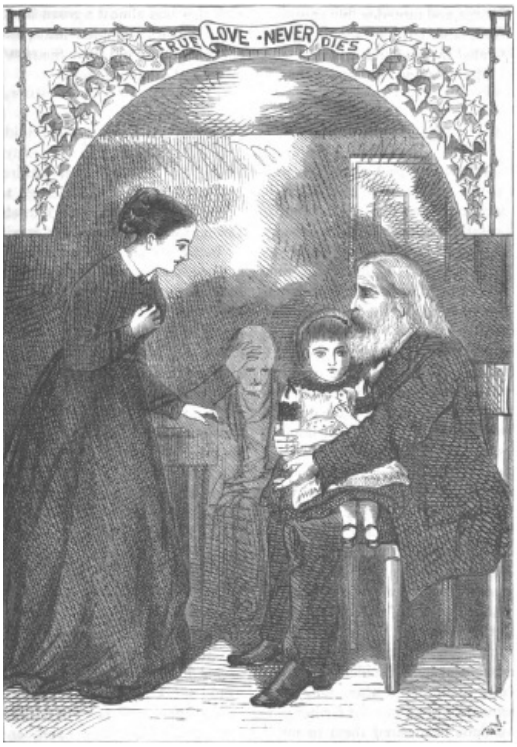
'I can't, my dear,' said George, raising the child in his arms and kissing her. 'I *must* go. Goodbye, little one.'--He set the child down; tears were coming to his eyes, but he kept them back.

'One moment, George Naldret,' said old Ben Sparrow, trying to be dignified, but breaking down. 'George--my dear George--what is the meaning of this?'

'I have no explanation to give, Mr. Sparrow,' replied George sadly.

'George, my dear boy, think for a moment! Are you right in what you are doing? Look at my darling, George; look----'

'Grandfather!'



The word came from Bessie's white lips; but the voice, struggling through her agony, sounded strange in their ears. The word, however, was sufficient; it carried its meaning in it; it told her grandfather not to beg for her of any man.

'You are right, my darling,' he sobbed; 'you are right. But neither of you will speak, and I am almost distracted. You are not going abroad then, George?'

'No, Mr. Sparrow; I have no need to go now.'

Bessie's strength was giving way. Pride, humiliation, wounded love, suspicion of her lover's faith, were conquering her. She held out her trembling hand to her grandfather. He took it, and cried:

'George! George! you are breaking her heart!'

'She has broken mine!' replied George, and turned without another word, and left the room, almost blinded by grief and despair. The moment he was gone, a sigh that was almost a groan broke from Bessie's wounded heart, and she sank into old Ben Sparrow's arms, and fainted there.

WELL, MOTHER, DO YOU WANT ANY WASHING DONE?

When George Naldret was seen in the streets of Westminster, it occasioned, as may be imagined, no little surprise. His neighbours supposed him to be on his way to the other end of the world, and they rather resented his appearance among them, for he had in a certain measure deceived them. He had promised to write to some, to tell them how affairs were over the water; and two or three courageous ones had already made up their minds that if George sent home a good account of things they would sell every stick they had, and make for a land where a brighter future awaited them than they could look forward to here. They would have been satisfied if George had given them an explanation; but this he absolutely refused to do. 'I have altered my mind,' was all they could get from him. 'I may do that if I like, I suppose, and if it don't hurt you.' But some decided that it *did* hurt them; and when they continued to press him for farther particulars, he desired them to mind their own business; and as this was the most difficult task he could set them, it made matters worse. George was too delicate-minded and too honourable to introduce Bessie's name; and when the inquisitive ones mentioned it he turned upon them savagely. It caused quite a commotion in the neighbourhood.

On the first day Mrs. Naldret had tried to persuade George to keep indoors and not show himself. But he said, 'No, mother; it will be better for me to show my face at once, and not shirk the thing.' And his father backed him up in his resolution. When he resolved upon this, he went to his bedroom and locked himself in, and, after much sad communing, decided that the first thing it was incumbent on him to do was to go to Bessie and release her from her promise. Thus it was that he met young Mr. Million in the parlour of the old grocer's shop, where he had spent so many happy hours. He had decided in his mind what to say. He would be gentle and firm with Bessie. And as he walked to old Ben Sparrow's shop, disregarding the looks of astonishment which his first appearance in the streets occasioned, he rehearsed in his mind the exact words he would speak to her. But when he arrived there, and saw Mr. Million smilingly holding her hand, and saw the bunch of rare flowers on the table, he received such a shock that his plans were instantly swept away, and he spoke out of the bitterness of his heart.

How the news got about was a mystery, and how it grew into exaggerated and monstrous forms was a greater mystery still. Who has ever traced to its source the torrent of exciting rumour which, like a rush of waters, flows and swells, unlocking vivid imagination in its course, until reason and fact are lost in the whirl? All sorts of things were said. George was frightened of the water; he was in debt; he had done something wrong at the shop he had been working for, and was not allowed to leave without clearing it up; these, and a hundred other things, were said and commented upon. The peculiarity of this kind of rumour is, that directly a new theory is started it is accepted as a fact, and is taken to pieces and discussed in all its bearings. George was a fruitful theme with the neighbours on that Saturday night and on the following day; they served him up hot (like a new and appetising dish), and so seasoned him and spiced him and garnished him, that it would have made his blood tingle to have known. But he did not know, and did not even suspect. To be sure, when Jim Naldret went to the baker's on the Sunday for his baked shoulder of mutton and potatoes, he heard some remarks which did not please him; but he did not say a word to George, and the mother, father, and son spent a sad and quiet evening together, and went to bed earlier than usual.

On the Monday, the startling intelligence was bandied from one to another that George Naldret and Bessie Sparrow had broken with each other. Bessie had turned him off, it was said; they had had a dreadful quarrel the night before he was to start for Liverpool. But it is not necessary here to set down all the reasons that were given for the breaking of the engagement. Some of them were bad, and all were false. But in the course of the day a little rill was started, which grew and grew, and swelled and swelled, until it swallowed up all the other waters. A rod was thrown down, which becoming instantly quick with life, turned into a serpent, and swallowed all the other serpents. It was said that Bessie had discovered that George had another sweetheart--who she was, where she lived, and how it had been kept secret during all this time, were matters of no importance; but it was first whispered, then spoken aloud and commented on, that this sweetheart should have been something more than a sweetheart to George--she should have been his wife. The reason why she should have been his wife was that George was a father. But where was the child? Rumour decided this instantaneously. The child was no other than our poor little Tottie; and George had basely deceived old Ben Sparrow and Bessie into taking care of the little one by a clever and wicked story that Tottie was an orphan, without a friend in the world. Here was food for the gossippers! How this hot dish was served up, and spiced and seasoned!

It reached George's ears, and he wrote to Ben Sparrow. He said that he had heard some rumours affecting his character; he did not mention what these rumours were, but he said they were wicked lies--wicked, wicked lies, he repeated in his letter. The rumours he referred to may have reached Mr. Sparrow, and might affect the happiness of a poor innocent child--a child innocent as he was himself. If so, he was ready to take the little one from Mr. Sparrow's charge. He said no more, concluding here, almost abruptly. A reply soon came. Ben Sparrow had heard the rumours, and was shocked at them; he believed what George said in his letter. But the child, said old Ben, was a comfort to them: by 'them' he meant himself and Bessie, but he did not mention Bessie's name: it formed the principal part of their happiness now in their little home, and to part with her would cause 'them' great grief and pain. His letter, also, was short and to the point. And so our little Tottie remained with old Ben Sparrow and Bessie, and was even more tenderly cared for than she had been before. Somehow or other, these letters were a great consolation to George and Bessie.

But the gossippers and rumourmongers would not let them alone. They said that George's other sweetheart had declared if he went away she would go with him, and would follow him all over the world. Bessie then was brought in. She had another lover also, a lover she liked better than George. Who should it be but young Mr. Million? He gave her those pretty ear-rings, of course, and he was seen to go into old Ben's shop with beautiful flowers in his hands, and come away without them. Ben Sparrow encouraged him, too. O, it was plain to see what was going on! So both George and Bessie were condemned, and kind gossippers did what they could to keep them from ever coming together again.

George and young Mr. Million met. Young Mr. Million was alone; George had his father with him. The sight of the idle, well-dressed, smiling young dog made George furious. He left his father, and walked swiftly up to his enemy. A policeman was near. Young Mr. Million beckoned to him, and the limb of the law touched his helmet, and came close. Jim Naldret saw the position of affairs in a moment. 'Come along, George,' he said, and linking his arm in that of his son, almost dragged him away. When they reached home, Mrs. Naldret made George promise not to molest young Mr. Million, not even to speak to him. 'No good can come of it, my dear boy,' she said; 'let the scum be! Don't get yourself into trouble for him; he's not worth it. He'll meet with his deserts one day!'

Time passed, and the world went on as usual. George got work at his old shop, and worked hard through the ensuing spring and summer. At that time, murmurs of discontent began to be heard among the builders and carpenters--not only among them, but among the workers in nearly every other trade as well. Labour was on the strike all over the country, and one trade quickly followed the example of another. Jim himself began to murmur; he wanted to know what he was to do when he got old, and couldn't work--for he had found it impossible to put by money for a rainy day.

'Go to the workhouse, I suppose,' he said bitterly.

But Mrs. Naldret said, 'Let be, Jim, let be; what's the use of looking forward? We should be happy enough as it is if it wasn't for George's misfortune. Poor lad! all the salt seems to have gone out of his life.'

In the summer the crisis occurred in the trade; and Jim Naldret came home one day with his hands in his pockets, and said,

'Well, mother, do you want any washing done? I'm on strike.'

'Jim! Jim!' cried Mrs. Naldret 'What have you done? Remember Saul Fielding.'

'Saul Fielding wasn't so wrong, after all,' said Jim; 'I was a bit too hard on him. I can't help myself, mother. I'm obliged to turn out with the others.'

It was well for them that during this time George had saved a little money; but although he gave them every penny he had saved, and although they pledged nearly everything of value they had in the house, they were in debt when the strike was at an end.

'It'll be spring before we're clear, mother,' said Jim; 'we've got to pay this and that, you know.'

Mrs. Naldret knew it well enough, and she began to pinch and save; this little family fought the battle of life well.

Old Ben Sparrow, of course, suffered with the rest. Trade grew duller and duller, and he drifted steadily, got from bad to worse, and from worse to worse than that. Autumn came, and passed, and winter began to make the poor people shiver; for coals were at a wicked price. Down, down, went old Ben Sparrow; sadder and sadder grew his face; and one day, within a fortnight of Christmas--alas! it was just a year from the time when George was nearly going away--Bessie heard a loud and angry voice in the shop. She hurried in, and saw her grandfather trembling behind the counter. The man who had uttered the angry words was quitting the shop. Bessie asked for an explanation.

'It's the landlord, my dear,' he sobbed upon her shoulder, 'it's the landlord. I've been behindhand with the rent ever so long, and I've promised him and promised him, hoping that trade would improve, until he's quite furious, and swears that he'll put a man in possession to-morrow morning.'

'And you can't pay him, grandfather?'

'Bessie, my darling,' sobbed old Ben; 'there isn't eighteenpence in the house, and I owe other money as well. I'm a ruined man, Bessie, I'm a ruined man! And you, my dear!--O, dear! O, dear! what is to become of us?'

And the poor old fellow pleaded to her, and asked her forgiveness a hundred times, as if he were the cause of their misfortunes. No need to say how Bessie consoled and tried to cheer him. She drew him into the parlour, and coaxed and fondled him, and rumpled the little hair he had on his head, and so forgot her own sorrow out of sympathy for his, that he almost forgot it too. But once during the night, while she was sitting on a stool at his feet, he said softly and sadly, 'Ah,

Bess! I wouldn't mind this trouble--I'd laugh at it really--if--if----'

'If what, dear?'

'If you and George were together, my darling.'

She did not reply, but rested her head on his knee, and looked sadly into the scanty fire. She saw no happy pictures in it.

THE MAN IN POSSESSION.

Old Ben Sparrow had genuine cause for his distress. Ruin not only stared him in the face, but laid hold of him with a hard grip. The landlord was as good (or as bad) as his word. He called the following morning for his rent, and as it was not forthcoming, he took an inventory, and put a man in possession. He brought this person in with him. A strange-looking man, with a twelvemonth's growth of hair at least on his face and head, and all of it as white as snow. The faces of Ben Sparrow and Bessie were almost as white as they followed the hard landlord from room to room, like mourners at a funeral. There was first the shop, with very little stock in it, and that little in bad condition. As the landlord said, How could a man expect to do business, and be able to pay his way honestly, when everything he had to sell was stale and mouldy? And old Ben answered humbly:

'Yes, yes, sir; you're quite right, sir. I ought to have known better. It's all my fault, Bessie, my darling; all my fault.' And felt as if, instead of an immediate execution coming to him, he ought to be led off to immediate execution.

'What d'ye call these? asked the landlord contemptuously. 'Figs! Why, they're as shrivelled as--as you are.'

'Yes, yes, sir; quite right, sir. We are, sir, we are; we ought to be put away! We're worth nothing now--nothing now!'

After the shop came the parlour, with the furniture that old Ben had bought for his wedding more than forty years ago; he sobbed as the landlord called out, 'One old armchair, stuffed and rickety!' and said to Bessie: 'Your grandmother's favourite chair, my darling!'

The old fellow could have knelt and kissed the 'one old arm-chair, stuffed and rickety,' he was so tender about it. Then they went into the kitchen; then upstairs to Ben Sparrow's bedroom, and old Ben cried again as 'One old wooden bedstead: wheezy!' went down in the inventory; then into another bedroom, where Bessie and Tottie slept. The man in possession stooped down by the child's bed.

'What are you looking for?' demanded the landlord testily.

'I was thinking the child might be there,' replied the man in possession meekly; 'there *is* a child, isn't there?'

'What if there is!' exclaimed the landlord. 'Can't sell a child. There's no market for them.'

Old Ben explained: 'There is a child. Poor little Tottie! But we've sent her out to a neighbour's, thinking you would come.'

'And might frighten her, eh?' said the landlord. And shortly afterwards took his departure, leaving the man in possession with strict injunctions not to allow a thing to be taken out of the house.

'You're accountable, mind you,' were his last words.

Bessie and her grandfather felt as if the house had been suddenly turned into a prison, and as if this man, with his strange face and snow-white hair, had been appointed their gaoler. As he did not appear to notice them, old Ben beckoned to Bessie, and they crept out of the parlour into the shop for all the world as if they had been found guilty of some desperate crime. In the shop they breathed more freely.

'What are we to do with him, Bessie?' asked Ben. 'What do they generally do with men in possession? They give 'em tobacco and beer, I've heard. O, dear! O, dear! I don't mind for myself, my darling; I don't mind for myself. It's time I was put away. But for you, Bessie--O, my darling child! what have I done to deserve this? What have I done? What have I done?

'Grandfather,' said Bessie firmly, 'you mustn't go on like this. We must have courage. Now,

I've made up my mind what I'm going to do. I'm going to take care of you, dear grandfather, as you have taken care of me. You know how clever I am with my needle, and I intend to get work; and you shall thread my needles for me, grandfather. We can live on very little----'

Her poor white lips began to tremble here, and she kissed the old man again and again, and cried in his arms, to show how courageous she was.

'I beg your pardon,' said a gentle voice behind them. It was the man in possession who spoke. 'I beg your pardon,' he repeated. 'May I beg a word with you in the parlour?'

They dared not for their lives refuse him, and they followed him tremblingly.

'I am aware,' he said then, as they stood before him like criminals, 'that I am here on an unpleasant duty, and that I must appear very disagreeable in your eyes----'

'No, no, sir,' remonstrated Ben, feeling that his fate and Bessie's were in this man's hands; 'don't say that, sir! Quite the contrary, indeed, sir; quite the contrary, eh, Bessie?'

And the arch old hypocrite tried to smile, to show that he was delighted with the man's company.

'--But I assure you,' continued the man, 'that I have no desire to annoy or distress you. I have gone through hardships myself--with a motion of his hand towards his white hair--'as you may see.'

'What is it you want us to do, sir? asked Ben Sparrow. 'I am sure anything you want, such as tobacco or beer--or anything that there is in the cupboard----'

'I want you to feel as if I wasn't in the house. I know, for instance, that this is your sitting-room; I don't want you to run away from it. If you like, I will go and sit in the kitchen.'

'No, no, sir!' implored Ben Sparrow. 'Not for worlds. We couldn't allow such a thing, could we, Bessie? This is my granddaughter, sir!--the dearest child that man ever had!----'

Why, here was the man in possession, as old Ben broke down, actually patting him on the shoulder, and looking into his face with such genuine sympathy, that before Ben knew where he was, he had held out his hand as to a friend! What would the next wonder be?

'That's right,' said the man in possession; 'we may as well be comfortable together, and I shall take it ill of you, if you and your granddaughter do not use the parlour just as if I wasn't here. If you don't, I shall go and sit in the kitchen.'

They could do nothing else, after this, but look upon the parlour as their own again. Bessie felt very grateful to the man for the sympathy he had shown to her grandfather, and she took out her old workbox, and sat down to mend a pair of Tottie's socks. 'The way that child makes holes in her toes and heels is most astonishing,' Ben had often remarked.

The man in possession glanced at the little socks, and then at Bessie so thoughtfully and kindly, that she gave him a wistful smile, which he returned, and said:

'Thank you, child!' in a very sweet and gentle tone.

When dinner-time came, and before they could ask him to share their humble meal, he went to the street-door and called a boy, who, in obedience to his instructions, bought some cold meat and bread at a neighbouring shop. All he asked Bessie to give him was a glass of cold water, and with this and his bread-and-meat he made a good meal. To the astonishment of Bessie and old Ben, they found they were growing to like him. After dinner, he seemed to be drowsy, and sat with closed eyes and thoughtful face in the corner of the room he had appropriated to himself, which, it maybe remarked, was not the warmest corner. Bessie and old Ben talked in whispers at first, so as not to disturb him, but after a time his regular breathing convinced them that he was sleeping; and Bessie laid down her plans to the old man. When they were turned out of the shop they would take one room, Bessie said; they would be very comfortable, she was sure, if they would only make up their minds to be so, and she would work for all three, for grandfather, Tottie, and herself. Indeed, the girl showed herself so much of a true woman in her speech, that she was almost beginning to persuade the old man that what had occurred was, after all, no great misfortune.

'How strange that his hair should be white!' remarked Ben, looking at the sleeping man. 'He does not seem old enough for that. He isn't very attentive to his duties, whatever they may be. Why, Bessie,' said the old man in a whisper that was almost gleeful, 'we could actually run away!' But his thoughts assumed their sadder tenor immediately afterwards, and he sighed, 'Ah, Bessie! What will George think of all this? They've had trouble at home too, Bessie dear, during the strike. I often wished, during that time, that I could have gone and sat with them, and comforted them; and you wished so too, Bess, I know.'

'Yes, dear,' answered Bess in a quiet tone, 'I wished so too. But George might have put a wrong construction upon it.'

'Bess, darling, tell me----'

'No, no!' cried Bessie, holding up her hands entreatingly, for she anticipated what he was about to say. 'Don't ask me, grandfather! It can never, never be! O my dear, I try to forget, but I can't!' She paused, unable to proceed for her tears, but presently said, 'I should be so much happier if he thought better of me--although I know we can never be to each other what we were! I was angry and indignant at first, but I am not so now. If he had only answered me about Tottie--dear little Tottie----'

The man murmured in his sleep, and they spoke in hushed voices.

'It was wrong of me to doubt him,' continued the girl, 'very, very wrong! I should have trusted him, as he told me to. He can never think well of me again--never, never! But do you know, dear, that I have loved Tottie more since that time than I did before--poor little motherless thing! I shall never be happy again! Never again! O, my poor heart!'

It was Ben's turn now to be the consoler, and he soothed her, and caressed her, and suddenly cried:

'Bessie! young Mr. Million!'

What made Bessie turn white at the name? What made her gasp and bite her lips, as the young gentleman entered the room?

'I am grieved to hear of what has happened, Mr. Sparrow,' he said, taking off his hat; 'and I have come at once to ask if you will allow me to assist you.'

'Hush, if you please, sir,' returned Ben. 'Speak low. That--that man in the corner has been put in by the landlord, and I shouldn't like to wake him. We are in great distress--ruined, I may say, sir----'

'Then let me help you,' interrupted young Mr. Million eagerly. 'It will be a pleasure to me. Let me pay this man off. You and Miss Sparrow will confer an obligation upon *me*--believe me!--if you will allow me to do this.'

'I thank you for your offer, sir,' replied Ben, with a helpless look around the humble room in which he had spent many happy years, 'but'--something in Bessie's face imparted a decision to his voice--'it can't be, sir, it can't be.'

'Why?'

'Well, sir, it might get talked about, and that wouldn't do Bessie any good. You see, sir, you are so far above us that it's impossible we--we can mix, sir. Yes, sir, that's it; it's impossible we can mix. No, sir, it can't be.'

Young Mr. Million was silent for a few moments, and tapped with his fingers impatiently on the table.

'For some time,' he then said, 'I have seen that you and Miss Sparrow have rejected my advances, and have been different from what you were. Why, may I ask again?'

'Well, sir,' replied old Ben, emboldened by the expression on Bessie's face, 'it will be best to speak plain. You see, sir, the neighbours *will* talk; and when they see a gentleman like you always a-visiting poor people like us, they want to know the reason of it. And as we've no reason to give, they make one for themselves. People will talk, you see, sir; and I am afraid that my Bessie's name--my Bessie! the best girl in the world, sir; good enough to be a Princess----'

'That she is,' put in young Mr. Million.

'--Well, sir, as I was saying, I am afraid that my Bessie's name has got mixed up with yours by people's tongues in such a way as to cause sorrow to her and to me. I have heard, sir, that she was seen one day--nearly a year ago now--go into your house, and that has been set against her, and flung into her teeth, as a body might say. Well, she *did* go into your house that once--and only that once, mind!--and took a letter from me which you desired me to send by her last year when I was in trouble. You helped us then, sir, and I am grateful to you, though I can't pay you. And we've got it into our heads--Bessie and me--that that, and the earrings you gave her--for *they've* been talked about too, and that's the reason we sent them back to you--was the cause of a greater sorrow to my poor girl than she has ever experienced in her life.'

'O!' exclaimed young Mr. Million, with a slight sneer in his tone. 'You mean because the affair between Miss Sparrow, and that cub, George Naldret, has been broken off.'

From Bessie's eyes came such a flash that if the idle young dog could have flown through the door, and have disappeared there and then instantaneously, he would have gladly availed himself of the opportunity. Old Ben Sparrow's blood; also, was up.

'Be kind enough to go, sir,' he said, with more dignity of manner than Bessie had ever seen in him; 'and wherever we are, either here or elsewhere, leave us to ourselves and our troubles.'

Their voices roused the man in possession; he yawned, and opened his eyes. Young Mr. Million saw here an opportunity to assert himself as the heir of a great brewery, and to indulge in a small piece of malice, at one and the same time.

'I must show my sense of your ingratitude,' he said, 'by somewhat severe measures, and therefore you will arrange at once for the repayment of the money I have advanced to you. I must remind you that there is such a thing as imprisonment for debt. As for the money which your son embezzled from our firm, I must leave my father to settle that with you. In the mean time----'

'In the mean time,' interrupted the man in possession, to the astonishment of all, 'I'm the master of this house, being in possession; and as you're not down in the inventory, I must request you to leave.'

And without allowing the idle young dog to utter another word, the man in possession, with a wrist of iron, twisted him round, and thrust him from the old grocer's shop.

So young Mr. Million, for a fresh supply of wild oats, had to go to another market. And doubtless succeeded in obtaining them: they are plentiful enough.

Ben Sparrow could not but thank the man in possession for his friendly interference.

'Don't mention it,' said the man in possession, adding, with an odd smile, 'he's not down in the inventory, you know.'

The interview had caused old Ben and Bessie great agitation, and left them sadly distressed; but nothing could exceed the consideration of the man in possession. He did not ask them for a word of explanation. When, indeed, the old man stumblingly referred to it, he turned the conversation, and asked for a sheet of paper and an envelope. These being supplied to him, he wrote a note, and when, after putting it in the envelope and addressing it, he looked up, his hitherto sad face wore such a bright expression that Ben whispered to his granddaughter,

'Really, Bessie, he is a good fellow; he puts heart into one;' and said aloud, 'Can I post the letter for you, sir?

'No, thank you,' was the reply; 'I can send it by a messenger. I mustn't let you out of my sight, you know. The landlord said I was accountable for you.'

Old Ben began to feel as if he were in prison again.

It was dark when Tottie was brought home; she ran into the parlour calling for grandfather and Bessie, and jumped into their arms, and kissed them, and pulled old Ben's hair; she seemed to bring light in with her. 'Is that Tottie?' asked the man in possession in a tremulous tone.

'Yes, sir, yes,' replied old Ben. 'Go to the gentleman, my dear.'

Something like a sob came from the man in possession as he lifted Tottie, and kissed her; and when, a little while afterwards, the lamp was lighted, and Tottie was seen curled up contentedly in the man's arms, eating sweets which he was giving her: with such a sweet tooth as Tottie had, it was no wonder she was easily bought over: old Ben whispered to Bessie,

'Depend upon it, my dear, he has got a little daughter at home, and that makes him fond of Tottie.'

Everything about this strange man was so gentle, that they actually looked upon him as a friend instead of an enemy.

SOFTLY, SWEETLY, PROCEEDS THE HYMN OF HOME.

'It is a story about two friends--' It is the man in possession who is speaking. Tottie is lying in his arms as contentedly as if she has known him all her life; he has told her the prettiest of stories, and the child has crowed and laughed over them, until she is almost tired with the pleasure and excitement. And now, although it is very nearly eleven o'clock, and time to think of going to bed, Bessie and her grandfather find themselves listening to a story which he says he desires to tell them. Of course they dare not refuse to listen.

'It is a story about two friends--mainly about those, although the dearest hopes of others better and purer than they are mixed up in it The story is a true one. What shall I call these friends, so as to distinguish them? Shall I say George for one---- What is the matter, my dear?' For Bessie has looked with a startled glance into the stranger's face. 'George is a common name enough, and this man whom I call George is a good man, in every sense of the word. Say, shall I

call him George?'

'Yes, if you please,' replies Bessie faintly, turning her face from him.

'And the other--I will call him Saul.'

'Bessie, my dear!' exclaims old Ben Sparrow. 'Do you hear? Saul and George!'

Bessie's hand steals into his, and the stranger continues.

'Say, then, Saul and George. They lived and grew to manhood in just such a neighbourhood as this. Saul was the elder of the two by six or seven years; but notwithstanding the difference in their ages, they became firm friends. They talked much together, and read together; for Saul was a great reader, and took delight in studying, and (according to his own thinking) setting wrong things right. I believe that, at one time of his life, he really had a notion that it was his mission to redress the wrongs of his class; at all events, it is certain that he elected himself the champion of his fellow-workmen, and as he had the fatal gift of being able to speak well and fluently, the men listened to him, and accepted his high-flown words as the soundest of logic. George admired his friend, although he did not agree with him; and when he was a man he took an opportunity of vowing eternal friendship to Saul. Such a vow meant something more than words with George; for he was constant and true to the dictates of his heart Where he professed friendship, there he would show it. Where he professed love, there would he feel it. And it might be depended upon that neither in his friendship nor his love would he ever change. He was no idle talker. Saul, working himself into a state of false enthusiasm respecting his mission, waited but for an opportunity to raise his flag. The opportunity came. A dispute arose between master and men in a certain workshop; Saul plunged himself into the dispute, and by his fatal gift inflamed the men, and fanned the discontent until it spread to other workshops. Neither men nor masters would yield. A strike was the result. In this strike Saul was the principal agitator; he was the speaker and the man upon whom all depended, in whom all trusted. Hear, in a few words, what occurred then. After making things as bitter as he could; after making the men believe that the masters were their natural enemies; after making a speech one night, filled with false conclusions, but which fired the men to a more determined resistance; after doing all this, Saul suddenly deserted his followers, and left them in the lurch. He told them that, upon more serious consideration, he had been led to alter his mind, and that he was afraid of the misery a longer fight would bring upon them and their families. The men were justly furious with him; they called him names which he deserved to be called; and the result was that the men returned to work upon the old terms, and that all of them--masters and men--turned their backs upon the man who had betrayed them. Only one among them remained his friend. That one was George. From that day Saul began to sink; he could get no work; and he dragged down with him a woman who loved him, who had trusted in him, and whom he had robbed of her good name. Stay, my dear,' said the man in possession, placing a restraining hand upon Bessie's sleeve; the girl had risen, uncertain whether to go or stay. 'You must hear what I have to say; I will endeavour to be brief. This woman had a child, a daughter, born away from the neighbourhood in which Saul was known. Her love was great; her grief was greater. Saul showed himself during this time to be not only a traitor, but a coward. He took to drink. What, then, did this good woman--ah, my dear, how good she was only Saul knows!--what did this good woman resolve to do, for her child's sake? She resolved that she would not allow her child to grow up and be pointed at as a child of shame; that she would endeavour to find some place where it could be cared for, and where, if happier times did not come to her, the child might grow up in the belief that her parents were dead. Shame should not cast its indelible shadow over her darling's life. Saul, in his better mood, agreed with her. "I have no friends," said this woman to Saul; "have you? Have you a friend who, out of his compassion for the child and friendship for you, would take my darling from me, and care for it as his own?" Saul had no friend but one. George! He went to George, and told his trouble, and this dear noble friend, this Man! arranged with a neighbour to take the child, and bring her up. He promised sacredly to keep Saul's secret, and only to tell one person the story of the poor little forsaken one. "I may marry one day, Saul," he said, "and then I must tell it to my wife." In this way the mother obtained her desire; in this way came about her love's sacrifice!'

Tick--tick--tick--comes from the old-fashioned clock in the corner. Bessie has sunk into her chair, and her head is bowed upon the table. She hears the clear tick, and thinks of a year ago, when, standing at the door with her lover, it sounded so painfully in her ears. What pain, what pleasure, has this strange man brought to her! For she knows that the story he is telling is true, and that Saul's friend, George, is her George, whom she has loved truly and faithfully during all this sad year. What pain! What pleasure! What pain to feel that George is parted from her for ever! What pleasure to know that he is without a stain, that he is even more noble than her love had painted him! She raises her head; her eyes are almost blinded by her tears; she stretches forth her arms for Tottie.

'Let me nurse her!' she sobs.

'No, my dear,' says the man in possession; but he places Tottie's lips to hers, and then stoops and kisses Bessie's tears which have fallen on the little one's face. 'There is more to tell. Shall I go on?'

'Yes.'

'A happy time comes to George. He falls in love with a tender-hearted, pure-souled girl----'

Bessie kneels at his feet, and looks in bewilderment at the man's strange face, at his snow-white hair, and in gratitude raises his hand to her lips.

'There, there, child!' he says; 'sit down: you interrupt my story. They are engaged to be married, and George is anxious to make a home for his bird. But trade is slack, and he can save no money. Then comes a false man, whom we will call Judas, into the story, who, under the pretence of friendship for George, gives him a passage-ticket to the colonies, where George can more quickly save money to buy the home to which he yearns to bring his bird. But on the very night, within three hours of the time when George is to look his last upon the little house in which he was born, he learns from Saul that this pretended friend has played him false, has told him lies, and has given him the ticket only for the purpose of getting him out of the country, so that Judas can pay court to the girl who reigns in George's heart. Other doubts and misunderstandings unfortunately accumulate in these critical moments; George learns that the girl was seen to go into the house where Judas's father lives; learns that Judas has given her a pair of earrings; learns that Judas was seen by George's mother to place a letter in the girl's hands----'

'It was for grandfather!' cries Bessie. 'It contained money for grandfather to help him out of his trouble!'

'Hush! my dear! What can you know of this story of mine? When George learns all this he is in an agony of despair. He takes the ticket from his pocket, and is about to destroy it, when Saul falls on his knees at his friend's feet, and begs, entreats in *his* agony for the ticket, so that *he* may go instead of George. For Saul's dear woman has left him; has charged him, by his love for her and for their child, to make an effort to lift them from shame; and he sees no way-- no way but this which is suddenly opened to him. George gives his friend the ticket, and the next day Saul bids good-bye to the land which holds all that is dear to his heart.'

The man in possession pauses here, and old Ben Sparrow gazes earnestly at him. When he resumes, his voice grows more solemn.

'Saul reaches his destination, and after much wandering finds a shelter in the mountains with a little colony of gold-diggers. He makes a friend there; David. Another; David's wife. God rest their souls! Another; David's little daughter. Saul finds gold, and thanks God for His goodness. He will come home and make atonement But the snow season sets in, and he and his companions are imprisoned by mountains of snow whose shallowest depth is sufficient for a man's grave if he is buried upstanding. An awful night comes, when the snow-drift walls up their tents. In the morning the tents are hemmed in; the diggers cannot open their doors. Near to the tent in which Saul and David and David's wife and David's little daughter live is a tree. Saul climbs to the roof of the tent, breaks through it, climbs on to the tree, and calls to his friends to follow him. David tries, and fails; he falls back into the tent, and hurts himself to death. Saul, in an agony, calls out for David's little daughter, and the mother succeeds in raising the child through the roof of the tent; Saul clutches the little girl and takes her to his heart. All this time the storm is raging; the snow rises higher and higher. David commands his wife to save herself; she refuses, and stays to nurse him, and slowly, slowly, my dears! the snow falls; the walls of the tent give way; and David's wife meets a noble death, and both find their grave.'

Awe-struck they listen to this strange man's story. A look of pity steals into his face--and then he murmurs to himself, 'No; why should I bring sadness upon them this night?' And says aloud:

'The tree to which Saul clings for dear life with David's little daughter, one other man manages to reach. His story you shall hear to-morrow; sufficient here to say that it is a strange one, and it comes strangely to Saul's ears. He bequeaths his gold to Saul for a good purpose. But this man is weak; his strength fails him in the night; and when the next morning's sun rises Saul and David's little daughter are the only ones left. Can you picture Saul to yourself clinging to the tree, holding in his arms the life of a dear little one? Can you realise the agony of the time? Can you believe that his grief and tribulation are so great during the two terrible days that follow, that his hair turns snow-white----'

'But he is saved?' cries Bessie and her grandfather at once.

'He is saved.'

'And David's little daughter?'

'Is saved also, God be thanked!'

They draw a long breath.

'But little remains to be told. Saul comes home, bringing David's little daughter with him--bringing gold with him. He seeks his dear woman. He marries her. He hears that the old man and the dear girl who have protected and reared his child are in trouble--that an execution is to be put into the old man's shop for rent----'

'And he becomes a man in possession!' cries old Ben, starting up in indescribable excitement.

'O, dear! O, dear! He becomes a man in possession!'

The tolling of a bell is heard.

'As you say. Is not that the Westminster clock beginning to chime the hour? Listen for one minute more. When Judas comes in this afternoon, do you think the man in possession is asleep? No; he is awake, and hears every word that passes, and such a joy comes into his heart as he cannot describe--for he thinks of George, that dear friend, that noble friend, that Man! What does the man in possession do when Judas has gone? He writes a letter, doesn't he? Hark! the last hour is tolling! Twelve!'

The door opens, and Bessie, with a wild cry, moves but a step, and presses her hand to her heart. George stands before her, pale with the excitement of the moment, but hopeful, and with love in his eyes.

'George, my dear boy!' cries old Ben, grasping the young man's hands.

'Can you forgive me, Bessie?' asks George.

A grateful sob escapes from the girl's overcharged heart, and the lovers are linked in a close embrace.

As if this happy union has conjured them up, there enter on the instant Jim Naldret and Mrs. Naldret, she nursing David's little daughter. And behind them, with a wistful look, with hands that are convulsed with excess of tenderness, with eyes and face and heart filled with yearning love, stands the Mother hungering for her child! Tenderly and solemnly Saul places Tottie in Jane's arms. The Mother steals softly into the shop with her child; and Saul follows, and kneels before her. Presently she takes him also to her breast.

'Dear wife? he murmurs; and a prayer of infinite thankfulness for the mercy and the goodness of God comes to his mind.

Half-an-hour afterwards, he enters the room with Jane and their child.

'Bessie,' he says, 'this is my wife, Jane.'

And as Bessie kisses her and caresses her, the sorrow of the past melts into gratitude for the present.

They sit and talk.

'George and I are going into business together,' says Saul. 'We shall start a little shop of our own.'

'And stop at home,' remarks Mrs. Naldret, 'and be contented.'

'Yes,' replies George, 'on bread-and-cheese and kisses. I shall be able to buy my pots and pans now.'

Somehow or other George has come into possession of the little silk purse again.

'Bessie!' exclaims Mrs. Naldret 'My dream that I told you last year'll come true!'

The maid blushes. She is dreaming happily now. So are they all indeed. Old Ben hopes that they will not wake up presently.

Silence falls upon them. And in the midst of the silence, the sounds of music steal to their ears, and they gaze at each other with earnest grateful eyes. It is the waits playing 'Home, sweet Home.'

'Do you remember, George?' says Bessie, with a tender clasp.

Softly, sweetly, proceeds the hymn of Home. The air is filled with harmony and prayer.

THE END.

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