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Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly

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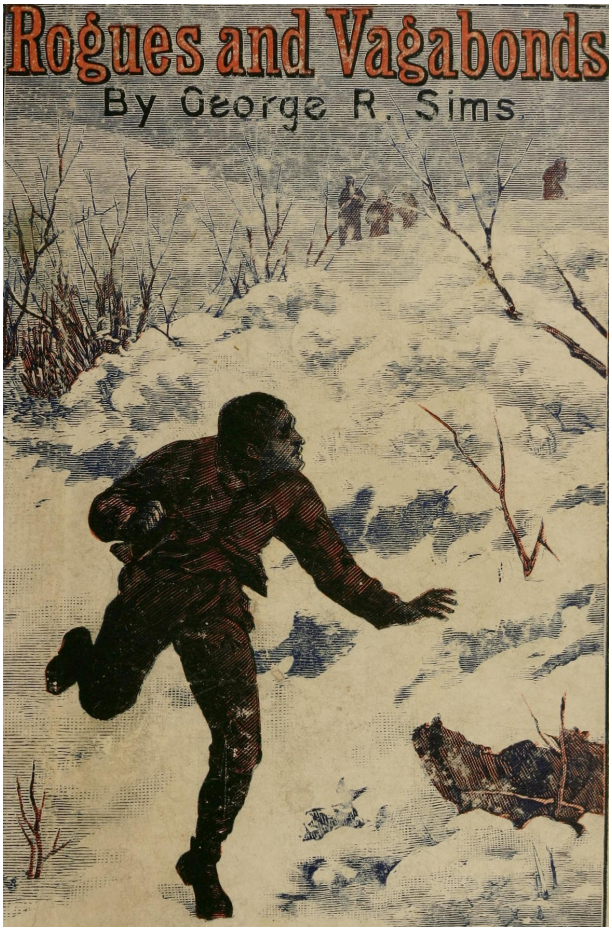

ROGUES AND VAGABONDS

BY

GEORGE R. SIMS

AUTHOR OF

'HOW THE POOR LIVE,' 'MARY JANE'S MEMOIRS,' 'TALES OF TO-DAY,'

ETC.

A NEW EDITION

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1892

To
My Good Friends,
Agostino and Stefano Gatti,
This Story,
Now First Published in Novel Form,
Is Gratefully

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CHAPTER I.
THE WRECK OF THE ‘BON ESPOIR.’

The ship was going down!

The sky was cloudless, the sun rode high in the heavens, and the waves glistened in the clear, bright light. It was a glorious summer day—a time when life pulsed joyously, and everything invited a man to forget his troubles, close his eyes, and lie basking in the warmth.

A soft, invigorating breeze fanned the pallid cheeks of the eager watchers; the eyes worn with long vigils glistened in the silver light that fell on them; the glowing orb above sent its rays upon haggard faces and seemed to make them smile.

The ship was going down—going down in a calm sea. Here, shut off from all human aid—here, with no one to know the secret of that last hour of anguish and despair—Death had come to the fifty souls left on board the *Bon Espoir.* They were alone upon the trackless ocean. Around them lay leagues of lonely water. Their fate would be a mystery. As the weeks went on, and no tidings came of the ship, her name would be upon every tongue, and strange conjectures as to her fate would drop from thousands of lips.

The world would picture the good ship caught in some furious tempest, dashed to pieces, and engulfed amid the roar of the billows, the howling of the wind, and the wild cries for help of terror-stricken men.

But there was no tempest, no wind to howl—only a gentle zephyr, that kissed the men’s checks as gently as their mothers did in their happy childhoods; no billows to seethe—only little playful wavelets that lapped against the ship’s side gently, and seemed to say, ‘You are ours; presently we shall dance and sport above you, and toss your bodies softly to and fro in the merry sunshine.’

A night had passed since the crew and passengers of the *Bon Espoir* knew they were doomed. She had sprung a leak in midocean on the previous night, in a lonely part, far out of the regular track, where for weeks and weeks never a sail might be seen.

The night was dark.

The sea was rough, and there had been a panic. The boats had been filled with passengers and some of the crew at once. The captain had shouted to them to keep near the ship, but the order had been disobeyed. When the light dawned those on board the *Bon Espoir* scanned the horizon, and saw no floating thing upon the waves.

A light mist hung like a veil over the waters, narrowing their range of vision. The wind had sunk, the waves were at rest, and the sun bursting through the mist gleamed upon a vast expanse of smiling sea.

Those who had stuck to the ship, hoping against hope that she might keep afloat yet until they fell into the track of other vessels, took counsel together and talked of a raft when every effort to save the vessel had been found useless.

But they were in a latitude where the storm came swiftly on the calm; where, with little warning, the baby waves swelled into gigantic billows, and the sighing zephyr, gathering sudden strength, shrieked aloud and lashed the sea to fiercest fury.

The sailors who remained were principally foreigners. They had remained on the ship all night, refusing to work when they found the water gaining on them. They had gone below, torn their hair, beaten their breasts, cried aloud to the saints. Then they attacked the spirit store, and drank till they reeled down and slept a brutish, drunken sleep where they lay.

The passengers still left were all men, but unskilled. Without the aid of the sailors they could not make a raft. The sailors were not in a condition to move—certainly not to work. They had resigned themselves to their fate now. That strange sense of calm which comes mercifully even to cowards when hope is absolutely dead had fallen on them all.

They stood leaning over the ship’s sides, waiting for the end, their faces pale, their eyes haggard, and their thoughts far away.

Some of them had wives and children at home, and the images of their beloved ones rose up before them. They seemed to pierce the space and see the place that would know them no more. One man whispered to those who stood near him that he had heard his little boy cry “Father!” and another said that in the night he had seen his wife hearing his little ones their prayers, and when they said “God bless papa!” she looked up,

and her eyes were filled with tears.

There were yet some hours between them and death, and they could still talk to each other.

It seemed a relief to do so; it created a companionship in misery; they cheered each other with their voices.

There was a clergyman among the passengers, and, as the captain went away to his post after a few last words of encouragement to the little band, the reverend gentleman asked their attention for a moment.

Earnestly and calmly, as became an English gentleman in the presence of death, the man of God prayed to the Throne of Grace for strength and sustenance in this hour of supreme peril. Briefly he addressed his little flock of doomed ones, and then went his way, deeming the last moments of his fellow-voyagers sacred to themselves.

As he was walking quietly aft, he felt a hand laid upon his shoulder.

He turned, and found that one of the passengers had followed him. He was a quiet, gentlemanly man, who had hardly spoken to any one during the voyage. He was tall, dark, and well built, apparently a man of five or six and thirty. The face was pleasing at first glance, the features being well cut, and not too prominent. But on a closer inspection the defects were apparent. The lips were sensual; the eyes had that strange look which one sees in the hunted animal. The fear of something behind was apparent upon the face the moment the features were disturbed from their repose. A dark moustache covered the too thick upper lip, and the rest of the face was bronzed with long travel and exposure to sun and sea. One thing would instantly attract the attention of the ordinary observer—the strange way in which “indecision” was expressed in his countenance. His eyes and his lips would have revealed the secret of his character to a physiognomist at once.

He had evidently made up his mind in a hurry to say something to the clergyman. Directly that gentleman turned kindly, and asked what service he could render him, he hesitated.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said, after a pause; ‘but can I speak with you alone?’

They walked to a deserted part of the ship.

‘I am going to make an extraordinary statement to you,’ said the passenger, his undecided eyes now looking in the clergyman’s face and now resting on the deck; ‘but I think I ought to. You are a clergyman, and I know no one better to whom in the hour of death I can confess a secret that should not die with me.’

The clergyman surveyed his interviewer earnestly for a moment.

‘Is it a crime?’ he asked.

The passenger nodded.

‘I don’t want to die with it on my mind,’ he murmured. ‘I fancy when the—the end comes, I shall die easier.’

‘My friend,’ said the clergyman, kindly, ‘do not imagine that a confession at the last moment takes guilt from the soul. To confess a crime to one who is about to share your fate is, perhaps, rather a superstitious than a religious deed. Let us understand each other. We both believe that we are about to die. You confess to me, perhaps thinking that no possible harm can come to you from it—that you run no such risk as you would in confessing under other circumstanccs.’

‘I haven’t thought about that,’ answered the passenger, almost in a whisper. ‘Let me tell some human being my secret, and it will at least be off my mind. I feel as if the secret would choke me if I kept it any longer. I cannot die with murder on my soul.’

‘Murder!’ exclaimed the clergyman, starting back; then, recovering himself, he added, ‘Speak on; but I warn you that whatever you tell me, should we, by the Lord’s will, be saved, I will keep as no secret. Neither shall you deny it. Write.’

The clergyman drew out his pocket-book, and handed it, with a pencil, to the passenger.

The latter hesitated.

Presently, with a supreme effort, he wrote:—

‘On board the *Bon Espoir*.

‘The ship is sinking rapidly. I, Gurth Egerton, believing that I am about to die, do solemnly declare that on the night of the 15th of September, 18—, I stabbed my cousin, Ralph Egerton, in a gambling-house, kept by a man named Heckett, and that the wound proved fatal. I freely make this confession, and may God forgive me.

‘Signed, Gurth Egerton.’

The clergyman took the book from him and read it. Then he wrote something beneath it.

The confession once made, a swift revulsion of feeling came over Gurth Egerton. He reached out his hand, as though he would have snatched it back.

The clergyman closed the book and thrust it into his pocket.

‘Unhappy sinner!’ he said; ‘even now you repent the acknowledgment of your awful crime. Pray, for your time is short. Remember, should God spare me, I will use every effort to bring you to justice.’

As the last words left his lips, and Gurth Egerton, with a white face, was about to turn away, a loud cry rang out from the look-out man.

‘A sail! A sail!’

The doomed men rushed to the side of the vessel and strained their eyes. In that wild moment of sudden hope all was forgotten. Gurth Egerton flew to the vessel’s side.

Yes. Far away in the distance, but still visible, were the white sails of a ship.

Hope sprang up with renewed vigour in every breast. Strong men laughed and cried and hugged each other. A strange delirium animated them.

One or two of the sailors awoke from their drunken sleep, and came staggering on deck.

The excitement was at its height, each man shouting above his neighbour what was to be done to attract the passing ship’s attention, when suddenly the vessel heeled over, there was a gurgling sound, the roar and rush of a huge volume of water pouring in, and then down like a stone, to the depths of the ocean, went the *Bon Espoir.*

The waves danced and glittered in the sunlight. Over the spot where the ship and her living freight had sunk the blue waves closed, and there was nothing to tell of their vanished prey.

A bottle bobbed about, carried now here now there by the playful waves. As the *Bon Espoir* sank, the clergyman’s hand had hurled it far out to sea. It contained a leaf torn from his pocket-book.

The ship *Diana*, bound for Baltimore, sailed late that afternoon over the spot where the *Bon Espoir* had sunk.

A sailor who was in the rigging cried out that he could see something that looked like a barrel floating in the sea some distance away.

A boat was manned and put off.

In half an hour it returned with a strange story.

To the barrel they had seen in the water clung a man in the last stage of exhaustion. They had released him, and brought him with them.

Tenderly the sailors lifted a half-drowned body from the stern of the boat, and it was hoisted on board.

The surgeon of the *Diana* took it in charge, and pronounced it to be still alive.

Presently the half-drowned man opened his eyes.

‘What ship?’ asked the captain, when he had recovered sufficiently to speak.

‘From the *Bon Espoir*,’ answered the man, feebly. ‘She sprang a leak and went down.’

‘Who are you?’

The man hesitated a moment. His senses were evidently half scattered.

‘My name is George Englehardt, of Philadelphia,’ he said presently.

Then he looked round anxiously.

‘Are there any saved except me?’ he asked, in a faint whisper.

‘Not a soul.’

The man heaved a deep sigh, and relapsed once more into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER II.
TOPSEY TURVEY SEES A GHOST.

I don’t imagine that Mrs. Turvey had ever read Cowper: in fact, it is exceedingly improbable that Mrs. Turvey’s poetical readings had ever extended beyond the works of the late lamented Dr. Watts. This talented author had, it is pretty certain, come under her notice, for it is on record that she once reprimanded her niece, Topsey, for putting her fingers into the marmalade-pot, by telling her that—

‘Satan finds some mischief still
For idle hands to do.’

And fancying that this solemn warning by itself might not be sufficient, she had added to it a picture of the delights of an active life by requesting Topsey to contemplate the habits of the busy bee, who ‘improves each shining hour by gathering honey all the day from every opening flower.’ A quotation which was singularly inapt under the circumstance, for, substitute marmalade for honey, and open jam-pot for opening flower, and Topsey had been really doing her best to imitate the bright example aforesaid.

Topsey might have retorted to this effect had she been a sharp child, but unfortunately she was not. So she just wiped her sticky little fingers on her pinafore, looked up with a roguish smile at her ‘aunty,’ and darted from the room, to find as much mischief (or marmalade) as she could elsewhere.

Mrs. Turvey and Topsey, her twelve-year-old niece, were the sole inhabitants of a great old-fashioned house in a street near Russell Square. Mrs. Turvey was housekeeper to Mr. Gurth Egerton, a gentleman who was travelling abroad for the benefit of his health, and feeling lonely with fourteen rooms all to herself, not to speak of cellars, dark corners, and gloomy passages, she had, in an evil hour, obtained permission of her brother, a widower and a railway guard, to take his little daughter into her keeping, and so have the echoes of the desolate mansion occasionally awakened with a human voice.

Topsey woke the echoes, and no mistake. The echoes had a bad time of it if they were at all sleepy echoes. They did have forty winks now and then in the day, when Topsey ran errands; but as a rule they were only allowed to drop off and take their natural rest when Topsey took hers—at night.

See what a mischievous little thing this Topsey is. She has actually kept Cowper waiting while we are attending to her.

Let us hark back to Cowper and Mrs. Turvey at once.

There is a well-known passage in ‘The Winter’s Evening,’ which I never read, even on a hot June day, without wishing it was a winter’s evening, and I could take the poet’s advice. Thus it runs:—

‘Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
And while the bubbling and loud hissing urn
Throws up a steamy column, and the cups
That cheer but not inebriate wait on each,
So let us welcome peaceful evening in.’

Now Mrs. Turvey, I will venture to say, had never read this charming piece of advice, but she was certainly putting it into practice. It *was* a winter’s evening, singularly enough, and she had stirred the fire, closed the shutters fast, and let fall the curtains. The table stood too near the fire for a sofa, to be wheeled round, but three chairs were set in nice convenient places, the urn was bubbling and hissing away as cheerily as possible, and three cups and saucers stood waiting in a quiet and contented manner to take their proper part in the programme of the evening’s entertainment.

Cowper doesn’t mention muffins, beautifully browned and lavishly buttered, standing on the hob, and he is discreetly silent as to a glass dish of home-made marmalade. Neither can I discover any reference to a fat black pussy dozing, the picture of sleek contentment, on the hearthrug. In these particulars Mrs. Turvey had, I make bold to assert,

improved upon the poet. But then Cowper only proposed to welcome the evening in. Mrs. Turvey's welcome was designed for something with a more substantial appetite.

Don't imagine I intend to convey that Mrs. Turvey's visitor was going to eat the cat. That was always on the hearthrug. The marmalade and the muffins were the specialities which denoted the expected advent of company.

There were *three* cups and saucers set. Now, allotting one to Mrs. Turvey and one to Topsey, we might, by setting our wits to work, arrive at the conclusion that only one visitor was expected. Our wits would have performed the task confided to them most creditably if this was the result of their labour, for there is a knock at the door, and presently Topsey, who has been upstairs on the *qui vive*, comes dancing down into the housekeeper's little room with the intelligence that 'He's come.'

'He' follows very closely at Miss Topsey's heels. 'He' is a fat, smiling gentleman of fifty, and so shining that it seems almost a waste to burn the gas when he is in the room.

His bald head shines, his face shines, his coat shines, his boots shine, his buttons shine, his black stock shines, and his old-fashioned stand-up collar shines.

He smiles a sweet smile at Mrs. Turvey, and when he opens his mouth you see that he has white shiny teeth.

'You're late, Mr. Jabez,' says Mrs. Turvey, as, having shaken hands with her visitor and motioned him to the tea-table, she seats herself and prepares to do the honours.

'Business, my dear madam, business. Nothing but business would have made me late for this appointment, you may be sure,' answers the gentleman, shining all over his face, till he reflects the teapot and the teapot reflects him.

'Ah!' sighs Mrs. Turvey, 'business is a strange thing!'

'Yes, my dear madam, it is, and never stranger than in our line. Muffins—thank you; I adore muffins. I've been in our line thirty years, Mrs Turvey, and our business gets stranger every day. Now our business to-night, for instance——'

'Ahem!'

Mr. Jabez is so suddenly interrupted by the warning eye of Mrs. Turvey that he gives a little cough, and swallows a little piece of muffin, and the redness which ensues, together with the extra shininess, makes him look like a setting sun sinking slowly below the horizon of Mrs. Turvey's tea-table.

Mrs. Turvey's glance has implied that the conversation is to be deferred till Topsey is out of the room. Let us take advantage of the lull in the conversation to properly introduce the worthy housekeeper's visitor.

Mr Jabez Duck is a clerk in the employ of that eminent firm of solicitors, Messrs. Grigg and Limpet, Lincoln's Inn. Messrs. Grigg and Limpet are the family solicitors of Mr. Gurth Egerton, and have the entire management of his affairs during his long absence abroad. Mr. Duck is the clerk specially entrusted with this part of the firm's business, and occasions for visits to the house have from time to time arisen.

Mr. Duck pays Mrs. Turvey her housekeeping allowance, sees her with regard to accounts that are applied for, authorises repairs, and comes occasionally to refer to papers and documents, or to see if they are in the library of the firm's absent client. This is the business part of the acquaintanceship. But beyond this there is a little personal friendship. Mrs. Turvey is a spinster, in spite of her matronly appellation, and Mr. Duck is a bachelor. Mr. Duck stays occasionally to take a friendly cup of tea after his business has been transacted. Confidences have been exchanged; under the potent influence of the cheering cup their hearts have been opened, and little secrets have oozed out. Curiosity has been awakened on both sides, and the affairs of the absent Mr. Egerton have become deeply interesting to them.

Mr. Duck has come to tea this evening by special invitation, for something has occurred of the deepest interest. The firm have news of a very startling character; and what more natural than that, having called in the morning and hinted that he should perhaps have something of great importance to communicate, Mr. Duck should have been requested to come to tea that evening and have a quiet chat?

Mrs. Turvey hated to hear important intelligence on the doorstep, or to have a secret imparted to her in the vulgar daylight, when brushes and brooms were about. If there was a nice delightful mystery to be revealed,

or a little scandal to be whispered, let her drink it with her tea, after her work was done, and when she could sit still and enjoy it with muffin and marmalade.

Mr. Duck was quite of her opinion, and so the invitation had been readily accepted.

The only difficulty was Topsey; but this, with great diplomacy, Mrs. Turvey had got over.

The servant next door was going to the Polytechnic that evening, and had promised to take Topsey with her directly Mrs. Turvey hinted that her niece had few opportunities of going out, and she thought that the ghost entertainment was one which, from an educational point of view, no child should miss.

The glance with which Mrs. Turvey favoured Mr. Duck was therefore intended to inform him that he was to hold his tongue on the important matter for the present, but that by-and-by he would have an opportunity of speaking unreservedly.

Mrs. Turvey had not calculated upon also sending the good man's piece of muffin the wrong way. That was an unforeseen contingency, from which, however, Mr. Duck speedily recovered, and shone as placidly as ever.

When tea was over, and Topsey had been packed off to see the ghost, with instructions not only for the evening but for her entire conduct in life, with many warnings not to tumble under 'buses or to leave go her friend's hand, and with strict injunctions not to get entangled in any machinery that might happen to be going at the Polytechnic, Mrs. Turvey settled herself down and prepared to hear Mr. Duck's narrative.

Mr. Duck commenced by solemnly lifting his eyes to the ceiling, and exclaiming, in dramatic tones:

'Mrs. Turvey, madam, Mr. Gurth Egerton is there!'

Mrs. Turvey started up with a little scream, and glanced in amazement at the ceiling. Then she looked at Mr. Duck, to see if he was in his right senses.

'Where?' she gasped, presently.

'In heaven, ma'am,' answered the gentleman; then, dropping his voice and glancing significantly at the carpet, he added, 'I trust he's not *there*.'

'Lawks a mercy, Mr. Duck, how awful! You don't mean to say that the master's dead?'

'I don't say positively he is, ma'am, and I can't say positively that he is not, but the chances are that he is *there* now.' Mr. Duck had glanced at the carpet as he spoke, but he instantly corrected the mistake, and looked up solemnly at the ceiling.

'Mr. Duck,' said Mrs. Turvey, half crying, 'don't trifle with my feelings. I've been alone in this house so long, I've lost all the nerve I ever had. If the master's dead I'd rather not stop here. I shouldn't like to be in a dead man's house. He was never easy in his life, poor man, and—and ——'

'And he's just one of those men you'd expect to come wandering about his house after death—eh, Mrs. Turvey?'

'Well,' answered the lady, glancing uneasily round, 'it's a dreadful thing to say, but I always did believe, and I always shall believe, as the master had—had——'

'Had something on his conscience that wouldn't let him rest. Exactly, Mrs. Turvey.'

'Lor' how you do catch me up. Well, yes. It's no good mincing matters. But how and where did he die?'

'How and where we can't exactly tell,' answered Mr. Duck; 'but from information received, as they say at Scotland Yard, he left America in the *Bon Espoir*, that was wrecked last summer; and as he has never been heard of since, the conclusion is obvious.'

'But he might not have come in the *Boney's Paw*.'

'We are certain that he did sail in her. The information that he was among the passengers reached our firm only this week, though the wreck took place six months ago. But the information is correct; the owners confirm it upon application.'

'But he may be heard of yet. There were some persons saved.'

'Every one of them is accounted for. The boats were all picked up, and the passengers our firm have written to all state that a Mr. Gurth Egerton was on board. The *Diana* passed the scene of the wreck, and reported, on her arrival at Baltimore, that she had saved one passenger —a Mr. George Englehardt. Besides, if he had been saved we should, of

course, have heard from him. Dr. Birnie was his intimate friend, and is left executor to the will. Dr. Birnie agrees with the firm that Mr. Gurth Egerton went down, my dear Mrs. Turvey, in the *Bon Espoir*.'

When she realised that her master was actually dead, Mrs. Turvey felt she ought to cry, and she begged Mr. Duck to excuse her while she did so. What was to become of her? She'd lived in the house this ten years, first as servant and then as housekeeper, and of course it wouldn't be kept on. Oh, it was very dreadful, and she didn't know what she should do.

Mr. Duck let her have a good cry, and then he shone upon her. 'My poor soul,' he said, when the paroxysm was over, 'you distress yourself needlessly. I think I may tell you, without a breach of confidence, that you are provided for. The will was opened by the firm to-day.'

Mrs. Turvey sobbed again.

Mr. Duck edged his chair a little nearer to her. 'Susan,' he said, softly, 'I shouldn't have spoken so abruptly but for this. Oh, Susan, you need never want a home.'

Mrs. Turvey looked up through her tears and beheld the shining face of Messrs. Grigg and Limpet's clerk so close to hers that it almost made her blink. At least that must have been the reason that she turned her head away.

Mr. Duck took her hand.

'Susan,' he said, pressing the imprisoned member gently against his shiny satin waistcoat, 'don't spurn me. You are alone in the world now, but I can offer you a shelter.

Come, weep on my bosom, my own stricken deer,
Though the world all turn from thee, thy shelter is here.

Those are lines, Susan, which I composed myself the first time I saw you, but which I dared not utter till now.'

The stricken deer sighed, but declined to weep upon the shiny bosom of her adorer.

'It is very sudden,' she faltered. 'I—I really never thought there was anything——'

Jabez assured her there had always been a suspicion; that now it had ripened into a fact.

For an hour or more the conversation was a mixture of poetical quotations, business suggestions, reminiscences of Mr. Gurth Egerton, and tender declarations in Mr. Duck's shiniest and sweetest manner.

Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door.

Mrs. Turvey jumped up from her chair and straightened her cap.

'Who is it?' exclaimed Mr. Duck, nervously.

'Why, it must be Topsey,' said the lady, after a moment's thought. 'Dear me! I'd no idea it was so late. I think you'd better go, Mr. Duck.'

'And when shall I call again, Susan?—for your answer.'

Mr. Duck showed his shiny teeth and rolled his shiny eyes so sweetly that Mrs. Turvey could not resist him any more.

'To-morrow, Jabez.'

There was a soft sound as of the sudden collision of a pair of lips and a cheek, and then Mrs. Turvey, followed by Mr. Duck, went upstairs to the front door.

It was Topsey brought back. Mr. Duck bade Mrs. Turvey good-night on the steps as though nothing had happened, for Topsey's sharp little ears were open, and he went off whistling ''Tis my delight on a shiny night,' and Topsey went downstairs with her aunt.

She was full of the ghost. She acted the ghost. She showed her aunty how the ghost looked, and how it rose mysteriously from nothing and walked towards its victim.

Mrs. Turvey did not enter very heartily into the scene. She did not like ghosts at any time, but to-night, when her master's death had been so suddenly communicated to her, she positively hated ghosts.

Do what she would, she could not shake off the idea that she was in a dead man's house. All the stories of uneasy spirits visiting their earthly dwelling-places floated across her brain, and presently she turned sharply to the child, and told her not to chatter but to get ready for bed.

They slept on the ground floor, in a room that had been a servant's room in the days when Mr. Egerton kept up an establishment.

Now in her confusion at parting with her elderly admirer right under Topsey's watchful eye, Mrs. Turvey had forgotten to fasten up the front door. As a matter of fact, she had closed it so carelessly that the lock had not caught at all.

She suddenly recollected her omission to examine the fastenings with her usual care, so she sent Topsey to do it, while she got the bread and cheese out of the larder for her frugal supper.

Topsey ran up and got half-way down the hall. Then she started back, trembling in every limb. It was quite dark in the passage, but the door was slowly swinging back on its hinges. As it opened and the pale light of the street lamp wandered in, the figure of a man with a face ghastly in the glare of the flickering illumination from without glided towards her. Her brain was full of the ghost illusion she had seen that evening. This was just how the apparition had walked.

Slowly it came nearer and nearer to her.

With a sudden effort the terrified child found her voice and gave a wild cry.

'Aunty!' she shrieked. 'Save me! The ghost! the ghost!'

Mrs. Turvey ran upstairs, terrified at the child's cries.

She reached the hall, held up her arms, and fell down in a swoon.

The sea had given up its dead.

There, in the hall of his earthly dwelling, stood the ghost of Gurth Egerton.

CHAPTER III.
MR. EDWARD MARSTON MEETS AN OLD FRIEND.

Now, gentlemen, please!’

The landlord of the Blue Pigeons had one eye on the clock and the other on his customers. It wanted only five minutes to closing time, and the patrons of the Blue Pigeons required a great deal of soft persuasion, as a rule, before they shook themselves up from their free-and-easy attitudes at the counter and on the benches, and filed out into the street.

On this especial night there was every excuse for the apparent inattention with which they received the landlord’s hint. Inside it was warm and cheery, the brilliant gas flared upon polished pewter, and gay-coloured glass, through the open door of the bar-parlour the ruddy glare of the fire could be seen dancing on the hearth, and everything was suggestive of warmth and light and comfort.

Outside—oh, what a night it was outside! The rain was coming down in torrents, the streets were seas of slush, and every time the big door swung open to admit a benighted traveller a roaring blast of east wind followed him to give him a final buffet, and seemed to say, ‘Take that; and I’ll give you another when you come out.’

It was no wonder the Blue Pigeons was crammed such a night as this; it was no wonder that once under the hospitable portals, and sheltered from the rain and the wind, the customers hesitated to leave the haven behind them.

‘Now, gentlemen, please!’

This time the landlord put a little more determination into his warning note, and gave the sign to the potman to lower the gas and fidget with the front door.

Reluctantly the gentlemen and ladies drained their glasses, wiped their lips, and shook themselves together preparatory to turning out into the night. Coat-collars were turned up, shawls were flung over battered bonnets, hands were thrust deep into trousers pockets, there was a little laughing, more growling, and a great deal of swearing, mixed with maudlin farewells and some rough horseplay, and then the motley crowd of drinkers oozed through the swing doors, melted gradually, and vanished.

Where to?

To foul alleys and rookeries, to cellars and human kennels, to low lodging-houses and tumble-down hovels.

The lights of the Blue Pigeons go out one by one, silence steals over the street, and the great crowd of drinkers separates, and each component part of it wends his or her way to some place which is ‘home,’—some place—mean, vile, and awful though it be—which contains the scanty household gods and something near and dear.

Although the Blue Pigeons is within a stone’s throw of the Seven Dials, its immediate vicinity is wrapped in silence when the clock strikes one. As a rule the sounds of revelry and riot linger in the narrow streets long after the public has disgorged its prey, and men and women stand about at the street corners, and joke and laugh and quarrel, despite the rough injunction to move on bestowed upon them by the especial policeman told off to superintend their conduct.

To-night the rain is so pitiless and the air so keen and merciless that the lowest and meanest of the populace have hurried off to such shelter as they can find. A thick fog, too, has begun to settle down upon the scene of desolation, and it is not a time for the proverbial dog to be out of doors.

But there is one customer who still hovers about the closed doors of the “Blue Pigeons.”

He had been inside from nine until closing time, and has come out at the last moment with the rest.

He had stood about unnoticed among the little groups, shifting about from one to the other, and pretending to belong to them. In the Dials a pot of beer does duty for a good many mouths sometimes, and neither the landlord nor the potman noticed the stranger sufficiently to discover that during the entire evening he had been enjoying the warmth and light and the smell of the spirits and tobacco-smoke without spending one penny for the good of the house.

Edward Marston hadn’t anything to spend or he would have spent it.

He had made a dive into the house to escape the storm, and it had sheltered him for an hour or two. Now the doors were shut, and he was out in the streets again—homeless! penniless!

'I'm on my beam ends now, and no mistake,' he said to himself. 'What the dickens am I to do? I suppose I'd better go and get quietly into the river.'

He passed his hands over his soaked jacket, looked up at the sky and laughed.

'I don't think I need go to the river,' he muttered; 'if I stay here a little longer, I can be drowned where I am. I'll look about for an arch or a gateway; I may as well stand in the dry, if it doesn't cost any more than this.'

Edward Marston was a gentleman. You saw it in the face under the shapeless billycock hat; you saw it in the thin hands that every now and then wiped the rain-drops from his beard and moustache; you saw it in his bearing as he stepped from the poor shelter of the Blue Pigeons doorway and made a dart round the corner in search of a gateway.

He was evidently accustomed to something very like his present position, and there was nothing startlingly new to him in the utter emptiness of his pockets; but it was the first time he had been homeless.

He had been in America for some years, having left his native land in a hurry. He had returned a few weeks since, almost penniless, and tried in vain to drift into some means of gaining a livelihood. Every avenue was closed against him, for his past life was a sealed book, and he had no one to speak a good word for him. So he had hung on to existence till his last copper was spent, and now he was without even a shelter for the night.

He had been turned out of his lodging that morning, and everything he had had been detained for the four weeks' rent which he had promised again and again, and which he had never been able to pay.

A few papers had been all that he had been allowed to secure from his scanty belongings, and these only because they were of no value to any one but himself.

As he hurried round the corner in search of a convenient gateway in which to spend the night, he drew his hands out of his trousers pockets to shake from the brim of his hat a small pool of water which had begun to trickle down his neck. He drew the lining of his pocket up at the same time, and a piece of folded paper fell on the ground. He picked it up, opened it, and read it.

It was an old acceptance, torn with lying long in folds and dirty with being carried about.

'Birnie's acceptance for £500,' said Marston, as he read it over. 'Ten years old, and not worth the paper it's written on. I wonder how that got in my trousers pocket, instead of being with the other papers! I must have put it in in the hurry. I wonder whether Birnie's alive or dead! If he's alive, I hope he's as badly off as I am—curse him!'

He folded the old acceptance carefully, and put it back in his pocket.

'Birnie owed me more than this when I left England. By Jove, if I had the thousandth part of it now I should be happy. I could get out of this confounded rain and lie quiet a bit. I wonder what's become of the old set—if they've all gone to the dogs, like I have! Egerton was a queer fish, but he had rich relations. Ralph must have left a lot of money behind him, and Gurth Egerton would have some of it by hook or by crook. I wonder what the upshot of that affair was.

Walking along and thinking, with his eyes on the streaming streets, he was suddenly aroused from his reverie by a vigorous 'Hi, my man!'

A carriage, evidently a doctor's brougham, was drawn up in the middle of the roadway, and a gentleman was leaning out of the carriage window, and shouting at him to arrest his attention.

'Hi, my man!' said the gentleman, peering through the fog, as Marston looked up, 'can you tell me which is Little Queer Street about here? This fog makes all the streets look alike.'

'No, I can't,' answered Marston; 'I'm a stranger myself.'

'Well, Would you mind looking for me? My coachman can't see the names written up at the corners from the road, and I can't tramp up and down the neighbourhood in the rain—I should get wet.'

'What about me?' asked Marston, with an offended tone in his voice.

The occupant of the carriage gave a short little laugh.

'My good friend, I don't think a little more rain will do you much harm; you don't appear to have been under an umbrella lately.'

Marston remembered that he was a penniless outcast, soaked to the

skin; for the moment he had forgotten it, and fancied he was a gentleman walking home.

'What do you want me to look for?' he said, altering his tone.

'Little Queer Street, No. 15; and if you find it I'll give you a shilling.'

Marston walked up one side street and down another, peering through the fog towards those wonderful arrangements in white and black with which the Board of Works are good enough to label the street corners, and which are so high up and so small that an ordinary-sighted person requires a ladder and a magnifying glass before he can tell what they are, and at night even this would be insufficient unless accompanied by an electric light.

After much wandering up and down, and straining of the eyeballs and cross-examination of a solitary policeman, who was standing up out of the wet, and enjoying a quiet pipe down a particularly deserted side street, Marston discovered where Little Queer Street was, and ascertained which side of the way and which end was honoured by the presence of that No. 15, which was evidently about to be visited by a gentleman who kept his carriage.

He came back with the intelligence, and communicated it to the coachman.

'Wait a minute, Cook, I haven't rewarded this poor fellow for his trouble,' said the doctor, for the coachman was whipping up the horses, without waiting for such a trifle.

The doctor fumbled first in his trousers pockets, then in his waistcoat, and then in his overcoat.

'Cook,' he exclaimed, presently, 'have you got a shilling?'

'No, sir.'

'Dear me, how very peculiar! no more have I. My good man I'm very sorry—most extraordinary thing—but I've come out without any money. Here, however, is my card. Call to-morrow and I will leave a shilling with the servant for you. Drive on, Cook.'

Cook, the coachman, whipped up his horses and shot off, splashing Marston with mud, and leaving him crestfallen and disappointed in the middle of the road, with a card in his hand.

'My luck!' he said, as the light of the carriage vanished in the mist; 'my infernal luck! That shilling would have been a bed and breakfast. I earned that shilling, and I never wanted it more in my life. What the dickens does a two-horse doctor do here, I wonder! I thought he was sent by Providence to give me a shilling, at first. Bah! Providence turned me up long ago. Let's look at the card.'

He came out of the roadway, and stood under a lamp-post to read the name of his debtor.

The light flickered and blew to and fro in the night air, and the rain, driven against the glass, made a mist through which the rays fell feebly. But feebly as they fell on the small piece of pasteboard and the face of the man who read it, they showed the sudden gleam of joy that flashed into his white damp face.

For a moment he stood speechless as one dazed; then he read the card aloud, to make sure that he was not dreaming:

'Dr. Oliver Birnie,

'The Lodge,

'Lilac Tree Road,

'St. John's Wood.'

'Oliver Birnie!' he exclaimed, triumphantly. 'And keeps a carriage and pair! By Jove! Providence has not deserted me. I'm glad I didn't recognise him in the dim light of carriage lamps, or I should have cried out and betrayed myself. I can do better by waiting, perhaps. Ah, Mr. Oliver Birnie! it isn't a shilling I've earned to-night—it's many and many a golden pound. I've one bird safe, at any rate. Now I've only Gurth Egerton to find. If he's gone up in the world too, you are all right for a little while, Ned Marston.'

CHAPTER IV.
NO. FIFTEEN, LITTLE QUEER STREET.

Little Queer Street, Seven Dials, is not a particularly nice street to live in, but as every house in it is inhabited to the utmost extent of its inhabitable capacity, it is evidently a street in which a great many people are very glad to live.

Squalor and vice and misery, and everything that can make life horrible, find their way into Little Queer Street, but fail to frighten the inhabitants. Dirt they like—it suits them; most of them have been brought up from infancy in close contact with it, and would feel uncomfortable without it. As to vice and misery, they have seen so much of them that any terror such things might once have possessed has long since worn off. They may be real spectres to some people, but to them they are only clumsy turnip-headed bogies, and he must be a very young native of the locality indeed who would betray the suspicion of a shudder at the sight of either.

All day long the muddy roadway is blocked with costers' barrows, who drive a roaring trade in cheap crockery, stale vegetables, doubtful meat, and still more doubtful fish, which one class looks upon as abominations, and another holds in high esteem as luxuries.

There are shops, too, in Little Queer Street. Such shops! Dusty, dirty, barn-looking rooms, where sallow-faced women sit, dishevelled and ragged, amid old boots and shoes, tumbled and dirty dresses, old coats, and promiscuous heaps of cast-off wearing apparel.

Sometimes the shop is not large enough to contain the varied assortment of 'goods' in which the proprietor deals, and a portion of the narrow pavement is taken into the service.

Rows of boots—very much worn at the heels, and very shabby about the uppers, but thickly coated with a blacking which is rather sticky than shiny—stand in military array to tempt the shoeless.

But though the habits and customs and source of income of the inhabitants of the lower portion of the houses in Little Queer Street are thus openly demonstrated, the rest is all mystery. How the second, third, and fourth floors get their living, what they are, and what they do, it would be a difficult matter to explain. Most of them evidently have very small incomes and very large families. There are more children of all sizes and conditions in Little Queer Street than in any other street in the United Kingdom.

Almost every female carries a baby, and some females carry two. There are children in heaps at the corner of the street, children on the doorsteps, children in the gutter, children under the wheels of hansom cabs, up the lamp-posts, hanging over the window-sills, crowding the staircases, lying in the areas, rolling with the cabbage-stalks under the stalls, swarming and crawling all day long among the crowd, laughing, crying, screaming, and playing, unheeded, uncared for, unowned.

Their hair is rough and matted, their little hands are black with mud, their faces are grimed with dirt, and often, alas! scarred with disease. Sometimes they get lost, every now and then one or two will be run over by a cab or a brewer's dray, and sometimes an epidemic will swoop down upon Little Queer Street, and thin the ranks of the great gutter army, and make more room for the remainder.

All day long these human waifs loiter in the street, at the peril of life and limb. They have no regular meal-times. They get a slice of bread-and-butter, occasionally a slice of bread-and-treacle, at irregular periods, and this constitutes their staple sustenance.

Many of them are turned out at seven, when mother and father go to work, and called in again at whatever hour it may suit father and mother to return. It is considered safer to leave them outside than in. Out of doors they may get killed; indoors they might damage the 'furniture' or set fire to the house.

Two days after Edward Marston's strange meeting with Dr. Birnie, a little girl sat at one of the open doorways in Little Queer Street, gazing vacantly at the busy scene around her. A stranger would have been instantly attracted by the extraordinary appearance of her face. *It was quite clean*. Her hair was neatly brushed, and over her plain little brown merino frock she actually wore a white pinafore. Not only would a stranger be struck with amazement at the phenomenal appearance—a clean and tidy little girl on a Little Queer Street door-step—but the inhabitants have been for a long time so struck with it that Gertie

Heckett, the child in question, has become quite a local celebrity.

'That gal 'll die a orful death,' said Mrs. Maloney, of the fish-shop at the corner, to her next-door neighbour, Mrs. Moss. 'Larst night she came for a pen'orth o' fried fish, and I guv her a ha'penny too much change out o' sixpence, and she guv it me back.'

'Lor,' replied Mrs. Moss, 'you don't say so! I fancy she can't be quite right 'ere.' And Mrs. Moss put a very dirty and very fat forefinger on her matronly brow.

'I don't believe she's old Heckett's gal at all,' added Mrs. Maloney, as she stared hard across the road to the doorway where sat the unconscious object of her criticism. 'It's my belief she's been stole, like the gal in the play as was a nobleman's dorter, arter all.'

What Mrs. Moss would have replied to this suggestion can never be known, for at this moment the attention of both ladies was attracted by the very extraordinary conduct of the child in question.

Gertie Heckett, who had long been wistfully looking up the street, suddenly leaped up and made a joyful dash at a gentleman who was elbowing his way through the crowd.

He was a good-looking, well-dressed gentleman, of about eight-and-thirty. Gertie Heckett's pretty face lit up with pleasure the moment she caught sight of him. She was by his side in a moment, and looking up into his face with her wistful blue eyes.

'Oh, Dr. Birnie, I'm so glad you 've come. Grandfather's worse—I'm sure he is.'

'What makes you think he's worse, my child?'

'Because he gets crosser and crosser, and'—here a flush of shame came upon her cheeks and she held her head down—'and because he swears at me worse than ever.'

Dr. Birnie laughed. He didn't notice the pained tone in which the child made her confession.

'Cross and swears, eh, little one? That's a good sign, not a bad one. People are always cross when they're getting well.'

'Oh, then I don't mind his being cross; but, Dr. Birnie, will you be very kind, and do me a favour?'

She looked up at the doctor timidly, as though she was taking a great liberty.

'A favour? Eh, what is it? Has your doll got the measles, or does Lion want a cough mixture?'

The child laughed for a moment, tickled by the notion; but her face resumed its serious expression again directly.

'No, it isn't that, Dr. Birnie; but I want you to ask grandfather not to swear at me. It hurts me here.'

She put her hand on her heart, and spoke with such earnest emphasis, that the doctor stopped on the threshold of the house, which they had just reached, and looked earnestly in her face.

'Poor little thing!' he said, laying his hand kindly on her smoothly plaited hair, 'what a shame it is!' Then, without answering Gertie Heckett's petition, he ran rapidly up the stairs, the child following him.

Mr. Josh Heckett, the invalid, was in bed when the doctor entered; that is, he was lying partially dressed, with a dirty counterpane flung over him and the pillows propped up under his head. The said head was covered with surgical bandages, and a considerable portion of the face below was 'discoloured and bruised. That Mr. Heckett was in pain was evident, for every time he moved—and he was very restless—he drew liberally from that well of Saxon, impure and defiled, which is so largely patronized by the free-born Englishman who wishes to add force to his conversation.

He was a strange-looking invalid, with his burly limbs and giant strength lying prostrate, like a lightning-stricken oak, and he was surrounded by strange companions. Round the walls, wherever a nail could be driven, hung cages full of all sorts and conditions of birds, from the parrot to the lark. Lying about on the floor, in various attitudes of repose, were two toy terriers, a fox-hound, and a fierce and exceptionally ugly bull-dog. A pretty King Charles spaniel, with a litter of puppies, occupied an empty box in one of the corners, and scattered about the room in picturesque confusion were rabbits in hutches, squirrels in revolving cages, guinea-pigs, and white mice, and a few other animals, who had rolled themselves up so completely into a ball for their noonday siesta, that it was quite impossible to say what they were until they condescended to disentangle their heads from their tails.

The central figure of the group, however, was a splendid mastiff dog. He lay at the foot of Heckett's bed, a perfect picture of unstudied grace. His leonine head was slightly on one side, as though listening for a footstep, and his paws were crossed in front of him. His sleek fawn coat shone like velvet, and spoke of some one's constant care and attention. There was something of contempt for the other inhabitants of the room in the dog's look at times. When the other dogs barked, he would glare towards them with a lazy, sneering expression, as much as to say, 'Poor idiots! what are you frightened about?' But suddenly he became agitated himself, and sprang from the floor. He uttered a deep growl, and crouched in an attitude of attack, There was a footstep on the stairs. The door opened, and Dr Birnie walked in.

At sight of him the dog dropped his tail, and, growling, slunk back into the corner of the room, with his eyes steadily fixed on the doctor, half in dislike, half in fear.

'Why don't you teach that brute not to growl at me, Heckett?' said Dr. Birnie, seizing a rabbit-hutch by the bedside, and sitting on it, much to the terror of the occupant.

'It's his natur,' the man answered. 'He don't like you; he's a very good judge, is Lion—he knows my pals in a minute.'

'I suppose you mean he knows your friends from your enemies?'

'Yes.'

'Then he ought not to growl at me. I'm one of your friends.'

'You're friendly as long as it suits yer purpose, that's all.'

'All right, Heckett; have it your own way. How's the head?'

'Orful; can't sleep with it.'

'Let's look at it again.'

With a hand as gentle as a woman's, Birnie removed the bandages, and examined the wounded man.

After carefully looking at a rapidly healing wound, he put back the strappings and the linen, and felt the patient's pulse.

'All right, Heckett, you're going on well. You'll be able to get out in a week. By Jove! I thought it was all up with you that night you sent for me in a hurry. I didn't expect you'd live till the morning.'

'But I did, ye see; and I mean to live a good bit longer yet. Josh Heckett isn't going to snuff: it just for a crack on the head.'

'No, you weren't born to die that way, Josh.'

The invalid glanced up at the doctor's face with a look of such intense rage that it convulsed his swollen features, and made him cry out with pain.

'Mind what you say, governor,' he hissed, clinching his fist under the counterpane. 'If I come to a bad end there's others as 'll have to be in the same boat with me.'

The doctor laughed, and turned the conversation.

'How does Gertie manage?'

'Oh, all right. She's a kind wench; I don't know what I should do without her. She's a fust-class nuss, and she attends the animiles, and she can talk to the customers better nor I can.'

'Well, then, why do you swear at her?'

The man looked at him a moment as if he had not heard aright.

'Swear at her! Why, you'll ask me why I looks at her next. There ain't nothin' in swearing at anybody, is there? 'Tain't hitting of 'em, is it?'

Mr. Josh Heckett was lost in amazement. The doctor objected to his swearing at Gertie. Why, he swore at everything—at the dogs, at the guinea-pigs, at the chairs and tables, at himself—why should he make an exception of Gertie?

'Well, I'm blowed!' he added, when he had fully realized the enormity of the objection. 'This here's a free country, and a cove ain't to swear at his own gal. Oh, crikey!

'Well, don't do it, Josh; that's all I ask you. The girl's a good little lass, and she doesn't like it.'

Josh Heckett pulled himself up in bed.

'Look here, Oliver Birnie, Hessquire, Hemd., you get my head well, that's your business. Me and my gal's got on pretty well without your assistance up to now, and we're wery much obliged, but "declined with thanks," as they sez in the noose-papers. Oliver Birnie, Hessquire, Hemd., drop it.'

'You're facetious to-day, Josh. Never mind; you're always glad enough

to send for me when you're in a mess.'

'Yes, and you was very glad of my services once.'

The doctor's brow darkened as he muttered:

'That was a bad time for a good many of us—a time we should like to forget.'

'I dessay,' growled Heckett; 'and as you'd like other people to forget too. You've got on in the world, and rolls your eyes hup, and does the wirtuous now. I can't afford to.'

'You've had no end of money,' said the doctor. 'Heaven only knows what you do with it. Why do you keep on this wretched den, and these wretched animals? You could afford to retire and live decently and in comfort.'

'No, I couldn't. I've spent all the money I ever made. You don't believe it, but I have. Besides, I must keep on this place. If I hadn't a crib like this, how could I live? It isn't so respectable as the old crib you and Egerton and Marston, and all the lot of you, was glad enough to come to once, perhaps, but it soots me quite as well.'

The man winked at the doctor as well as his bruised face would let him. The doctor thrust his hands in his pockets, and walked up and down the room, treading on the toy terrier's tail, and narrowly escaping a grab from the bull-dog in consequence.

'Heckett, do you ever think what might have happened if Marston had turned traitor?'

The invalid went pale on the only side of his face that could change colour.

'Don't talk like that,' he growled. 'I ain't well, and it worrits me. Bah! he's died in furrin parts, or gone too stone broke ever to get 'ome agin. I ain't always sure as may be it wasn't him as done it. What did he bolt to America for directly afterwards? Only he hadn't no motive, and the other had, and I allus looks at motives. Besides, anyway, it 'ud be wus for you, now Egerton's drownded, than it would for me. You're better off now than you wos then, and he might want to go snacks, perhaps. A poor cove like me wouldn't be high enough game for him to fly at.'

Birnie glanced at the old dog-fancier, as he lay with his grey hair straggling over his bandaged head.

'You're very poor, aren't you, Heckett!' he said presently with a peculiar intonation in his voice.

'Yes, I am. Curse you! what do you look like that at me for? Perhaps you think I ain't poor? Perhaps you thinks as I'm Baron Rotschild, a-livin' in this here drum for the benefit o' my 'elth? Perhaps you thinks as I lends money to the Emperor O' Rooshia at five per cent., and only goes out after dark, for fear the Goverment should call in the day-time for a loan, and have to go away without it?' The old man rose in the bed, his body quivering with rage.

'Nonsense, Heckett!' said the doctor, trying to quiet him.

'What a queer old fellow you are! Of course you're poor. Why, you wouldn't worry me for money as you do if you weren't.'

'No, of course, I shouldn't.'

'There, there,' continued the doctor, arranging his pillows and smoothing the bandage that Heckett had moved in his excitement; 'lie still and get well; that's what you've got to do. I'll come and see you again in a day or two.'

The doctor nodded to his patient, tumbled over the bulldog, and made a bolt for the door. Outside Gertie was waiting for him.

'Your grandfather's better, my child,' he said. 'He'll be about in a week again. Good-bye.'

Dr. Birnie patted her face and went out of the door. He walked rapidly up Little Queer Street and through the Dials, making his way into New Oxford Street. Then he turned up past the Museum, and into Russell Square. Leaving the square, and turning into one of the streets branching off from it, he became aware of something shiny on a doorstep that seemed to shine right *at* him.

He looked up.

He nodded pleasantly, for he had recognised the highly polished face of Mr. Duck, the clerk of his legal advisers.

'Fine morning, Mr. Duck!'

'Doctor,' gasped the shiny one, running after him, and grabbing him by the coat-tails, for Birnie had walked on rapidly, 'Doctor, one moment. I wish you'd come in and see Mrs. Turvey. She's quite queer in her head. I can't make her out.'

‘What, Mr. Egerton’s housekeeper?’

‘Yes, doctor. She’s quite light-headed. Swears she’s seen his ghost. Just come in and see her, sir, if you will. It’s the rummest case I ever heard of.’

The doctor walked back with Mr. Jabez.

‘It’s shock to the system,’ he said; ‘that’s all. When did she hear the news of his death?’

‘Last night, sir,’ answered Mr. Duck. ‘I told her, sir. Thought it was best. Old and faithful servant, sir—very much attached. He’s left her five hundred pounds in his will—as of course you know, sir, being executor.’

‘Of course,’ muttered the doctor, and then he silently followed his guide into Gurth Egerton’s house.

As he passed through the hall, and saw the late owner’s picture hanging there, his memory went back to a time when he, Oliver Birnie, and this very Gurth Egerton were companions in adversity, and were not quite sure where their next pound was coming from.

Now he was a rising practitioner, with a balance at his banker’s, and Gurth—well, Gurth had been drowned in the *Bon Espoir*, and had left his housekeeper five hundred pounds.

CHAPTER V.
MISS DUCK HAS A WORD TO SAY.

Mr. Duck was at breakfast one morning in his eight-roomed house at Dalston, and his revered sister, Miss Georgina, was pouring out the first cup of tea in the pot for him, and selecting the worst piece of bacon and the most suspicious-looking egg from the dish before her. Having jerked these delicacies on to his plate, and thus ensured the survival of the fittest, she proceeded to help herself to the remainder.

'Jabez,' said Miss Georgina suddenly, 'some day you will die!'

'Lor', Georgie, don't!' exclaimed Jabez, bolting a particularly cindery piece of bacon, and thereby nearly bringing his sister's prophecy off there and then.

When he had coughed and choked and increased in shininess from ten to thirty candle power, he gradually recovered, and, polishing his perspiring face with a large red handkerchief, proceeded to expostulate with Georgina on the impropriety of talking of death to a man with his mouth full.

'You are a weak-minded idiot, Jabez!' answered the lady. 'All men are. Do you imagine that you *won't* die?'

'No, my dear; of course not. Only, why remind me of an unpleasant fact just when I'm having my breakfast?'

'Because it is only at breakfast I see you, and I think you ought to make your will while you are in a sound state of mind. You've changed lately, brother Jabez—changed very much for the worse. You don't come home to tea, and you have ceased to take me into your confidence.'

'Nonsense, my dear!' stammered Mr. Duck, going very red. 'A little business has detained me the last night or two, I confess, but——'

'Jabez Duck, you're deceiving me. You're making a fool of yourself.'

'Georgina—really, upon my word——'

'Hold your tongue. I've looked after you and managed your house for more than twenty years, and I'm not going to desert you now. I will protect you against designing minxes with the last drop of my blood.'

Miss Duck waved her teaspoon in the air at an imaginary minx, and brought it down on her cup with a clang, as though she were striking her shield with a sword, and inviting the foes of Jabez Duck to come on.

Jabez grew very uncomfortable, and fidgeted about on his chair. The eagle eye of Georgina was reading his soul. He knew it was. He felt that the name of Susan Turvey was written on his guilty brow, and that Georgina was spelling it out.

He plucked up a little determination, and inquired, in a quavering voice, if his sister would kindly drop conundrums and come to the point.

Yes, she would come to the point. There was an old frump of a housekeeper at Mr. Egerton's—that was the point.

'Oh, indeed!' said Jabez. 'And pray who has been telling you this fine cock-and-bull story?'

'You yourself,' answered Miss Georgina triumphantly.

Herewith she put her hand into her pocket, and drew forth a crumpled piece of paper, which she handed to him.

'I found this in your trousers pocket.'

Jabez rose in wrath. The cloud on his brow quite obscured the skin for a moment.

'Georgina, you've no business at my trousers pockets! It's—dash it—it's embezzlement!'

Miss Duck laughed, an irritating, satirical little laugh, and, seizing the piece of paper which her brother held in his hand, she spread it out and read it aloud.

'Dear Mrs. Turvey—may I say Susan?—Dr. Birnie tells me, my own, you are progressing favourably, and may see visitors in a week's time. I count the hours. As the poet says:—

'"Thou wert all the world to me, love,
For which my soul did pine;
A green isle in the sea, love,
To be your valentine."

Oh, Susan, when reason returns, and health mantles your cheek once more, may I hope that you will grant the prayer of your ever-devoted Jabez?'

'Give it to me!' shrieked Mr. Duck, making a violent effort to seize his crumpled *billet-doux*.

'Certainly,' said Miss Georgina, tossing it contemptuously across the table to her brother, who tore it into fragments, and jumped upon it.

'How dare you, Georgina?' he exclaimed—how dare you interfere with my business? It's a crime to steal a letter. You could be prosecuted by the Postmaster-General.'

'Postmaster fiddlestick! I hope you didn't send any sane woman such twaddle as that, Jabez.'

'No, I didn't; I thought better of it,' stammered Mr. Duck.

'That's nothing. It wasn't a copy of a letter at all. It was an exercise of the imagination, that's all.'

'Well, don't leave your exercises in your pockets, Jabez.'

'I'll empty my pockets, Georgina—rely on that. Never do you have another coat or waistcoat of mine to brush till it's been searched as if it were a shoplifter brought into the police station. Give me my hat and coat. I'm going. Good morning, Georgina.'

Mr. Jabez burst out of the room in a towering passion. He brushed his hat the wrong way and quite took the shine off it; and when he jumped up on the box seat of his regular omnibus, there was so little shine in his face that the driver looked round to see if there was any fog about.

Mr. Duck was excessively annoyed that his sister had found this copy of his first love-letter in his pocket. He had intended her to know nothing about the matter till it was all arranged. In fact he wasn't quite sure that he should let her know anything about it till the ceremony was over, and he couldn't be bullied out of his resolve. He went in mortal terror of Georgina. She had a sharp tongue and a sharp eye, and she persisted in looking upon him as a weak-minded man, who could only prosper with her assistance.

When he had called at Mr. Egerton's house on the morning after the tea party, he had only seen Topsey, and Topsey had told him her aunt was very ill and couldn't see anybody, because she'd seen a ghost. She, Topsey, had seen the ghost too, and she described it. Mr. Duck's horror was intense when he found the apparition the child described was the exact counterpart of the firm's drowned client. It was coming away from the house that he met Dr. Birnie, and sent him in to see what was the matter with the housekeeper. From the doctor he learned the particulars of the case. Mrs. Turvey declared she had seen the ghost of her master, and the child corroborated her.

It couldn't be Gurth Egerton in flesh and blood, because he would have come in and spoken to them. He would have said, 'Here I am,' or made some observation.

But this ghost said nothing, and when Topsey, who had seized her aunt, and hidden her face, looked up, the door was shut and the ghost was gone.

Mrs. Turvey came to herself to find Topsey sobbing beside her and white with terror. They got downstairs the best way they could, and locked themselves in, and had the gas on full all night.

The next morning Mrs. Turvey was very ill, and Dr. Birnie had attended her ever since.

Jabez, who could keep very little to himself, had told this ghost story, with sundry reservations, to his sister, and she, finding the draft of a tender declaration in the pocket of a pair of trousers he had left out to be brushed, immediately put two and two together, like the clever woman that she was, and determined to tackle her brother at once.

Miss Georgina Duck was a strong-minded, hard-featured damsel, who had passed sweet seventeen some thirty years ago. She was mistress of a house without being plagued with a husband. She managed her brother's home, and her word was law. She ruled him, and she ruled the lodgers in the first floor, and she ruled the charwoman who came in to help occasionally, and she ruled the butcher and the baker and the milkman, and everybody in the neighbourhood who came within the circle of her magic influence.

She even ruled the cats. No cats came into *her* garden, or if by chance they did cross it *en route* for the gardens beyond, it was always in fear and trembling. Before the eye of Georgina Duck the most daring Tom would quail, and it was wonderful how quickly the whole of the

neighbouring feline colony learned to shun a conflict with Miss Duck.

Now this was hardly the woman quietly to resign her sceptre after a long despotic reign just because her elderly idiot of a brother had taken a fancy to an old woman's legacy.

'A pretty thing, indeed,' said Miss Duck to her bosom friend, Miss Jackson, from over the road, 'for him to go making a fool of himself at his age! The house wouldn't hold her and me long. I suppose I should be expected to turn out. Not me!'

The idea of Miss Duck turning out so shocked Miss Jackson that she fell upon her friend's neck and wept.

Miss Jackson always wept. Tears with her supplied the place of speech.

'Don't be a fool, 'Lizer,' said Miss Duck, harshly. 'There's nothing to cry about. He hasn't done it yet. *And he isn't going to!*''

If Mr. Duck had been present he would have accepted his fate there and then, and resigned Mrs. Turvey without a struggle. Fortunately, he still believed that he could evade the watchful guardianship of Georgina, and did not allow his little plans to be disconcerted.

CHAPTER VI.
AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE.

At the lodge-gates of an old-fashioned country mansion, which stands in a well-wooded park shut in among the Surrey hills, a young girl was waiting one winter night. Every now and then she would turn and glance towards the house, as though she expected some one to come from it.

Twice she fancied she heard a footstep and stepped out into the shadow of the roadway, and twice she found her faney had deceived her.

But the third time it was no fancy. There was a well-known step upon the broad gravel path, and in the dim light she could see the figure of a man coming rapidly towards her. She gave a nervous glance towards the lodge-window, then darted out into the roadway, and, walking in the shadow of the hedge that skirted the park, reached a spot where the bend of the road would hide her from the view of any one looking out of the lodge-gates.

The man, walking rapidly, soon caught her up.

She ran to him, and, looking up into his face, questioned him eagerly with her eyes.

He shook his head sorrowfully.

‘Failure, Bess,’ he said. ‘I must leave this place to-night.’

The girl gave a little cry, and, taking the man’s arm, clung closely to him.

‘Yes, Bess; the old man’s as hard as iron. I flung myself on his mercy. I told him all. He heard what I had to say, and then turned me out like a dog. Swore I wanted to ruin him. The old miser!’

‘Hush, George—he is your father.’

‘He was, you mean. We’ve parted for ever. He says I’m no son of his. So be it. He’s no father of mine. A paltry thousand would have put me straight.’

‘Can nothing be done, George?’

‘Nothing, my girl. I’m what they call dead broke. I must get up to town, and trust to luck. I’m young and strong, and if I can’t pay my debts, at any rate I can earn bread-and-cheese.’

The girl let him run on, but his flippant manner distressed her. You could see that in her face. The dark eyes were filled with tears, and the red lips trembled. She was a village beauty—a handsome brunette—this lodge-keeper’s daughter, and many a village swain had laid his heart at her feet, but she had laughed their love away, and kept her heart for one who was far above her. The man by her side was her master’s son, young George Heritage, heir to the house and lands—‘the young squire’ they called him in the village, but Bess only called him ‘George.’

Bess Marks was no ordinary rustic beauty, or I question very much if she would have won George Heritage’s heart. She was a strong-minded, pure-hearted, clever girl—a girl who exercised a strange fascination over the young squire.

Their sweethearting was a profound secret from every one. There was enough romance in it to redeem it from vulgarity, and it was a perfectly serious affair.

No thought of harm had ever entered the young man’s breast. He had accepted the fact that he had fallen in love with a lodge-keeper’s daughter as he accepted the fact that he had got heavily into debt. He couldn’t help it. That was his answer to himself when he and his conscience had a quiet quarter of an hour together.

Some day he supposed he would have to pay his debts; some day he supposed he would marry Bess. ‘Some day’ was a movable feast, and so George didn’t worry himself about it.

But to-night a crisis had come. To-night he had to begin a new life. He was no longer Squire Heritage’s heir.

George had not exaggerated the nature of his interview with his father. The old squire was the last man in the world who should have been George’s father.

He was as careful of money as his son was prodigal. His notions of what a young man of three-and-twenty ought to be were founded upon what he himself had been at that age—a steady young fellow, contented to ride about his father’s estate, talk with the old men, and spend his days about the land and his evenings in the library. He was matter of fact, stern, and uncompromising. He came of Puritan stock, and he had

notions of morality which were scandalized by the fashionable follies of to-day.

He was bitterly disappointed in his son, in whom he had hoped to find a companion. When Mrs Heritage died the lad was fifteen and at school, and he saw but little of his father. In due course he went to Oxford, and there he developed his ‘fast’ tendencies. He got into a fast set, went the pace, and ran heavily into debt.

The squire had him home, read him a lesson, paid his debts, and told him he need not go back to Oxford again; that what he was learning there wasn’t likely to do him any good.

The old hall was dull for the lad. About a fortnight he grew tired of dining with his father and going to bed at ten. He looked out for something to amuse him, and two things happened which influenced the whole after-course of his life. He fell in love with the lodge-keeper’s daughter, handsome Bess Marks, and he took to going up to London and joined a club.

Gradually the club claimed most of his attention, and he broke out into another gambling fit.

He took to attending race meetings and to card-playing, and once again came what in sporting language is called a ‘cropper.’ He got his name on stamped paper which had an awkward habit of coming due, and let things go on in his easy, happy-go-lucky way, till he found himself in such a muddle that he was bound to appeal to his father.

A second time the squire drew a cheque and paid his son’s creditors. But from that moment there was an estrangement. George resented the severity of the lecture which accompanied the cheque, and took little pains to conceal his feelings.

The squire was stately and cold. His son avoided his society, and it was not forced upon him.

But when, after the lapse of a few months, a fresh burden of debt came upon the scapegrace, and the young man went half-defiantly to his father for assistance, the storm burst.

The old squire was honestly indignant, and he spoke his mind.

The terrified servants passing to and fro heard high words that evening in the little library, and the voices of father and son quivered with passion.

The young man was a favourite with all the people about the place, and many were the hopes expressed that the squire wouldn’t be too hard on Master George, as was a bit wild, perhaps, as was but natural, but he’d settle down when he’d sown his wild oats, bless him, and be a squire as ‘ud do the old hall some credit yet.

The good souls who spoke up for the young scapegrace didn’t know what a plentiful crop of oats Master George had sown, neither had they had to draw the cheques to pay for this rather unprofitable agricultural produce.

George and his father quarrelled fiercely this time. The squire swore that not one penny more should George have. He was a reprobate and a vagabond. He was wasting his substance in riotous living and bringing discredit on an honoured name.

The young man in turn reproached his father. He had made the home dull and repellent. It was like a monastery more than a gentleman’s house. Because he was no longer young himself and had had his pleasure and seen life, he had no sympathy with young men. George wasn’t going to turn goody-goody and take to psalm-singing and dryasdust books for anybody. If his father wouldn’t give him any more money, he’d do without it. He didn’t want money that was grudged him. Let the squire keep his money, if he was so fond of it.

Taunt succeeded taunt, reproach reproach, and so the wordy warfare was worked up to its climax.

It ended by the squire denouncing his son as an unprincipled rascal, and swearing that he would disinherit him.

Then George spoke some bitter words and marched out of his father’s presence, vowing that he should see his face no more.

‘I’m young and strong, and I’ll be independent of you,’ he said. ‘You say I’m no son of yours—so be it. From this moment I renounce my name. I have no father—you have no son. Leave your money to the missionaries, or do what the deuce you like with it. You can’t take it to heaven with you when you die.’

With these words the young man strode out of his father’s presence, bade the servants in a loud voice pack up his things and send them up to Waterloo Station the next day, as he was going on a journey; and then he

walked hastily down the Avenue, his small travelling-bag in his hand, and went to the spot where Bess was anxiously awaiting the result of the interview.

'Oh, George, what will you do?' moaned the girl.

'Do, my darling?' answered the young man, looking at her lovingly, and then stooping down and kissing her. 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll marry you, and we'll settle down into a hardworking young couple, and perhaps, some day, if we're good, we shall have a public-house.'

Bess was hot and cold, and the rich blood faded from her olive cheeks only to rush back again and suffuse them with a burning crimson, for George's sudden proposition had turned her first giddy and then faint; but, confused and troubled as she was, she could not help laughing at the idea of George keeping a public-house.

In spite of his gay manner, there is no doubt he was in earnest in his offer to Bess.

'You'll keep me steady,' he went on, in reply to her remonstrances.

'I'm a ship without a rudder now, and I might drift on to the rocks. You'll keep me straight for port. I know you will, little woman.'

'But, George, think of your friends.'

'I have no friends. From this day I'm George Smith, and you shall be Mrs. Smith. I'll get something to do in the City, and earn my dinner before I eat it. It'll be quite a romance.'

George rubbed his hands. He was already in imagination bringing home his golden salary on Saturday, and flinging it into Bess's lap.

Many idle words he said that evening, and many serious ones, but the upshot of it all was that he went off to town to look for quiet furnished apartments in which they could start housekeeping, and to buy a licence to marry Bess Marks.

And Bess went back to the lodge, half broken-hearted and half mad with delight, to cry on her father's neck and keep the big secret that her lips were dying to utter.

And all supper-time she sat and looked at him and wondered what he would do when she was gone, and what he would think of her.

George had told her that her father must not know they were married —'Not for a little while, darling,' he said.

He thought if the lodge-keeper knew it, the faithful old servant would not be able to keep the news long from his master.

George Heritage had made up his mind to marry Bess Marks, but he couldn't quite screw his courage up to the point of having his *mésalliance* proclaimed.

That he put off to 'some day.'

On the following morning, while Bess was sitting by the open window thinking of her sweetheart and talking to her father, answering at random, and dropping furtive little tears on to her needlework, George was roaming about London looking for furnished apartments suitable for a young couple with limited means.

After trying a few dozen houses where cards were exhibited in the windows, and finding everything that he did *not* want, such as musical societies, religious families, new babies on each floor, and high rents and low ceilings, he came to a little house in a street at Dalston, in the front window of which hung a card, and on the card was written 'First floor to let furnished. Apply within.'

George applied, and the rooms just suited him. Sixteen shillings a week was not dear, certainly, for a bedroom and sitting-room; and though the landlady seemed a little starchy and inclined to be acidulated, she was very clean and respectable-looking.

That evening when Mr. Jabez Duck returned from the City, Miss Georgina informed him that she'd let the first floor—no references, but rent a week in advance—to a Mr. and Mrs. George Smith, a newly married couple.

'What are they like?'

'I don't know,' answered Georgina, tartly; 'I've only seen the gentleman at present, and he *is* a gentleman.'

'Well, my dear, I didn't expect he was a lady;' with which remark Mr. Jabez sat down and had his tea, utterly oblivious of the terrible contempt which spread itself over the features of his sister, who despised small jokes of any kind, and her brother's small jokes most of all.

CHAPTER VII.
A CHAT OVER OLD TIMES.

There is a quiet little road in St. John's Wood which seems specially to have been designed for ladies and gentlemen of a retiring disposition, who wish for a peaceful arcadia at a convenient distance from trams, omnibuses, and railways. You turn out of the main thoroughfare to find yourself suddenly shut in between a double row of small villas, all well set back in high-walled gardens, and further protected from the gaze of the curious by luxuriant foliage.

The Arcadian inhabitants of this out-of-the-world by-way—a by-way so narrow that a hansom cab can scarcely be driven down it without getting on to the kerb—seem to be slightly suspicious of visitors. The villas are constructed on a system of defence not unpopular during the middle ages. There is no room for a drawbridge or a moat, but this deficiency is supplied by a very high and solid garden gate, which effectually bars the progress of the attacking party—and not only his progress but his view.

Over the tops of the trees in the front garden, if you stand well back on the opposite side, you may catch sight of the tops of the villa chimney-pots, but of the villas themselves you can see nothing.

The garden gate affords you no better standpoint. It is a solid piece of woodwork, grim and forbidding as a prison door.

If you knock and ring with the idea that the gate will be opened, and you will thus get a glimpse within, you are wofully mistaken.

Your summons may be answered or not, as the case may be. If it is, a small wooden flap at the back of an iron grill is let down, and a face appears blocking up the aperture. The eyes of this face regard you carefully, and if these eyes fail to recognise you the lips move and request to know your business. If your explanation is satisfactory, you may be admitted; if it is not, up goes the wooden flap again with a bang, and silence reigns around.

At the gate of one of these curious and secluded little villas, which by the inscription on the door-posts we learn is called 'The Lodge,' and by the brass plate on the door we find is inhabited by Dr. Oliver Birnie, there stands a gentleman whom we have seen before.

He is a tall, good-looking fellow, very shabby about the clothes, and not particularly tidy about the hair and beard.

The face which blocks up the little peephole of The Lodge is a female face of the domestic servant order, and it evidently regards the visitor with some suspicion. There has been a preliminary verbal passage of arms, and the female face is hot and angry-looking.

'If you can't tell me your name, I shan't go and disturb master,' say the lips.

'You go and tell your master what I say,' answers the shabby gentleman—'that an old friend from abroad wishes to see him.'

The lips move again—this time in a curled-up and scornful manner.

'People as is ashamed o' their names ain't no friends o' master's, I'm sure.'

'That's more than you know, you impertinent hussy! Take my message.'

'Shan't!'

With that the flap goes to with a bang.

The shabby gentleman is not in the least abashed. He takes the bell-handle calmly and proceeds to tug at it.

He continues tugging till the female face, hotter and angrier than ever, once more appears at the peephole.

'If you don't go away I shall send for the perlice.'

'Will you take my message?'

'No, master ain't at home.'

'Then why the devil didn't you say so before?'

'Cus I didn't choose. P'raps you'd like to know where he is, and where he was borned, Mr. Impertinence; and how many times he's been waksinated, and what he had for dinner o' Sunday. Come, what is it? 'Ave you called to see the meter and help yourself to the hovercoats; or d'ye want to be shown in and see which is the heasiest way through the back window on sone futur' ercashun?'

The domestic was fully roused now, and she let the shabby gentleman have it. She knew a thing or two; and she wasn't going to be made a fool of, like the silly girls master read to her about in the newspapers.

Her particular instructions were never, under any circumstances, to admit a visitor when her master was out, and she meant to obey them. Besides, what could a shabby fellow like this want but what he'd no right to?

The shabby gentleman wasn't angry in the least. He accepted the attack with a smile.

'Bravo, Jemima! or whatever your name is,' he said. 'You are a shrewd girl, and deserve encouragement. I'll report to the doctor, when I see him, what an admirable watch-dog you make.'

'Dog yourself! and my name ain't Jemima; and if it was, I shouldn't be ashamed on it, like you are o' yourn. Go away. There ain't nothing to be got here.'

Bang went the flap, and the shabby gentleman was still on the wrong side of the door.

He was about to stroll away when a carriage came dashing down the narrow roadway, and was pulled up in front of The Lodge. Dr. Birnie jumped out, the carriage drove off, and then the shabby gentleman, coming close up to the doctor as he was putting his latchkey into the garden gate, touched him gently on the arm.

The doctor turned.

For a moment he hesitated and turned slightly pale, then he looked closely into the shabby gentleman's face and gasped out: 'Good God, Marston! I thought you were dead.'

Edward Marston smiled.

'Not yet, Birnie. I've been very near it, though, once or twice.'

'How strangely things happen,' thought Birnie to himself. 'I've been to Heckett's and Egerton's to-day, and now here's Marston dropped from the skies, as if to complete the circle.'

The doctor glanced at his visitor's costume, and then at his face again.

'Hard up, I suppose?' he said uneasily.

'Devilish hard up, old man. So hard up that I have called for that bob you owe me for directing you to Little Queer Street the other night.'

The doctor started.

'Good gracious, man! you don't mean to say that was you?'

'It was. Here's the card you gave me. I've given you three days credit as it is.' Marston drew the card from his pocket and give it to Birnie. 'That's how I knew where to find you. Deuced funny how things come about, isn't it?'

Marston laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh, and the doctor didn't respond to it.

He looked very uncomfortable, and hesitated for a moment; then, assuming an air of nonchalance, he said, with an affectation of cheeriness:

'Well, old fellow, I'm glad to see you. Will you come in and have a chat?'

'Just what I should like,' answered Marston; 'especially if there's anything to eat with the chat.'

'Certainly, my dear boy. Come along.'

The doctor pushed his gate open and walked in, followed by Marston. As they entered the house the servant came running to the doctor to tell him of the pertinacious shabby gentleman's visit. The look of disgust on her face when she saw the shabby gentleman in the hall, was intense. She tossed her head, muttered, 'Well, I'm sure!' and rushed downstairs to the kitchen to protect the spoons and forks.

'And so you've come back again, Ned?' said Dr. Birnie, as, a few minutes later, he sat in his library with the shabby gentleman.

'Yes, I have. But pleasure before business, please.'

Mr. Marston was enjoying some cold meat and pickles, which the servant had been ordered to bring him up, much to her disgust.

When he had finished he leaned back in the chair and fetched a deep breath.

'By Jove, Birnie,' he said, 'that's the first good meal I've made for a month!'

'Can I order a little more for you?'

'No, my boy; I won't spoil my dinner.'

Mr. Marston had evidently made up his mind that he was not going short of good meals again in a hurry.

Birnie eyed him nervously, and waited for him to grow communicative.

He wasn't comfortable. He was playing a game without knowing his opponent's cards, and that was a style of play which had never suited Oliver Birnie. He had not long to wait.

Do you know, it's ten years since I left England,' said Marston presently. 'By Jove! there must have been some changes in our little party since then.'

'Indeed there have.'

'I come back and I find you a doctor, with a carriage and pair, a nice quiet villa, and a thundering cheeky slavy; I heard abroad that Gurth had got a windfall and was a regular tiptop swell now, and I'll bet old Heckett hasn't been behindhand in making hay. I'm the only one of the lot that's down on my luck. I've been the scapegoat—that's what I've been—and I assure you, my dear boy, I've grown tired of the character. I've come back to change places with one of you, and I'm not particular which.'

Birnie shot a keen, searching glance at his visitor.

'Look here, Ned, before we go any further, suppose we clear the ground a little. I suppose, from your being here and walking about openly, it's quite safe for you to have come back?'

'Quite.'

'Well, then, why did you go away so suddenly?'

'Not for what you think, Nolly, my boy. That's where you've all been wrong, I guess. When that little affair was on and I bolted suddenly, you put two and two together and fancied I'd broken the law. Now the boot was on the other trotter. The law broke me.'

'How?'

'You know that my father had gone to America to prosecute the big lawsuit which was to make us all millionaires, and put me straight for ever?'

'Yes.'

'Well, he lost the day, and I went out at once to him.'

'Good heavens, Marston! Don't say that your mysterious departure was due to filial affection!'

'No, I don't. You wouldn't believe me if I did. I went out to stop the old man making a fool of himself, and carry the case further still. I wanted something saved out of the fire for myself.'

'Did you succeed?'

'No. Got there to find the old man dead, and every blessed halfpenny of his property gone in the law-costs.'

'You'll excuse me, old fellow, if I suggest that there must have been another motive behind.'

'All right; if there was, find it out. It wasn't the bill business.'

'I always thought it was.'

'You were wrong, then. Every acceptance old Isaacs discounted for me was genuine—as genuine as this one.'

Mr. Marston drew gently from his waistcoat-pocket a dirty and creased piece of paper, and held it out for Dr. Birnie to read.

It was Birnie's acceptance for £500.

The doctor looked at it, read it, as Marston held it out before him.

'You didn't discount that, then?' he said quietly. 'I wondered it had never been presented.'

'Isaacs wouldn't take it. He said it wasn't worth the stamp it was written on.'

'It wasn't,' said Birnie, with a smile.

'But it is now,' replied Marston, folding it up carefully and putting it into his pocket.

'You are wrong,' said the doctor quietly. 'It was worth nothing then because I was a penniless adventurer. It is worth nothing now because it is ten years old, and your claim is barred by the Statute of Limitations.'

For a moment the two men sat eyeing each other in silence. Marston was the first to break it.

'I think you'll pay it, in spite of the statute.'

'Well,' answered the doctor, taking a pipe from the mantelshelf and filling it, 'I may, or I may not. That depends on you. I suppose you've something better to offer me than this worthless piece of paper for £500?'

'Perhaps I have.'

'Take a pipe from the rack,' said the doctor. 'Here's some tobacco.

Tobacco is a wonderful sedative, and we want to talk this matter over calmly.'

Marston lit his pipe and settled himself down in an arm-chair. He was quite ready for a combat, if combat it was to be.

'Let us review the situation, Ned,' said the doctor. 'Some years ago you left this country suddenly. At that time we were all down on our luck. You had run through your money leading a fast life, so had I, so had Gurth Egerton. We were all gamblers and loose fish, and our principal haunt was Josh Heckett's betting-office and gambling den in Soho. There was only one rich man among us, and we turned rooks to make him our pigeon. That was Ralph Egerton, Gurth's cousin. He was a drunken, reckless fool, and we thought him an easy prey. He came night after night to the den, but he didn't seem to care for play; he lost with a good grace, and we never could quite make out why he came. One night there was a furious quarrel there; blows were struck in the struggle, the table was knocked over, and the light extinguished. Suddenly Ralph Egerton shrieked out that he was stabbed, and when a light was struck we found him lying on the floor with a knife in his breast and the lifeblood pouring out. No one knew who had struck the blow. He could not say. There were half-a-dozen strangers present, and they got away directly, fearing to be mixed up in a gambling-house scandal. The knife was one which had been used to cut the corks of the champagne-bottles, and had been lying on the table.'

'Well, I know all about that,' interrupted Marston.

'Excuse me; let me review the situation my own way. We were all terrified, for we knew what would come out if an inquest was held. Old Heckett was like a madman, and beside himself with terror. Gurth Egerton was as white as a ghost, and stood trembling like a child. You and I were the only ones who kept our heads. I was just admitted to the profession, and I examined the wound, and found that it was a bad one. We held a council and agreed what to do. I bandaged the wound up tightly and swathed the body round so that no blood could escape; then you went and got a four-wheel cab, and we put him in. We carried him between us, talking to him as if he were a drunken man, to deceive the cabman. We drove here, to this very villa, which was his house, and carried him in. I am quite correct in my story so far, am I not?'

'Quite,' answered Marston, lazily puffing his pipe. 'Up to this point you've told me nothing I couldn't have told you. Go on.'

'Here your part of the transaction ended,' continued the doctor, 'and the rest was left to me. Ralph Egerton died. I was with him to the last. I performed the last offices myself, and when the undertaker came he found only a neatly shrouded body. Everything was done in my presence, and no one ever had the slightest suspicion of foul play. The death was duly registered, and my certificate accepted as that of the medical man who had attended the deceased during his last illness.'

Dr. Birnie went to his writing-table, undid a drawer, and handed a piece of paper to Marston.

'Here is a copy of the certificate,' he said.

Marston read it. It was to the effect that Ralph Egerton had been attended for so many days by Oliver Birnie, his regular medical attendant, and had died from a complication of diseases—the diseases which a life of drinking and dissipation would probably culminate in.

'All this had occurred before I left England,' he said, as he handed it back to the doctor. 'I don't see what it has to do with my £500.'

The doctor threw his tobacco-pouch across to him.

'Have another pipe, and be patient. You'll see directly. Well, after Ralph Egerton had been buried, it was found that Gurth was his next heir, and came into all the property; and a nice little haul it was. There was a lot of ready money, and some comfortable house property, and no end of stocks and shares.'

'I didn't know that Gurth was the heir when I left,' said Marston.

'Of course you didn't. You might not have gone if you had known, eh?'

'That's a matter I won't discuss now,' answered Marston. 'All I know is that I'm back again, that I haven't got a mag in the world, and that, as you and Egerton seem to have done so well, perhaps you'll come down handsomely for an old friend.'

'My dear fellow, that's just where you make the mistake. I am not a rich man. I've got a little practice, and I have a carriage and pair for appearance sake, in the hope of working up a better. It isn't mine. I hire it when I want it, and use it as an advertisement. This house I have lived in since Ralph died here. Gurth let it to me cheap on a long lease. Gurth

has behaved very handsomely to me, and, as a matter of fact, that is the reason I have been able to appear well-to-do on a practice which really is not lucrative.'

'I don't suppose generosity had much to do with it,' growled Marston.

'As you will, my boy. It isn't worth while discussing the motive—the fact remains. Gurth has done well since you left. I have only done well through Gurth.'

'I see what you are driving at,' said Marston. 'You mean that if I want help Gurth is the man I ought to go to. Well, where is he?'

'At the bottom of the sea,' answered the doctor, knocking the ashes out of his pipe.

Ned Marston jumped up in a rage and strode across the room to where Birnie sat.

'Look here, Oliver Birnie,' he cried, clutching his arm, 'this game doesn't suit me. I'm not to be humbugged by your cool as a cucumber business. I'm back in London, and I've got to live. I look for my old friends, and I can find only one of them—you. You owe me £500, statute or no statute—are you going to pay it?'

'My dear fellow, it was only a gambling debt in the first place, and in the second it's not recoverable on account of its age.'

'I only ask you for £500 for this bit of paper. Give me that, and I'll make a fair start, and go ahead right enough. I've got my wits about me, and pluck enough for a dozen man. Give me the money, and you won't be troubled with me any more.'

'Sit down and talk sensibly,' said the doctor quietly, 'and I'll see what I can do for an old comrade in distress.'

The doctor and his visitor were closeted together in earnest conversation for over an hour. When Marston went out through the garden gate, Rebecca looked after him with as much scorn as her features could assume.

'He ain't been here for no good, I'll wager,' she said to herself. 'If he ain't got something in his pocket as he didn't bring in with him my name ain't Rebeccer.'

Rebecca was quite right. Mr. Marston had something in his pocket that he didn't bring in with him. It was a cheque for £500.

In spite of his non-lucrative practice, Dr. Birnie evidently had a balance at his banker's.

CHAPTER VIII.
MR. DUCK'S NEW LODGERS.

It is a week since Mr. and Mrs. George Smith have taken up their residence beneath the humble rooftree of Mr. Jabez Duck.

'Quite the gentleman,' says Miss Duck, when she discusses the new lodgers with her brother.

'And quite the lady,' adds Mr. Duck, upon whom Bess's bright country face has made a great impression.

'You're an idiot, Jabez,' answers Georgina. 'She may be a lady in comparison with the *persons* with whom *you* are in the habit of associating—housekeepers, cooks, and such like menials—but Mrs. Smith is not a real lady. Anybody could see that with half an eye.'

'Well, my dear, I've got four half eyes, and I say distinctly that a well-bred and well-behaved young woman——'

'Quite so, Jabez; she is a very nice young woman: but a young woman is not a young lady.'

Mr. Jabez gave premonitory symptoms of a small joke by increasing in shininess. A smile spread up to the roots of his hair.

'A young woman is not a young lady; but a young lady must be a young woman. Ha, ha!—that's a paradox.'

'It may be a paradocks, or a Victoria Docks, or an East India Docks, or any docks you like,' said Miss Duck, snappishly; 'but if Mrs. Smith 's a lady, I'll eat my head.'

'Don't, my dear,' exclaimed Jabez, with the premonitory shine bursting forth again. 'It would be sure to bring on indigestion, and your temper's awful when your digestion's bad.'

'Jabez, you're a contemptible idiot. Such frivolous tomfoolery may suit the menial classes with which you mix; but don't bring it into this house, if you please.'

Jabez evidently thought he'd made quite as many small jokes as his sister could stand for one day; so he finished his breakfast in silence and departed citywards.

The menial classes were metaphorically hurled at his head now whenever he and his sister were together; but Jabez was not to be provoked into picking up the gauntlet; and, in spite of all Georgina's hints, the name of Mrs. Turvey never crossed his lips.

Leaving Mr. Jabez to get to the office by himself, let us walk upstairs to the first floor, and pay a visit to the newly married couple.

We will knock at the door first, for young married couples do not sit on either side of the room, with all the furniture between them as a barricade, like many old married couples do.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith have just finished breakfast. George is sitting in a low chair reading the newspaper, and Bess is on a hassock at his feet, looking up at him and doing a little quiet hero-worship.

Their marriage certificate is a week old. George resided in the apartments long enough to qualify for a licence, and then Bess came up to town and they were married quietly, and went back to spend their honeymoon at Dalston. George has been so good and kind, and Bess has been so happy, it has been quite like fairyland. Wandering about the Park hand in hand, lunching at the pastrycooks', going to Madame Tussaud's and to the theatre—it had seemed as if the people who had never got married on the sly and gone into apartments for the honeymoon could never have known what real happiness was.

George let a week go by in unalloyed bliss, then he put his hand in his pocket and counted his change out of the forty pounds he started married life with; he had but twenty left. Directly he made that discovery it was decided to take buses instead of cabs, and to go to the pit instead of the upper boxes, 'And George dear,' said Bess, 'we must be very careful and economical till you get something to do. I think we'll begin to dine at home instead of going out every day.'

'Yes, dear, I think we'd better,' said George. 'I suppose Miss Duck won't mind you cooking in the kitchen?'

'Of course not, dear. Let's start housekeeping to-day. What shall we have for dinner?'

George suggested lots of things, but they were all too much for two people.

Bess was perplexed too. Suddenly a bright idea occurred.

'Oh, George dear,' she said, 'do you think you could eat a nice little

toad-in-the-hole?'

'A toad-in-the hole, little woman? Splendid! I say, can you really make one, though?'

'Yes, indeed I can. Father used to say——'

For a moment her voice quivered and her eyes filled with tears.

Smiling through them as the April sun gleams through the showers she went on:

'You must taste my toad-in-the-hole. I'll make one to-day, and you shall help me.'

'I—I don't think I can, dear,' answered her husband, pulling his moustache doubtfully. 'I'm an awful duffer with my hands, you know.'

'Don't be a goose. You shall go and buy the things.'

George had his hat on directly.

Bess gave him her reticule to take on his arm, and then told him to buy two neck chops and some flour and some eggs.

'And be sure you see your change is right, you careless boy,' she added, laughing.

George Heritage marching down the street with a reticule in his hand was a sight worth seeing. He felt as proud of his commission as if Her Majesty had made him a plenipotentiary. He wasn't quite sure where you got the flour and the eggs, so he tried the butcher's for the latter and the greengrocer's for the former, but at last he got into the right shops.

'I want some flour, please,' he said to the man behind the counter.

'How much, sir?'

'Well, I don't know quite. About enough to make a toad-in-the-hole for two.'

The man stared at his customer for a minute, and then suggested perhaps half a quartern would do.

'Certainly,' said George. If the man had said a hundredweight or an ounce he would have said the same.

When all his commissions were executed—though not without considerable puzzling over quantities—George marched home in triumph.

He had only broken one egg and let the flour all over the reticle by poking the chops in so that the sharp point of the bone made a hole in the bag. Bess lifted the lid, looked into the reticule, and gave a little scream.

It was annoying to have the chops and a broken egg and the flour all mixed up together; but still, as it was George's first journey to market, he was forgiven.

He had a hug, and was ordered to sit still and not get into mischief while his wife went downstairs into the kitchen and prepared the delicate dish.

It was a happy dinner, I can tell you; better than all your Richmond follies and your London restaurant nonsenses. The toad-in-the-hole was delicious, and George insisted upon Miss Duck tasting it, and he informed Miss Duck that he'd been to market, and did Miss Duck ever taste anything so delicious in her life?

Miss Duck said, 'La, Mr. Smith, what a funny man you are!' and then George made small jokes, smaller than any Jabez had ever been guilty of in his life; but Miss Duck giggled prodigiously.

George declared privately to Bess that Miss Duck was a very decent old soul; and as Georgina had been particularly gracious, Bess agreed that she was. 'Only it's lucky for you. George, she's so old and plain, or I should be jealous.'

I hope Miss Duck wasn't listening at the key-hole to hear this remark, and I sincerely trust she wasn't looking through it to witness the manner in which George closed Bess's wicked little mouth.

That was yesterday. This morning there is no frivolity going on. George is reading the newspaper in order to find a berth that will suit him.

The disappearance of half his capital has reminded him that he is no longer a gentleman, but a young man who has a wife to keep and his living to earn.

When he comes to a likely advertisement, he reads it aloud to Bess, and they discuss it.

'How do you think this will do, dear?' he says, presently:

'"Wanted, a married man, without encumbrance, to drive a pair, look after a small garden, help in the house, and fill up his spare time as

amanuensis to a deaf lady. A small salary, but the person will have the advantage of living in a vegetarian family, where total abstinence and Church of England principles offer special advantages to a true Christian."'

'How'll that do?' asked George, with a smile.

'Not at all,' answered Bess, laughing. 'But George dear, what does "encumbrance" mean?'

'You, my pet.'

'Oh, I'm sure it doesn't. What does it mean?'

'Ask me again in a year or two, my darling,' answered George, with a wicked little smile, and then he went on with his paper.

Bess went on wondering what 'encumbrance' a married man could have till George read her another advertisement.

'Advertiser would be glad to hear of a gentleman by birth, not more than thirty, who would introduce advertiser's homemade brandy to the upper classes. A liberal commission given. A real gentleman might do well.'

'Oh, George,' said Bess, 'don't go after that, dear. I don't want you to go walking about with brandy-bottles sticking out of your pockets.'

'And fancy introducing it to the upper classes, eh? This sort of thing:—Allow me to introduce you: Upper Classes—Home-made Brandy. Home-made Brandy—Upper Classes.'

Bess laughed as George introduced the arm-chair to the sofa with a stately bow. The arm-chair was the brandy, and the sofa was the upper classes.

George read on, selecting the funny advertisements for Bess's amusement. Suddenly he put the paper down.

'By Jove, Bess,' he exclaimed, rubbing his hands, I believe I've found the very thing. Listen to this, little woman.'

George picked the paper up, folded it out carefully, rose and struck a commanding attitude, then, clearing his voice, he read aloud the following advertisement:

'"Wanted immediately, a gentleman for a commercial office. No previous experience necessary. Hours, ten to four. Salary to commence with, £150 per annum. N.B.—Must be of gentlemanly appearance and address.—Apply, in first instance by letter, to A. B., Burkett's Library, Leicester Square."'

'Oh, George,' exclaimed Bess, when he had finished, 'do write at once. It would be just the thing to begin with.'

'Magnificent!' answered her husband. 'Hours ten to four, no previous knowledge, and £3 a week. Why, my dear, it would be a splendid beginning.'

'So it would,' said Bess; 'and I'm sure, dear, you're just what they want.'

George grinned.

'I say, little woman' (the conceited fellow was looking in the glass all the while), 'the applicant must be of gentlemanly appearance. Perhaps my appearance will be against me.'

'You vain boy; you want me to flatter you,' said Bess, looking at him lovingly, 'and I shan't. You'll do very well indeed, sir, and you know it.'

George was quite certain he should do.

Bess routed out some writing-paper, and then she went down to Miss Duck and borrowed a pen and ink, and then she and George sat down and spoilt a dozen sheets of paper, and at last between them they produced the following:

'Mr. George Smith presents his compliments to Mr. A. B., and he would be very pleased to accept his offer. He is four-and-twenty, active, and anxious to get on. If Mr. A. B. wishes for an interview, he will call at any time Mr. A. B. chooses to appoint. Mr. George Smith thinks it well to enclose his *carte* for Mr. A. B. to see. Will Mr. A. B. kindly answer per return.'

When the important note was folded and in the envelope, and the address had been carefully copied from the paper, Bess and George both went together to put it in the post. Bess peeped down the letter-box to see if it had gone safely in, and then George peeped, and then they both walked away full of hope, and feeling sure that the photograph would settle the matter at once.

'If A. B. were a lady it would,' said George.

Then Bess said he was a nasty vain thing, and he thought all the girls

were in love with him.

To which George replied that it didn't much matter if they were, as he was only in love with one girl, and she was the dearest little girl in the world, and God bless her little heart, etc., etc., which style of conversation being probably quite familiar to the reader, there is no necessity to make further extracts from it.

It was very wicked of Bess to do what she did that night, I dare say, but you see she had not been brought up very well. She knelt down and prayed to God to bless her dear husband, who had sacrificed so much for her, and she asked Him to let them live happily together all their lives; and, oh, if God would only let George get this situation and make Mr. A. B. love him, she would be, oh, so thankful. Her heart was full of gratitude to God for giving her George's love, and that night it poured out and spread itself over everything she loved and knew. And as she was dropping off to sleep, George distinctly heard her say,—

'God bless Mr. A. B.'

And he wasn't a bit jealous.

CHAPTER IX. CONCERNING GERTIE HECKETT, A KIND LADY, A GOOD DOG, AND A WICKED BIRD.

Mr. Josh Heckett was about again, and Gertie and the animals were having a bad time of it.

The temporary retirement from business which had been necessitated by Mr. Heckett's injuries—how those injuries were acquired he had not yet condescended to explain to any one—had not given that calm to his mind which retirement from business is supposed to give. Towards the close of his illness, and just before he was allowed to go out, a vigorous playfulness had set in, which was very badly appreciated by the inhabitants, biped and quadruped. Mr. Heckett had playfully hurled his pillows at the rabbit-hutches, and had taken to pelt the dogs with such handy trifles as the candlestick, a plate, a cup, a pair of snuffers, or a boot.

The dogs growled and put their tails between their legs, crouched in corners and behind anything that yielded a temporary barricade.

Gertie and Lion usually retired when these fits set in. Not that he threw things at either of *them*—he knew better than that. But he swore fearfully, and that frightened Gertie worse than the boots and the pillows; so she would motion to her dear old Lion, and they would creep out quietly and leave grandfather to it.

It had been a whim of Heckett's when he was brought home with a cracked skull from one of his midnight wanderings to have his bed brought in among the animals. 'They'd be company,' he said. 'He didn't want to lie alone, with no end of horrible things dancing across his brain.' Gertie's little room was upstairs. She had slept there ever since she could remember. They had two other rooms—one on the same floor as Gertie's, and one behind the animals' room, where Heckett slept when he was well.

The house was three floors high, so that Heckett occupied two, and the ground floor, with an open shop, was let to a gentleman in the old clothes line, who shut it up at night, and went to another shop of his higher up the street, where he lived.

When Gertie and Lion, were gone away, Heckett would lie and curse to his heart's content, and he had a companion who used to curse in chorus.

There was a parrot among this strange collection who swore like a trooper, and who, since he had come to live with Heckett, had considerably improved his vocabulary. It was grotesque but supremely awful to listen to the grey-haired reprobate shrieking and blaspheming and the parrot mocking him. Sometimes Heckett would lose his temper and swear at the bird, then the bird would swear back at him, and a cursing match, not to be equalled in the Dials, would take place. Heckett would get so mad while he lay there helpless, that he would threaten the bird with summary vengeance. The bird caught up his threats at last, and occasionally Mr. Heckett's visitors would be startled to hear a voice from somewhere in the corner suddenly shriek out,—'Bless you, I'll have your blood!' or 'Bless your beautiful eyes, you screeching devil, I'll wring your beautiful neck!'

The adjectives are slightly altered, but the sense of the parrot's mild observations remains unimpaired.

As Heckett grew better, the wordy warfare between himself and the parrot increased in vigour, till a person, listening outside, would have believed that two horribly depraved wretches were about to commence a murderous struggle.

What with grandfather's language and the parrot's language, poor Gertie got more uncomfortable every day. The child had one of those sensitive natures which are quick to appreciate the difference between right and wrong.

Left alone almost from babyhood with the animals and the birds, she had grown to love them and look upon them as her playmates. Into their ears she poured her troubles. It was her task to feed them all, and give them their water, and never was handmaiden more faithful to her duties.

It shocked her terribly that the parrot should swear. Grandfather she expected it from, but that this wicked, depraved bird should come to

pollute the atmosphere was too bad.

She used to put her hands over Lion's ears, so that he shouldn't understand. She blushed sometimes when she was alone with her pets to think that Lion should be in the room with her when such language was going on.

How Gertie came to be so clean and pure, and to have so much modesty and good sense, amid such surroundings, was a mystery to everybody but Gertie herself and one other person.

That person was a lady who came in the day time, often when the old man was out. She came first with the police to look for a stolen dog, and Gertie's sweet face and gentle manner struck her.

She was a woman of the world, and guessed that any open offer of sympathy would be resented by the child's guardian. So she found out when Gertie was alone, and came to see her. She was a good customer, for she bought canaries, and white mice, and guinea-pigs; but really she came to see Gertie and to rescue her from the contamination around.

Miss Adrian, Gertie's protectress, found out what times her *protégée* was most likely to be alone, and she made various excuses to visit her, and taught her to read and write unknown to the grandfather.

She taught the child more than this. She gradually imparted to her the outlines of the beautiful Christian faith, and under her fostering care the little wild, uncultivated bud blossomed into a sweet and delicate flower.

Seeing his granddaughter in a clean face, and finding her always tidy and civil, and loth to go into the street and play with the other children, old Heckett had been surprised at first, but he had put it down to the contrariness of the female nature, and had not troubled himself to inquire further into the matter. Once when he was asked how it was Gertie was always so clean and tidy and good, he had growled out something about breed, and had hinted darkly that Gertie's father must have been a gentleman.

This observation points to the fact that Gertie's birth was shrouded in some slight mystery. What that mystery was the reader will learn in due course. She was old Heckett's granddaughter; of that there was not the slightest doubt.

It was a strange sight to see Gertie at her lessons among the animals. These hours were the happiest of the poor child's life. When the day came round for Miss Adrian's visit, Gertie would wait anxiously for grandfather's departure. Then she would go and stand at the door and look up the street, and Lion would stand beside her.

If Miss Adrian saw the dog and the child together she knew that she might come in. If Gertie was alone she would pass by, just speaking a few words to the child as she went along.

Gertie spoke of Miss Adrian to Lion as 'the beautiful lady,' and Gertie's description would hardly have been disputed by any one who knew what real beauty was. Ruth Adrian, at the age of twenty-eight, was as young looking as many a girl of eighteen. If it ever comes into fashion to print actual coloured photographs of an author's characters in his story, it will save the male writer much vexation of spirit. Ladies can tell you at a glance the colour of everybody's hair and eyes, the modelling of the chin, the expression of the lips, and the character of the nose. The present writer, if asked suddenly, when away from his domestic circle, the colour of his nearest female relative's eyes, would have to telegraph home for the information. To such a one the minute personal description of his characters is indeed a task, but he is bound to attempt it. What would the ladies say if he left them in doubt as to the colour of his hero's eyes? What would the gentlemen say if he failed properly to describe the beautiful features of sweet Ruth Adrian?

Picture, then, a tall young lady, with soft grey eyes, fair cheeks, in which the delicate white and pink had never been marred by the pernicious adjuncts of the modern belle's dressing-table; a small, almost baby mouth, that seemed specially designed to spread a perpetual smile over the face; brown hair, neatly and smoothly arranged over a forehead almost too high for a woman's; and a nose which a Greek sculptor might have borrowed for his Diana.

Here you have what the auctioneers would call a catalogue of the features of Ruth Adrian. Picture her thus and you will behold a marble statue; to see her as she was, a sweet and noble English woman, the beautiful spirit that was hers must animate the lifeless clay. Let truth and love shine out from the soft grey eyes, over the fair cheeks spread the glow of health and the smile of innocence, listen to the gentle words of sympathy with all God's creatures that fall so softly from the well-shaped lips; let the inner beauty of her noble, loving nature shine

through and illuminate the whole, as the soft light of the lamp in my lady's boudoir glows through the daintily decorated shade that covers it, and brings the hidden beauties into tender relief; think of Rath Adrian, not as a beautiful doll, but as a noble woman, and then you will see her as she was.

The one great trouble of her life had chastened her beauty, and left upon her features that gentle look of melancholy which poets love to give their heroines.

Ruth had loved and lost. The man who won her girlish heart had been unworthy of her. She believed him to be an honourable English gentleman; she discovered him to be an adventurer and a scamp.

The moment the fatal truth was revealed to her, the quiet heroism of her character asserted itself. She renounced him, not with scorn or indignation, but with loving words and gentle pity. She bade him farewell, and buried her unhappy love in the innermost chamber of her heart. She bowed beneath the blow, and prayed God for strength to bear it. He went his way, and she went hers, and from that moment the poor and suffering took the vacant place in her heart.

She didn't break her heart, but, like a brave woman, resolved to devote the life that should have been lived for a man to her suffering fellow-creatures. She had a hearty sympathy with the poor and oppressed, with dumb animals and little children, and she went about doing good quietly and effectively.

Ruth Adrian was free from the cant which mars the efforts of so many well-meaning people. If she could save a soul she was delighted, but she always tried to save the body first. The penny-packet-of -tea-dust-once-a-month, and tracts-once-a-week system of mission work she despised. She did not bribe people to be hypocrites, neither did she have holy names in her mouth in season and out of season. She went with the precepts of the loving Lord in her heart instead of on her lips, and so she conquered where the professional missionary, male and female, failed utterly.

She had taken a deep interest in Gertie from the first, and, as the beauties of the child's nature blossomed in the sunshine of her care, she grew to love the little outcast with almost maternal love.

She had a great fight with her conscience over keeping their connexion a secret from the grandfather; but she found out for a certainty that she would be forbidden the house, and so for Gertie's sake she played the Jesuit, and convinced herself that the end justified the means.

Gertie's books were hidden up in her bed-room, where Heckett never went. Only Lion knew about them. She was beginning to write a little now, and she had a slate on which she wrote letters to Lion and to Miss Adrian and did little sums.

It was a strange sight to see Ruth and her *protégée* at lessons. The foxhound and the spaniel and the bulldog always wagged their tails when Ruth came in, and then sat down on their haunches and stared at the proceedings.

Lion was privileged. He was one of the class. But then he was such a superior dog to all the others. They were always being sold and going away and being replaced by other dogs before they had learned proper behaviour. But Lion was part of the establishment. Heckett kept him to guard the premises, perhaps.

When Ruth had gone, Gertie would sit with her arm round Lion's neck and say her lessons over to him, and explain things that perhaps might not be quite clear to him.

Lion said nothing, but he evidently thought a good deal. Unfortunately, there was a member of the menagerie who behaved very indifferently. That was the parrot.

The parrot's interruptions were shameful and scandalous. When Miss Adrian was there he had to be quieted with lumps of sugar. He rarely swore before her. Gertie was very thankful for that. The parrot only swore as a rule at grandfather. But Polly interrupted lessons; in fact, she took part in them.

When Miss Ruth, by constant repetition, had impressed upon Gertie that England was an island, surrounded by water, the parrot said 'Humbug,' and persisted in saying 'Humbug.'

Gertie apologised for Polly's rudeness, and hoped her mistress would look over it, and Ruth laughed merrily and told her it was Polly's bad bringing up.

Then, again, when Gertie repeated the multiplication table, and said, 'Twice one is two,' Polly would shriek out 'Gammon.'

'Humbug' and 'gammon' were the mildest words in Polly's vocabulary.

Doubtless she selected them for the occasion in deference to Miss Adrian.

When her mistress was gone Gertie would lecture Polly severely.

'Polly,' she said, one day, with tears in her eyes, 'unless you repent you'll go to the bad place. You must have a new heart, Polly. Oh, Polly, why are you so wicked?'

'Humbug,' shrieked Polly, with a chuckle.

'But you *are* wicked, Polly; and nothing that's wicked can be happy. Miss Adrian says so.'

'Gammon,' shrieked Polly.

Gertie gave Polly up in despair, and turned to Lion for comfort. He at least was good, and did not swear and use bad words.

'Look at Lion, Polly, what an example he sets you,' exclaimed Gertie one day in despair. 'Lion's a——'

'Humbug,' interrupted the Satanic bird.

'He's not a humbug, Polly,' cried the child, stamping her little foot. 'He's a dear, kind, loving dog. But we forgive you, because we must forgive our enemies. Miss Adrian says so.'

'Gammon, said the bird; and then suddenly it leapt about the cage, shrieking and swearing so fiercely that Gertie seized Lion by the collar and led him out of the room, offering up a little prayer as she went that Polly might see the error of her ways before she died and was utterly lost.

During Heckett's illness the lessons had been abandoned, but from time to time Gertie had exchanged greetings with her kind teacher at the door.

When the old man got well enough to be about, he began to go out as usual, and Gertie was delighted to think she could renew her studies and the happy times with Miss Adrian.

One visit, which was paid a few days after Heckett's renewal of his old habits, was fraught with consequences so serious to all concerned that it will require a chapter to itself.

CHAPTER X.
IN WHICH GRIGG AND LIMPET EXPLAIN.

Time?’ asked Grigg.

‘Eleven,’ said Limpet, looking at his watch.

Grigg was tall and thin. Limpet was short and fat. Admirable lawyers and admirable men; they made admirable partners. Solicitors to dozens of wealthy families, tin boxes, lettered in white, lined the walls of every room. Envious neighbours said that Grigg started in the profession with six dozen of the said boxes, bought cheap at a sale, and that the capital which Limpet brought into the business was a gross more.

Of course, this was merely malice. Doubtless each one of those tin boxes was crammed with deeds relating to millions and millions and millions of money. The statement that Grigg kept his old hats in the one labelled ‘His Grace the Duke of Cheshire,’ and that Limpet junior used the one labelled ‘The Candlestick Makers’ Company’ to keep the back files of a sporting paper from injury, is on a par with the other malicious assertions above referred to.

Limpet junior doesn’t trouble the firm much. He used to come down occasionally about eleven, put the kettle on in his private office, and as soon as the water was warm enough he would wash his hands and go home again. One day he opened a letter marked ‘Immediate,’ and put it into his pocket in order not to forget it. He wore the same coat again when he went to Boulogne, about six months afterwards, and he found the letter when he wanted a bit of paper to write an I O U for £50 on, for a gentleman who had been good enough to play cards with him at the Establishment. He posted it home with praiseworthy promptitude. Grigg and Limpet were sued for negligence in not attending to that letter, and it cost them £200 to stay the proceedings. After that the partners agreed that the less Limpet junior attended to business, the more likely he was to be worth the salary he drew.

Grigg and Limpet are sitting opposite each other to-day in room B. All the rooms are lettered, and this has a great effect upon clients. Faney a business so extensive that the very rooms have to be lettered for fear they should get mixed!

‘Time?’ says Grigg, looking up again.

‘Ten past,’ answers Limpet. ‘Time they were here,’

Limpet always says more than Grigg.

A clerk comes in.

‘Dr. Birnie, if you please, sir.’

‘Room C,’ says Grigg.

Presently another clerk comes in.

‘Mrs. Turvey, please, and a little girl.’

‘Room D,’ says Limpet.

A third clerk enters.

‘Mr. John Symonds.’

‘Room F,’ says Grigg.

The clerks having retired to do their bidding, the partners sit still for a few minutes.

‘Time?’ says Grigg.

‘Twenty-past,’ says Limpet. ‘I think that will do.’

Clients calling on Grigg and Limpet are always kept waiting from ten minutes to a quarter of an hour. Lawyers with such an enormous business are never disengaged at a moment’s notice.

Grigg goes to the side of the room where several speaking-tubes are arranged. These are lettered A, B, C, D, E, and F Malice says they all communicate with the same office; but what will not malice say?

‘Show all parties to the Egerton case in,’ says Grigg, speaking up the tube.

Presently the three clerks appear, bringing in the doctor, Mrs. Turvey and Topsy, and Mr. Symonds, who, judging from his appearance, is a seafaring man.

Grigg and Limpet bow and motion the visitors to the seats. Grigg bows to the ladies, Limpet to the gentlemen.

‘Mr. Limpet,’ says Grigg, ‘explain matters.’

‘Ahem, ’says Limpet, ‘we have thought it better, Mr. Grigg and myself,

to ask you to attend here to-day together *in re* Egerton. I should say in the matter of our client, Mr. Gurth Egerton—our late client, I fear I should say. Before taking any steps, we have thought—Mr. Grigg and myself have thought—that it would be better to hear the evidence in this matter, in order that we—in order that Mr. Grigg and myself might, if possible, arrive at some definite conclusion. Ahem, ahem.'

'Will,' said Grigg.

'Exactly. Thank you. The will. The will of the—I fear I must say late?'

'Say late,' put in Grigg.

'Exactly; we will say late, as Mr. Grigg suggests. It is better. It is a sad description, but I fear a truthful one.'

Mr. Limpet looked at Mr. Grigg to see if any emotion was advisable.

'No relatives,' muttered Grigg.

'Exactly. There are fortunately no relatives of the deceased here, so that we can discuss this matter calmly, without yielding to that very natural emotion which in cases of this sort, ahem—is, ahem—is, ahem ——'

'Usual,' suggested Grigg.

'Exactly, which is usual. The will, as you are aware, was left in our possession when the, I fear I must say deceased, gentleman set out to travel abroad for the—ahem—for the——'

'Benefit of his health,' said Grigg.

'Exactly, the benefit of his health. Alas! his health was not benefited, for I fear that he is now—that he is now——'

'Bottom of the deep blue sea,' suggested Grigg.

'Exactly. As Mr. Grigg poetically puts it, at the bottom of the deep blue sea. Of course, in cases of this sort there is always a difficulty to prove death. There is always a doubt.'

'Beggin' your pardon, cap'en,' interrupted the seafaring man, 'but I'm qualified to speak to that there point. There ain't any doubt about it at all. Them as goes to the bottom of the sea where the *Boney's Paw* went down is gone to Davy Jones right enough.'

'Exactly. Mr.—Mr. Symonds, thank you. But that is not the point. You see—excuse the little humour—we can't call Mr. Jones as a witness. Ha, ha!'

'Ha, ha!' groaned Grigg. Grigg's laugh was exactly the same as his groan.

'There is a doubt in law, I say; but that, of course, we shall be able to get over. We shall prove the loss of the vessel; we shall ascertain that Mr. Egerton was on board; that he was left on board; that he is not among the survivors, who can all be accounted for; and that, as a matter of fact, he is, as Mr. Grigg very sympathetically and, I may say, very poetically observed, at the bottom of the deep blue sea—in other words, that he is dead. You, Mr. Symonds, I believe, were the last man to leave the vessel when the boats put off? 'I were, cap'en.'

'And you left Mr. Egerton on board?'

'There was a passenger o' that name, and I left him aboard.'

'Both boats were picked up, I believe, by a passing vessel on the second day?'

'They was,' answered Mr Symonds.

'And you are quite certain the passenger known as Mr. Egerton was not on board either of the boats?'

'Sartin.'

'I think, Dr. Birnie, that is satisfactory?' said Limpet, turning to the gentleman addressed.

'Quite,' said the doctor, with a bow.

'Dr. Birnie, I should say, that all present may understand the position, is left sole executor of our—I fear I must say, in fact, I will say—our late client's will. He therefore is interested in proving the death of our late client. Mrs. Turvey—ahem!

'Perhaps, Mr. Grigg, you——'

'Certainly,' said Grigg. Grigg always talked to the ladies. 'Mrs. Turvey. Madam, under the provisions of the will, you receive a legacy of five hundred pounds. Old servant. Very proper, and all the rest of it. Go on, Mr. Limpet.'

'Exactly. Mrs. Turvey, therefore you also are interested in proving the death of our late client.'

Mrs. Turvey said 'Thank you,' and dropped a curtsey, and wondered

whether she ought to shake hands with Grigg and Limpet or not.

'Now,' continued Mr. Limpet, 'everything would be satisfactory, but for the extraordinary statement of—Mr. Grigg, perhaps you——'

'Certainly,' said Grigg. 'You see, madam, you and your daughter——'

'Niece,' said Mrs. Turvey, rising and curtseying.

'Same thing. You and your niece saw a ghost. Law doesn't acknowledge ghosts. Either you saw Mr. Egerton, not at the bottom of the deep blue sea, but at his own front door, which is a different place altogether. Very, Eh? You did, you know, or you didn't. Eh? Which?'

Mrs. Turvey rose and curtseyed to the assembly.

'Which, if it's the last words I ever speak, gentlemen, I see Mr. Egerton's ghost that night a-standing at the door, all white and looking dreadful. My niece see it first, and she screams and I comes up, and I shudders now to think of it. I'll take my happydavid of it, sir, as I'm a Christian woman; and so'll Topsy: won't you, dear?'

'Yes,' said Topsy, rather scared at being appealed to. Whether the 'happydavid' she was required to take was a powder or a sweetmeat, Topsy didn't know; but in the presence of Grigg and Limpet she would have said 'Yes' to anything.

'My good lady,' said Grigg, 'we don't doubt you; but the law will. Excuse me—mere form of words—you weren't drunk?'

'Lor', no, sir; I don't do it,' said Mrs. Turvey, bridling up.

'Of course not. Well, then, if sober, you saw a man, not a ghost. Little daughter—beg pardon, niece—saw a man. Both sober; both saw same thing. What was it? Who was it? Eh?'

'I attended this lady,' put in Dr. Birnie, 'and I found her suffering from a shock to the nervous system. I am sure she saw something. It couldn't have been a ghost, and I really don't see how it could have been the lamented Mr. Egerton.'

'Certainly not,' said Grigg; 'couldn't have been. Sea don't give up its dead. Eh, what is it, child?'

Topsy was fidgeting on her chair and whispering to her aunt.

'Speak out, child,' said Grigg.

'Speak out, little one,' said Limpet; 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help—beg pardon—of course not. Speak the truth, child; what is it?'

'Please, sir,' stammered Topsy, very red and shamefaced, 'perhaps it were the Judgment-day.'

Grigg looked at Limpet, and Limpet looked at Grigg.

As a lady, Topsy fell to Grigg's share.

'Judgment-day, eh? Ridiculous—queer notion, eh? What d'ye mean, child?'

'Please, sir, it says in the Bible that the sea will give up its dead at the Judgment-day.'

'Ah!—of course—good girl. Always remember Bible—queer notion. But it isn't the Judgment-day yet—at least, I hope not—eh, Mr. Limpet?'

Mr. Limpet shook his head gravely. Topsy, who wondered if she had said something very wrong, hid her face behind her aunt's back.

'The question is,' resumed Limpet, 'who was the man Mrs. Turvey and the child saw? That's it, I think, Dr. Birnie?'

Dr. Birnie nodded.

'It was my master, Mr. Gurth Egerton's ghost as I see,' exclaimed Mrs. Turvey emphatically; 'and nothing will turn me from that.'

Mr. Limpet turned to Mr. Symonds.

'We have your statement and your address, I think, Mr. Symonds?'

'Yes, sir,' answered the seafaring gentleman, 'my address when ashore; but I ain't often there. I'm mostly a little beyond the four-mile radius.'

Mr. Limpet smiled condescendingly.

'Then for the present we can spare you, Mr. Symonds. The firm will see you compensated for any trouble you may be put to.'

'Thank you, cap'en and gen'l'men, one and all,' said Mr. Symonds; 'and good-morning, ladies—yours most obedient.'

Mr. Symonds made a leg, swung his hat in the nautical manner and rolled out of the room.

'Mrs. Turvey, for the present I hope you will remain in charge of the house now we have found a woman to be with you.'

‘Yes, sir,’ answered Mrs. Turvey; ‘I don’t mind now I’ve company; and I never was afeard of human beings; but ghosts I was not brought up to, and never shall be.’

‘Certainly not, my dear madam,’ said Limpet. ‘We will send to you again when necessary. Good-morning.’

Mrs. Turvey rose to go. She curtseyed, and led Topsy to the door.

‘Good-day, child,’ said Mr. Grigg. ‘Day of Judgment—queer notion for a child—always remember Bible.’

When Mrs Turvey and Topsy had departed, Messrs. Grigg and Limpet had a long and earnest conversation with Dr. Birnie, the result of which was the drawing up of an advertisement, to be inserted in the *Times*, requesting the present address of Mr. George Englehardt, the rescued passenger of the *Bon Espoir*. He might be able to prove even to the law that Gurth Egerton was dead, and his property at liberty to be dealt with.

And when his employers were busy in room B, Mr. Jabez slipped out of the office, and, meeting Mrs. Turvey at the door, escorted her home to what he informed her he now looked upon as a haunted house.

‘The sort of house, Susan,’ he said, ‘which I had in my mind’s eye, Horatio, when I wrote a few lines promiscuously, beginning:

> And over all there hung a sense of fear
> That e’en the boldest might well have daunted;
> And apparitions made it very clear
> The place was haunted,’—

which mutilation of Hood, being dramatically recited in High Holborn, caused the passers-by to stare, and Mrs. Turvey to clutch hold of Jabez’s arm tightly, if not lovingly.

CHAPTER XI.
A VERY NICE OLD GENTLEMAN.

Two days had elapsed since a letter was despatched to Mr. A. B., informing him that Mr. George Smith was willing to accept his proffered situation, and no reply had been received.

George declared that Bess's nose was beginning to get quite flat at the tip from being constantly pressed against the window-glass while she watched for the postman.

He was a most disagreeable postman. He went next door and opposite, and this side and that; he rattat-tatted at every door but Mr. Duck's.

George got to know the time for the deliveries after the first day, and he would go down and wait at the front-door and watch the postman as he came down the street. When he got close up George felt quite hot; but as time after time he passed by without the faintest indication of having anything for the Ducks' letter-box, a feeling of terrible disappointment crept over the young man's heart.

He had made so sure he should have an answer, and so had Bess.

On the morning of the third day, when they were sitting at breakfast, lo and behold the long-expected rat-tat came, and there was a click in the letter-box, and the postman's boots were heard descending the steps —not by themselves, of course, the postman was in them. Bess and George jumped up, nearly knocking the table over, and Bess tore downstairs.

Yes, there was a letter in the box. Nervously Bess put her hand in and drew it out, and then, half-hopefully, half-fearfully, glanced at the direction.

She could have sat down in the hall and cried with disappointment.

It was only a deep black-bordered letter for 'The Occupier.' Of course, that was for the Ducks. While she was looking at it Miss Duck came out, and Bess handed it to her.

'Lor', a black border!' exclaimed Georgina. 'I wonder who's dead.'

Miss Duck opened the letter with a nervous hand, and then flung it down in disgust. It was an undertaker's circular, offering to bury the occupier and family on strictly moderate terms.

Bess went slowly upstairs, and found George pacing the room.

He knew by his wife's face there was nothing for him, so he sighed and sat down to finish his breakfast.

'Bess,' he said presently, looking into the bottom of his cup as if he thought there might be a letter there, 'I shall go and look A, B. up.'

Bess was standing by him, with her hand on his shoulder.

'Oh, George, look, there is a letter!' she cried suddenly.

'Where?' said George, looking inquiringly about him.

'In the cup, dear; look, four black dots at the bottom of the cup—that means a letter. It always comes true.'

George laughed.

'You didn't see a coffin in the fire, or a thief in the candle last night, did you, dear?' he said. 'What a silly goose you are to believe in omens!'

But, as it happened, the teacup *was* a prophet, and Bess was quite triumphant over it, for by the twelve o'clock post there came a letter from A. B., requesting Mr. George Smith to call on him that afternoon at an address in the City.

When George had read the letter twice over, and Bess had read it three times, they had a wild polka round the room, much to the astonishment of Miss Duck below, who had fears for the ceiling.

At the appointed time George, letter in hand, presented himself at the address given, and was a little taken aback to find it was a public-house. While he was hesitating and wondering whether A. B. was the man in his shirtsleeves behind the bar, and, if so, what he could want with a gentlemanly person at £150 a year, an elderly gentleman, with beautiful long white hair and a flowing beard, touched him on the arm.

'Are you Mr. George Smith?' said the nice old gentleman, in a kind, soft voice.

'Yes, I am,' said George. 'Are you Mr. A. B.?'

'Yes.'

George wanted to seize the old gentleman's hand and shake it there

and then. He was delighted to find A. B. such a venerable and very pleasant person.

'You'll excuse my meeting you here,' said A. B., 'but the fact is I wasn't sure my offices would be ready, and as I had business in this neighbourhood I thought this would do. I shall be very glad to accept you. The terms I think you know—£150 a year, paid weekly. The hours are light—ten till four; the duties also are light. I think we shall get on very nicely. You will come to-morrow at ten to the address on this piece of paper, and commence work at once.'

'Oh, thank you!' exclaimed George, ready to hug the dear fatherly old fellow. 'I will be there.'

George took the piece of paper, and put it carefully in his pocket. The old gentleman invited him to have a glass of sherry, shook hands, with him and went out, and George rushed back to Bess, bursting with the good news.

They had such a tea that evening on the strength of it. George ate muffins and sallylunns, and talked and made jokes, and ate all at the same time, and nearly choked himself through the tea going the wrong way; and Bess was so excited that George declared he must take her to the play to keep her quiet.

It was one of the happiest evenings of their short married life. The play was beautiful, and they sat in the pit, squeezed up close together, and George fell in love with the leading lady, and Bess punched him for it, and declared that the villain of the piece had made a great impression on her.

And then they went and had some supper—real chops, at a real supper-room—and it was twelve o'clock before they got home. George whistled 'Cheer, boys, cheer' all the way through the street, and would have whistled all the way upstairs, had not a loud snore proclaimed the fact that sleep was upon the tired eyelids of the inmates. So George took off his boots and pretended to be a burglar, and Bess was obliged to giggle out loud when he tumbled over the coal-scuttle on the landing and said half a naughty word.

The next morning, punctually at ten o'clock, George arrived at the address given him, and ascended to the third floor, as he had been directed. There on a door he found a paper pasted with 'Smith & Co.' upon it, in a bold round hand.

He knocked, and the familiar voice of A. B. bade him enter.

'Good-morning, Mr. Smith,' said that gentleman. 'Glad to see you so punctual.'

George took off his overcoat and put it on a chair in the corner. Then he looked round. It wasn't much of an office, certainly, and had evidently been taken ready furnished. There was a table and two old chairs, a desk that had been a good deal used, and a couple of office stools.

'This is only a branch office of our firm,' said Mr. Brooks, for such was his name, he informed George. 'We have offices all over London.'

Mr. Brooks waved his hands to the four points of the compass.

'I see,' said George.

'Now, your duty will be to meet me here at ten, and execute the various commissions that lie within this radius.'

George didn't quite understand, but he said, 'Certainly, sir,' and sat himself down on a stool.

'The correspondence this morning is not heavy, and there are no commissions, so you can open this ledger. Do you know how to open a ledger?'

'Certainly,' said George. How could the old gentleman think him such a fool as not to know how to open a book!

George took the ledger and opened it. The old gentleman smiled.

'You can write a name at the top of each page.'

'What name?'

'What name?—well—ah! Look here, take the City Directory lying on the desk, and write the top name of each page.'

George thought it singular that the firm should do business with the top name on each page of a directory, but he knew how ignorant he was of business matters, and thought he'd better say nothing, or he might be found out.

While he was writing a gentleman came in to see Mr. Brooks.

He looked at George and then at the old gentleman.

'Mr. Smith,' said Mr. Brooks, 'kindly go as far as Cannon Street

Station, and inquire at the parcel office if there is a box for Smith & Co., from Dublin.'

George went on his errand, and the old gentleman and his visitor were left alone.

'Well,' said the visitor, 'will he do?'

'Prime,' answered the old gentleman. 'Green as grass. Phew, these things make me jolly hot.'

It was certainly a very extraordinary thing to do, but the aged representative of Smith & Co. did with the above observation take off his long flowing white beard and his long white hair and put them on the desk, together with the gold spectacles, and he was a different man altogether.

He had knocked quite thirty years from his age, and he didn't look half so nice and pleasant without the gold spectacles.

'When shall you try him?' asked the visitor.

'As soon as there's a good chance,' answered Mr. Brooks.

Mr. Brooks and the visitor had a short conversation, and then the visitor left. And Mr. Brooks put on his hair and beard, and amused himself by practising handwriting on a piece of paper.

It was singular that he kept on writing the same name, and it wasn't his own.

When George returned he informed Mr. Brooks that there was nothing for Smith & Co., from Dublin, and Mr. Brooks said, 'Oh, all right,' and didn't seem at all surprised.

At four o'clock George's work was done for the day, and he went home.

Bess ran down to meet him at the door. She had been watching from the windows, and had seen him coming along the street.

She had an idea that he would be quite worn out with hard work, and had had half a mind to go and fetch him. City work, she knew, was very hard. She had read in the newspapers about clerks committing suicide, and merchants going mad through overwork. She was quite surprised to see George come up the steps two at a time, and when he caught her in his arms, and gave her a good hug that nearly squeezed the breath out of her body, she was more astonished still.

When they got upstairs, and George had flung himself into his favourite chair, Bess poured in a broadside of questions.

'Did he like it? Was A. B. nice? What did he have to do? Was the office comfortable?'

George, in reply, gave a full, true, and particular account of his day's work.

'It's nothing at all,' he said. 'I'd no idea how easy it was to earn money in the City. I'm a jolly lucky fellow, little woman, and I'm glad I'm able to earn my own living. You see, I shall have plenty of spare time to do something else, and perhaps, if Smith & Co. like me, I shall get promoted, and drop in for a good thing. Why, I have heard that a thousand a year is nothing of a salary in the City. Fancy me earning a thousand a year! By Jove, what would the governor say to that?'

Bess was lost in calculating how much a thousand a year would be a week, and how much she should be able to spend in housekeeping.

Presently she started up.

'Oh, dear me—I'd quite forgotten,' she exclaimed, and, darting downstairs, returned with a basinful of something that steamed furiously, and a big spoon.

'There,' she said, putting it down in front of her husband; 'now you must have it all. You mustn't leave a drop.'

'Why, what the dickens is this, my dear?' said George, staring at the basin in astonishment.

'Beef-tea—I made it myself. You must have it to keep your strength up now you work so hard, dear.'

George roared with laughter. The idea of his wanting beef-tea to give him strength to sit on a stool and write names out of a directory in a big book!

But he scalded his throat with a few spoonfuls of the steaming liquid, just to please his wife.

That evening George took Bess out to dinner. Had he not earned ten whole shillings, the first money he had ever earned in his life? Of course he had. Then he had a perfect right to spend fifteen shillings and sixpence at once.

The young couple had a cab home that evening. George had earned ten

shillings, and surely he could afford half-a-crown for a cab out of it.

And before they retired to rest that evening Mr. and Mrs. Smith had taken a charming little villa near town, and George had bought a little pony and a basket-carriage for Bess to drive about in, and they had a delightful garden, beautifully kept, and a little conservatory; and George had condescended to make it up with his father, and had sent him an invitation to come and dine with him at his villa.

But this was not done out of the ten shillings. Oh, dear, no. George and Bess were not so foolish as that.

This was all arranged in advance out of the thousand a year which George was going to get by-and-by.

CHAPTER XII.
GOES INTO A LITTLE FAMILY HISTORY.

Gertie and Lion were in the middle of their lessons, and the parrot, as usual, was behaving in a most reprehensible manner. English history it treated with absolute contempt, geography it whistled away to the winds, and the ridicule it cast upon the first principles of social morality was deserving of the most severe censure.

'It is wicked to tell an untruth,' said Miss Adrian.

Lion and Gertie quite agreed with Miss Adrian that it was; but the parrot said, 'Humbug!'

'And it's wicked to use bad words, Miss Adrian, isn't it?' said Gertie, with a withering glance at the objectionable bird.

'It is, dear,' answered Miss Adrian, with a smile; 'but Polly has picked up bad words from hearing other people use them, and this shows us that when we do and say wicked things, we are injuring others as well as ourselves.'

Gertie quite saw that. She felt that her grandfather was responsible to a great extent for the depraved condition of Polly's mind.

'Oh, Miss Adrian,' she said, 'if grandfather could only hear you and have a few lessons, I'm sure he would be good. I think he doesn't know it's wicked.'

Miss Adrian sighed. She was woman of the world enough to have gathered, from Gertie's innocent confessions, what manner of man this old dog-fancier was. She had divined, far more than the child herself knew, and had long ago felt convinced that this little flower had been reared in a den of thieves.

For a weak woman like herself to attempt the regeneration of this burly reprobate she felt would be foolish, and could lead to no good result. The chances were that she would be forbidden the place, and then Gertie would be without a friend.

Her only hope was that in time Gertie might be able to have some influence herself, and might, in the hands of Providence, become a means of leading the old man into a different path.

Miss Adrian had passed from moral topics, and was hearing Gertie her spelling lesson. Gertie generally spelt the things they could see from the window and the animals in the room. It gave interest to a dry subject.

She had got beyond dogs, and cats, and rats, and animals of one syllable, and now she was in animals of two syllables.

'Spell parrot,' said Miss Adrian.

Polly hopped about and gave a shriek. It evidently knew it was going to be spelt, and objected strongly.

'P-a-r,' said Gertie.

'Rot,' shrieked the bird, and the vulgarism came so *à propos* that Miss Adrian looked at the bird half-fearfully. There was undoubtedly something uncanny about this diabolical parrot.

Just as there was a moment of dead silence after Polly's disgraceful interruption, a footstep was heard on the stairs, and the next moment Polly burst out into a torrent of oaths.

Gertie, flushed scarlet with shame, and Miss Adrian changed colour.

The step had startled her, and she felt a sudden terror. It might be Heckett coming upstairs, and she felt that a trying interview was before her.

The parrot had recognized the step first. It was Heckett sure enough, but not Heckett alone. The old dog-fancier came marching into the room, followed by a gentleman Gertie had never seen before.

It was so unusual for her grandfather to come home before the afternoon when he went out, that until she saw his face Gertie hardly believed it could be he.

Her cheeks were still crimson with the blushes Polly had raised, but she had been reared in an atmosphere of deception, and quick as thought she picked up a canary-cage and began to extol the beauties of the occupant to Miss Adrian.

'I think you'll like this one, ma'am,' she said. 'It's a capital singer.' Then, turning to her grandfather, she said, innocently, 'This lady wants a canary, grandfather; this is as good a one as we have, isn't it?

'Yes,' growled the old man; 'the gal knows her business, ma'am,'

He eyed Ruth as suspiciously as if she had been a female detective.

Ruth was looking over the canaries in the corner as Heckett and his companion entered, but when the old man spoke to her she turned round. Then, for the first time, the stranger and she stood face to face.

The gentleman was the first to speak.

'Good heavens, Ruth, what brings you here? he cried, starting forward as though to take her hand, then stopping short and dropping his head.

'Edward—I beg your pardon, Mr. Marston!' stammered Ruth, blushing crimson and trembling violently. Gertie and her grandfather looked on in astonishment.

In a moment Miss Adrian had collected herself.

'I will call again, my child, about the canary,' she said to Gertie; then, lowering her veil, she bowed coldly to Marston and walked rapidly out of the room.

Marston watched her till the door had closed behind her. He seemed inclined to follow, but he only took a step forward, and then, with an oath, came back again and flung himself down on an empty box.

'This is a rum go, governor,' said Heckett, after a pause; what does it mean?

'Do you know that lady?' asked Marston, answering his question with another.

'Never see her afore. Is she a reg'lar cus., Gertie, or only a chance?

'She comes now and then,' stammered Gertie, hardly knowing what to say.

Marston looked at the child, and then gave a glance at the door.

Heckett interpreted its meaning in a moment.

'Gertie,' he said, gruffly, 'get out and have a blow. I shall be at home for an hour.'

Gertie put on her little hat and went out for a 'blow,' though what sort of a blow, except one on the head, is obtainable in Drury Lane it is difficult to conjecture.

She guessed her grandfather wanted to get rid of her while he talked to the gentleman, and so she took the hint at once.

'Now then, governor,' said Heckett, making himself comfortable on a rabbit-hutch, and kicking the foxhound and the spaniel out of the way, 'perhaps you'll give us the straight tip about this here affair. Who's the donner?'

'The *lady*,' replied Marston, with a meaning emphasis on the word, 'is a friend of mine; that's enough for you. I knew her when I was a very different man to what I am now.'

'I see—old pals—sweetheart, eh?'

'Never you mind what we were,' answered Marston, gruffly; 'we didn't come here to talk about sweethearts. What about this business?'

'Well, if you think this is the best place to meet, I don't mind. How many will there be on the job?'

'The fewer the better,' answered Marston; 'but I don't see we can do with less than five. There'll be you and myself, Seth Preene, and Turvey the guard, and Brooks.'

'How much will it be, do you think?'

'About £20,000. We shall wait till it's quite that. We must make a good haul, for the chance will never come again.'

'It's worth being in,' growled Heckett, filling his pipe; 'but it's a blessed risky affair. What are the shares?'

'Half me, and the rest between the four of you.'

'That ain't fair, I'm dashed if it is,' said Heckett.

'Yes, it is. I shall have to scheme the whole thing. You'll only have to do the rough work. You needn't be in it, though, if the terms don't suit.'

'That's right, Edward Marston, Esq., turn up rusty with an old pal,' growled Heckett.

'I'm not rusty, Josh, but I risk more than all of you over this affair, and I'm the only man that can carry it out. Haven't I found out where you were, and come to put a good thing in your way, just because you are an old pal? All the others have agreed to the terms, why should you grumble?'

'I ain't grumbling, bless you. I'll take it. Give us your fist.'

Marston held out his hand, and Heckett gripped it.

'Then, that's settled,' said Marston. 'Directly the keys are ready we can arrange everything.'

‘By-the-bye,’ said Marston, as he was turning to go, ‘what about that girl? Where’s her mother? I suppose she’s Gertie’s child, isn’t she?’

‘Gertie’s dead!’ said the old man, quietly.

‘Gertie dead? I didn’t know that.’

‘She died directly after the Egerton affair—died here. Ah, I never could make it out,’ added Heckett, smoking his pipe fiercely.

‘But she wasn’t married, was she? We never knew that she was.’

‘I can’t tell you, Marston. I often thinks it over and wonders what the real truth of the affair was. Perhaps you might help me. You’re a scholard and pretty cute. You’ve read them ere stories in the ‘lustrated papers as gals read, ain’t you?’

‘I have read some of them years ago,’ answered Marston. ‘Well, the story of that child as you see here just now’s one on ‘em ready wrote. She’s my Gertie’s young un right enough, for she were born here. You knew my Gertie? She was as handsome a wench as you could see in a day’s march, and a reg’lar lady in her ways, warn’t she?’

‘She was,’ said Marston; ‘it was always a mystery how she could be your daughter.’

‘She took arter her mother,’ answered Heckett; ‘and Gertie, the child as you see, takes arter her. Well, you know as when I had the betting office in Soho, and young swells used to come, and we rigged up a roulette table in the back room? You remember them days?’

‘No one better, worse luck.’

‘You was one of the swells as come here, you and Birnie and Gurth Egerton and his cousin Ralph, and you all used to chaff my gal and pretend to make love to her, and all that sort of bosh.’

‘But she always kept us at a distance; she was as savage as a little tiger if any of us spoke too freely to her.’

‘I know it, and that’s why I trusted her among you, for you were as fast a lot of young rascals as could be found in London at that time, and there wasn’t one of you as had a mag to fly with, except what you got out of Ralph, for you was all dead broke.’

‘You knew it?’

‘Yes, I knew it, and I didn’t pertend to be a gentleman.

Everybody knew what I was; it was my business to live on greenhorns and fools. You was amatoors. You pertended to be gentlemen, and you brought a pal here and made him drunk night after night, and robbed him.’

‘You had your share.’

‘I don’t say I didn’t. Well, what happened? One night, at the old drum, there was a big row, the lights were knocked over, and in the darkness some one stabbed Ralph Egerton. Who, nobody knows, except the man as did it. He was taken away and he died at his own place soon after, and was buried, and nobody knew anything about it, thank God! but them as was mixed up in it.’

‘Birnie managed that affair deuced well,’ said Marston.

‘Yes, he did; and sometimes I think as he had a reason for taking so much trouble. But that ain’t here nor there. He seed everything right and proper, and kept us all out of an awkward row. Ralph’s dead and buried, and Gurth had all his money, and a pretty pot of it there was, though you had all been robbing him and living on him for months. Ralph’s will left him everything, though it was rum it should, for they was never very great friends, was they?’

‘No,’ said Marston. ‘Go on.’

Marston was interested. Heckett’s words had set him thinking. He was beginning to have a faint clue to something which had always been a mystery to him.

‘Well, the next morning I was in the room trying to tidy up a bit and get things straight, when in comes Gertie, my gal. She looked ill and worried. It was early, and I didn’t think she’d be down—she slept in the upstairs room—or I should have locked the door.

‘“Father,” she sez, “was there a row last night?”

‘“Not partic’lar, my gal,” I sez, a-tryin’ to chuck the cloth over something on the floor.

‘“I thought I heard quarrelling and blows,” she sez. “I hope you didn’t let them blackguards rob Mr. Egerton again last night?”

‘“I can’t help what the fools as comes here does,” I sez. “This here ain’t a Sunday school, my gal, where they comes to sing hymns and say their catechiz.”

‘“I know that, wus luck,” she sez, a lookin’ at me straight in the face. “This here’s a den o’ thieves, father—that’s what it is; and it’s people like us as brings murder about.”

‘I didn’t feel comfortable when she began to talk like that, so I sez to her:

‘“You go and get the brekfus ready, my gal, that’s what you’ve got to do.”

‘“I shan’t,” she sez. “Look here, father,”—Lor’, I can see her a-standing there now, poor dear, her eyes a-flashin’ and her bussim heavin’ with passion—“you shan’t lead this horrible life no longer,” she sez. “I’m sick on it. I’ll warn Ralph Egerton this very day. He don’t come here no more.”

‘“You’re a saucy jade,” I sez; “you go and mind your own business.”

‘’With that, being confused like, I picks up the cloth, and the next minute she had me by the arm a-grippin’ me till I hollared out.

‘“Father,” she sez, “what’s that? There’s *blood* upon the floor. Father, there’s murder been done here this night.”

‘With that she drops into a chair and begins to moan and rock herself to and fro, and presently she has what they calls a fit of the ‘sterics, for she begins to larf and cry and shout out. Then she rushes out of the room quite mad like, a-yellin’ “Murder.” Well, I got in a funk then, for I see as it would be all up if she didn’t hold her row, so I bolts after her and seizes her.

‘“Leave go!” she shrieks. “Murder! Help! Murder!”

‘“Quiet, you devil!” I shouted, gripping her by the throat, for I was half mad myself then. “Do you want to hang the lot of us?”’

‘She fought and bit and struggled, and, strong as I am, I had all my work to hold her. At last she broke loose, and made for the stairs, and then——’

The old dog-fancier drew out a big red handkerchief and mopped his brow, for the perspiration stood upon it in great beads.

‘And then—God forgive me!—mad with rage, I struck her a violent blow on the head, and she fell to the ground.

‘I was sorry arter, and I’d a cut my ‘and off, but what was I to do? She’d ha’ had the whole neighbourhood about our ears in another minute.

‘She lay quite still where she fell, a-moaning and a-groaning, and I kneels down beside her, and I calls her by name, and asks her to get up, and tells her as I didn’t mean to do it, for, so help me God, Marston, that there gal was the only human thing as I ever cared for. She never got up, so I lifted her and carried her up, and put her on the bed upstairs.

‘She lay there day after day, eatin’ a bit now and then, and a-moaning and a-talking out loud about things as had happened years ago, and I see as her brain was gorn queer. I daredn’t leave her a minnit hardly, so I shuts the place for a bit. Birnie come to see her, for I sent a message to him. He told me he’d a come before only he had to see to Ralph Egerton. Then he told me what he’d done, and how it was all square, and nobody need never be the wiser. Gurth Egerton he come to ask after her, and he seemed quite interested in how she was a-goin’ on and asked me what she talked about, and all manner o’ rum questions.

‘Well, she lied like that for a couple o’ months, and Birnie told me as she was quite out of her mind, and certainly she did talk that wild it was enough to give you the shivers to hear her.

‘“Is there any cause for this here?” I sez to Birnie, for I didn’t think as the crack on the head could have done it.

‘“Yes,” he says; “she’s evidently been in great trouble, and that little affair in the back room settled her outright,” and then he tells me something as regular takes my breath away.

‘I didn’t believe it at first, but I found he was right arter all; for one night I had to send for him in a hurry, and the next morning my poor girl was dead, and that young un as you see in the room jest now was a-crying by the side of her.’

‘And you mean to say you have no idea who Gertie’s father was?’

‘Not the ghost o’ one. She raved about everything except that. The murder was the principal thing she stuck to. “They’re murdering Ralph!” she’d cry out; “Save yourself, Ralph!” but never a word about a sweetheart, and she died without telling us; and from that day to this I’ve never found out who it was as ruined my poor gal like a villain.’

The frame of the burly old ruffian shook as he brought his fist down on a box by his side.

‘By G——!’ he said, ‘if I could find that out, I swing for him now.’

‘You wouldn’t,’ said Marston quietly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your story’s new to me, Josh,’ said Marston, quietly, ‘and I didn’t know poor Gertie was dead, for I left England soon after that affair, as you know.’

‘Yes, you left in a hurry, though nobody ever knew why.’

‘That was my business,’ answered Marston, with the air of a man who declined to be questioned; ‘but I left in total ignorance of anything but the attack on Ralph.’

‘Some of us thought that was why you did leave.’

‘I had nothing to do with it,’ said Marston; ‘but I can tell you what you evidently don’t know—your daughter had a sweetheart. One of the men who came here came only to see her. He met her here first, and afterwards they used to go about together in the day-time. One of the men who used your house night after night was Gertie’s lover.’

‘Tell me his name,’ cried Heckett, springing to his feet, with a face livid with rage. ‘Tell me his name, and by Heaven I’ll kill him like a dog.’

‘No, you won’t,’ said Marston. ‘Sit down.’ He pushed the old man back on to the box. ‘Now listen. The man who loved your girl, who met her day after day, and who only came to your den of thieves for her sake, was ——’ Marston paused.

‘Quick!’ gasped Heckett; ‘tell it me quick! His name—his name?’

‘Ralph Egerton!’ said Marston.

The old man’s clenched fist dropped to his side.

At that moment Gertie came in from her walk, Heckett called her to him and looked earnestly in her face.

‘By Jove, Marston!’ he exclaimed, ‘I believe you’re right.’

CHAPTER XIII.
THE MASTER OF EDEN VILLA.

There is a quiet little turning out of the Camden Road, where the whim of an architect has planted some hybrid arrangements in brick and woodwork which it would puzzle the unskilled in architectural nomenclature properly to describe.

They might be chalets if they were less like *cottages ornés*; they might be *cottages ornés* if they were less like bungalows; and they might be bungalows if there were not so much of the suburban villa about them. It is possible that the architect in preparing the plans saw, like a distinguished statesman, that there were three courses open to him, and, being a man who had some slight difficulty in making up his mind, determined to effect a compromise, and erect buildings which should embrace chalet, bungalow, and *cottage orné*, and also betray a suggestion of the suburban villa.

The houses are pretty enough in their way, are nicely set back in picturesque little gardens, and just the kind of places which a house agent can describe as ‘charming bijou residences.’

It is not often that one of them displays an agent’s board, for they are quickly snapped up by persons who wish to live in a pretty house and still have the benefit of a good shopping neighbourhood, and whatever advantages may accrue from a ‘close proximity to rail, ’bus, and tram.’

Eden Villa, however, had been to let for at least three weeks, when one fine day the milkman noticed the board was down and white curtains were up. The milkman, also observing straw in front of the gate and in the roadway, concluded at once that a new tenant had been found and had moved in.

Whereupon the milkman left his card, which set forth that he kept separate cows for children and invalids, and that families were waited on daily. The baker and the butcher and the grocer followed on the heels of the milkman, and very soon the young lady with cherry-coloured ribbons in her cap, who answered the successive peals at the bell, got out of temper, and informed all whom it might concern that ‘there wasn’t no family there, and that what they wanted they’d come and fetch.’

What else could cherry-ribbons say? How was she to decide, alone and unaided, between the rival claims of seven milkmen, six butchers, eight grocers, and ten bakers, whose cards made a nice little pack upon the kitchen dresser?

Six hours had not elapsed after those white curtains went up before the rates called with a rate already made, and the water applied for two quarters unpaid by last tenant, and the representative of the local directory requested the full christian and surname of the new tenant.

‘Master’s name’s Mr. Edward Marston, and he’s a hactor,’ said cherry-ribbons, flurried and excited with her continuous journeyings to the door. ‘That’s all I know, and he ain’t at home now, so you can’t see him.’

With which exhaustive information cherry-ribbons banged the door to, and bounced angrily into her easy chair, to enjoy her cup of tea and once more to take up the thread of that marvellous serial, ‘A Servant To-day and a Duchess To-morrow,’ which was running with brilliant success from week to week through the pages of the *Housemaids of Merry England*, a journal of fiction and fashion.

It was, however, from this scant information that the nobility, gentry, and tradespeople of Camden Road and its vicinity gradually became aware that Eden Villa was now the residence of Mr. Edward Marston, an actor—probably a provincial actor, for his name was unknown to Camden Town in connexion with the London boards.

Not being a baker or a milkman intent upon securing a new customer, but simply a veracious chronicler, intent upon making the story of certain people’s lives as clear as possible to the reader, I am quite independent of cherry-ribbons; so, without disturbing her, I will open the front door with my latch-key and usher you straight into the presence of the new tenant.

The white curtains have been up three days when we pay our visit in the early morning.

This is the breakfast-room on the ground floor. You will observe that the French windows open on to the lawn. The gentleman toying with his toast and sipping his tea leisurely you met one rainy night in the early part of this story.

He is a very different looking person now. His clothes are faultlessly cut, his hair is neatly arranged, his moustache is nicely trimmed, and his

beard and whiskers have been shaved off. The strange, wild look is gone, and you see only a good-looking, well-built gentleman of five-and-thirty, who has nothing much to trouble him, unless a nice house be a trouble (it is, sometimes, I'm afraid), and who should certainly, if appearances go for anything, mix in good society and have a balance at his banker's.

That he is an actor we know from cherry-ribbons, and that accounts for there being in a little room upstairs a complete actor's wardrobe—dresses, wigs, beards, and moustaches, and all the materials for 'making up.'

But before he blossomed into a member of that profession which to-day takes high rank among the arts, and passes followers into the saloons of the wealthy and the great, and gives them an income for which all but the most favoured in other professions may sigh in vain, but which once only entitled its disciple to take rank as a rogue and a vagabond, what was he?

An author must necessarily play the part of chorus while the action of his drama requires that he and not his characters should speak. It is not a pretty tune to which the chorus of Edward Marston's life can be delivered.

Edward Marston's father gave his son a good education, and he gave him little else. He was a gentleman at the outset of his career, was Marston *père*, and an adventurer at the close. He dissipated a fortune in reckless extravagance, broke his wife's heart by careless cruelty and systematic neglect, and, having brought up his son in an atmosphere of plenty, ran away from his creditors just as that son was twenty-one, and left him to shift for himself and make what he could by his brains and out of the acquaintances which he had made in his butterfly days.

Given a fair start, compelled from the outset to work for his living, young Marston might have settled down into a respectable citizen. But the whole surroundings of his life had unfitted him for the steady and laborious pursuit of wealth. He had expensive habits and tastes, a love of luxury which he was accustomed to gratify without thought of the cost, and he had never been brought within the range of those high moral influences which force the inclinations under some kind of control.

His home life had been unhappy. With an ailing and broken-spirited mother—a woman too weak-minded to do anything but what she did, pine away and die—with a father who openly violated the first principles of social morality, young Marston early learned to be what the world calls 'a smart fellow.'

He had no sisters. Had even this influence been brought to bear upon him he might have grown up differently. The men who have had sisters are generally the best. The constant presence of womanhood in a house acts as a charm. Boys who grow up among boys are always inferior to their fellows in manners, in tact, and, as far as the world knows, in their standard of morality. It is difficult to overrate the beneficial influence which sisters exercise over their brothers in an English household.

Edward Marston, deprived of everything which could appeal to his better self, drifted into a swift current of evil. His associates were young men of wealth and position, and he imitated their tastes at any cost. When his father went away to America he found himself utterly stranded, with nothing but his vices. He lived on them. He got mixed up with a fast set of young men, and in pursuit of pleasure made doubtful friendships. It was easy to foretell the end.

He had no money; he had therefore to get it from those who had. Such men are met in the largest quantities on racecourses in billiard-rooms, and gambling-saloons. These places were the haunts of young Marston, and fate flung him into close companionship with well-dressed rogues and well-dressed fools.

Among his 'set' were Oliver Birnie, a good-natured devil-may-care medical student, clever enough, but fond of more dissipation than he could get out of the two hundred a year his father, a small country practitioner, allowed him, and Gurth Egerton, a young man much after his own heart, whose only living relative was a wealthy cousin, a man of five-and-thirty.

This latter was Ralph Egerton, a man who might have been anything he chose, but who, inheriting a large fortune, plunged into dissipation and drank to the verge of madness. In his sober moments he was a good fellow; drunk he was a quarrelsome rowdy, and an easy prey to the young sharks who swarmed about him. Gurth and he were pretty constant companions, but they quarrelled fearfully. Gurth resented Ralph's wealth, yet he lived on him. Gurth brought him to the dens, and Marston helped to pluck him.

They let Ralph fancy himself a little king of Bohemia; they ate his dinners and drank his wine, and when he was drunk enough they took him to gambling hells and cheated him.

A favourite haunt with them all was Josh Heckett's. Heckett did many queer things for a living. Among others he kept a betting office in Soho, and had a little room where a select few of his customers played roulette or any game they chose.

It was in this room that the event happened with which the reader is already well acquainted. It was just after that that young Marston disappeared from the scene and went to America—to his father, he said—but whatever was his real motive, it was known only to himself.

Leading the life he did, he had yet found time to fall in love with a beautiful girl who had returned his affection.

The Adrians had been neighbours in his father's best days, and Edward and Ruth had been boy and girl sweethearts. No harm was known of the Marstons then. They lived in a good house, kept servants, and ostensibly were gentle people. Edward visited at the house, Mr. and Mrs. Adrian liked him, and it was tacitly understood that the young people were in love.

The one pure passion of Edward Marston's life was his love for Ruth Adrian. If anything could have sobered and steadied him it would have been her influence. Unhappily, at the very time that influence was most needed, an event happened which severed their lives for ever.

The elder Marston ran away from his creditors, some very 'peculiar financial transactions came to light, and when Mr. Adrian, awakened to the danger of the situation, made inquiries, he found that the son was leading an evil life, and was the constant companion of gentlemanly blacklegs.

The next time Edward called at the Adrians' he was forbidden the house, Ruth wrote him a noble, womanly letter, returned his presents, and declared that it broke her heart to give him up, but that her duty to herself and to those dearest to her demanded it. She should never love anyone else and never forget him. She would pray God that he might yet lead a better life, and some day call a pure and honest woman wife. The girl's tears fell fast and thick as she wrote. She thought she was doing her duty. Reared in a school of morality deeply tinged with religious fervour, Ruth saw no other way out of the difficulty. It seemed to her almost a sin to have loved a bad man. The love she could not crush, but the man she would look upon no more.

This breaking down of the last barrier between himself and utter recklessness happened immediately after Ralph Egerton's murder—for murder all concerned firmly believed it to be. Ruth Adrian was the last link that bound him to respectability. That link snapped and he was free—free to float out into the ocean of wickedness, and sink or swim as luck determined.

He went to America and led a life of adventure. He utilized his talents in a big field, but an overrun one. The 'smart man' is a type of American society, and a redundant type. Marston may have prospered at one period, but he must have come to an evil time at last, for certain it is that he returned to England almost penniless, and on the night he met Birnie outside the Blue Pigeons he was actually without a copper.

That meeting was the turning point in his career. It placed a little capital at his disposal, and capital is the one thing needed to make a fair start in anything in this country.

Marston had learned much in America, and he saw a way to utilize his experience.

High-art crime has been developed rapidly in these latter days. Edward Marston was one of its pioneers. He brought to the 'business' in which he embarked education, skill, ingenuity, and a knowledge of the world.

As he sits this morning in his newly furnished villa in the Camden Road his plans are formed, his capital is invested, he is at the head of an obedient and well-organized staff, and he is about to embark on the perilous and daring enterprise. His capital is the £500 Birnie had repaid him. He is under an obligation to no one for that. To his staff we shall in due time be introduced, and through the varying stages of his brilliant enterprise we shall accompany him.

He has finished his breakfast. He rings the bell, and cherry-ribbons enters and clears away. He has so much to see to and so much to think of this morning, that he will not want to be interrupted, and it is perfectly certain that he will have a strong objection to being overlooked.

Under these circumstances, having satisfied our curiosity as to his

antecedents and present position, it will perhaps be as well if we take our departure and creep out of Eden Villa as quietly as we entered it.

CHAPTER XIV.
JABEZ SEES THE GHOST.

It was Miss Duck's birthday—which birthday let us not be ungallant enough to inquire. Georgina herself confessed to thirty-three, but Jabez had heard her confess to quite that amount of years on many previous anniversaries when there had been no company present; he wisely held his tongue, and concluded that Georgina had been adding up with the trifling omission of a ten.

It was quite a festive occasion this evening at the little house at Dalston. Miss Jackson from over the way was invited, and so was her young brother; Bess and George were of the party, and Jabez came home an hour earlier in order to assist Georgina in doing the honours.

Tea was over and cleared away, and in its place there stood upon the table a plate of biscuits, a decanter of port, a decanter of sherry, and a plate of oranges cut into quarters.

Miss Jackson, between sundry fits of weeping, had confided to Bess that birthdays always made her miserable; and Miss Jackson's brother, supremely uncomfortable in a collar that would keep coming unbuttoned, sat on the edge of a chair and blushed crimson every time anyone looked at him.

Miss Jackson's brother was a nervous youth of nineteen, who wrote sonnets to Venus and odes to Diana of the most impassioned order, but could not look a mortal female in the face without going the colour of a boiled lobster.

After tea he wriggled on the edge of his chair, and divided his time between rebuttoning his collar and pretending to be deeply interested in the pattern of the carpet.

'Georgina dear,' said Miss Jackson, during a pause in the conversation, 'how sad it is to think that in the midst of this festivity'—Miss Jackson glanced at the cut oranges and sweet biscuits—'we are really celebrating the close of another year of your dear life.'

'Lor, Carry, don't!' said Georgina. 'You give one the creeps.'

'Alas!' sighed Carry, 'we are all one year nearer the grave than we were a year ago.'

Her eyes filled with tears, and she mopped them with her pocket-handkerchief.

'That's one way of looking at it, certainly,' exclaimed Jabez, filling the glasses and handing them round. 'Have a glass of port?'

'Thank you,' said Miss Jackson; and clutching a glass she dropped a tear into it, and tossed it off.

Miss Jackson's brother also took a glass with a trembling hand, and got it to his lips after spilling half of it down his white waistcoat, and turning the colour of the liquid itself in his agony, 'Now let's be jolly,' exclamed Jabez, shining benignantly on everybody. 'Here's Georgina's jolly good health, and a many of 'em.'

Bess and George duly honoured the sentiment, and Georgina bowed gracefully to everybody, including Miss Jackson's brother, who observed the salutation just as he was drinking, and, swallowing his wine in a hurry in order to bow politely, let it all go the wrong way, and choked and coughed for a good five minutes, crowning his misfortunes, in the confusion which seized him in consequence, by wiping his brow with the antimacassar instead of his pocket-handkerchief.

Gradually the little company settled into groups. Miss Jackson, Bess, and Miss Duck plunged into trivialities about Mrs. Jones's baby next door, Mrs. Brown's bad husband, the price of provisions, and the state of the weather; Miss Jackson's brother made a group by himself in a far corner with an album, over which he bent with the earnestness of a student, and looked at the portraits upside down for a quarter of an hour without knowing it; and Jabez and George started a little conversation which we are ungallant enough to imagine will be of more interest to the reader than Miss Jackson's jeremiads, Bess's mechanical 'Yeses' and 'Noes,' or Miss Duck's choice morsels of local gossip.

'And so you really like your new place. Well, I'm glad of that,' said Mr. Duck. 'Good places ain't easy found in the City.'

'Mine's a capital place, I assure you,' answered George. 'There's really very little to do.'

'Let's see, Smith & Co. is the firm, isn't it? What are they?' asked Jabez, presently.

'I don't know, exactly.'

‘Where are their offices?’

‘Well,’ said George, ‘they have so many.’

‘Many offices! What do you mean?’

‘Why, you see, I’m not attached to any office. One week I go to their office in Fenchurch Street, and perhaps the next I’m at Little Britain. This week I’m on at the office in the Borough.’

‘Do you have many customers come in?’

‘No. Now and then a gentleman comes to see the manager—that’s all.’

‘It’s a queer situation, anyway,’ said Jabez. ‘I wonder what they can be?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered George; ‘but the manager is a most respectable old gentleman, and very kind, and I get my money to the minute.’

Jabez registered a mental note to make some inquiries about the firm of Smith & Co., who had so many offices. And then the conversation turned upon Mr. Jabez’s own line of business.

‘We see some rum affairs in the law,’ he said, after giving George an idea of the grandeur of his firm. ‘We’ve a case now that’s a romance in itself.’

‘A romance!’ exclaimed Miss Jackson. ‘Oh, I dote on romances, they end so sadly. I had my romance once.’

Again the big round eyes filled with tears, and Miss Jackson was about to give way, when Georgina called her a goose, and Jabez went on with his narrative to a larger audience, for the local gossip was exhausted.

‘There is a bit of sadness about this romance, it’s true,’ said Mr. Duck, ‘because there’s a death in it.’ Miss Jackson got her handkerchief ready.

‘It’s the Egerton case I mean. You’ve seen the advertisement in the newspapers asking for proof of Mr. Gurth Egerton’s death? Well, my firm put that in. We’re solicitors to the gent. There’s no doubt he was drowned in the *Bon Espoir*. But the most curious part of it is the housekeeper, Mrs. Turvey’—Georgina turned up her nose here, and Miss Jackson sighed a sigh of sympathy with her friend’s trouble. ‘The housekeeper, Mrs. Turvey, and her little girl distinctly saw an exact counterpart of Gurth Egerton at his own front door some time after the news of the wreck reached England.’

‘A ghost!’ shrieked Miss Jackson; ‘don’t say it was a ghost.’

‘Well, I don’t know what else it could have been unless it was the drowned man himself; and if it was him, why should he open his front door and go away again? Why shouldn’t he have said, “Mrs. Turvey, light the fire in my bed-room and air my nightshirt.”’

Miss Jackson hid her face, and Georgina exclaimed, ‘Jabez!’ Miss Jackson’s brother buried his head in the album.

‘I beg your pardon, ladies,’ said Mr. Duck, ‘for alluding to details, but in the law we are particular about details. Well, instead of behaving as a live man would, he doesn’t come in, and nothing more is heard of him. His friend, Dr. Birnie, is executor to his will, and inherits a good lump of his property; but Birnie can’t touch a penny till we can prove the death of the man who came to his own front door after he was drowned.’

‘But,’ exclaimed George, ‘surely if he was drowned you can prove it.’

‘Not easily, except by supposition. Some people left the ship before she sank. They all swear the passenger known as Egerton was not in either of the boats. They were all picked up and are accounted for—every soul in the boats.’

‘Then Mr. Egerton must be dead,’ said Miss Georgina.

Mr. Duck smiled.

‘Of course he is, my dear, but not in the eyes of the law.

In a railway accident, or burned in a theatre, or blown up by an explosion of gas, we might have found a button or a coat-tail or something to swear by. You see in the present unsatisfactory state of the case there are people to whom money is left who can’t touch it.’

Miss Georgina shot an arrow.

‘There’s Mrs. Turvey, the housekeeper, has five hundred pounds, for instance.’

‘Yes, my dear, that estimable lady has, or rather will have, five hundred pounds.’

‘I dare pay some old fool will be after her directly that gets known,’ said Miss Georgina, with a look at Miss Jackson.

Jabez protended not to hear, but, turning to George, addressed his conversation specially to him.

It was a stormy evening, and the clouds had been gathering threateningly in the sky, with an indication of more violent tempest yet to come.

Just as Jabez was minutely describing the appearance of the ghost as seen by Mrs. Turvey, a terrific peal of thunder crashed through the stillness of the night, and vivid flashes of lightning played about the room.

With a wild shriek Miss Georgina sprang to her feet.

She was the most abject coward in a thunderstorm.

Miss Jackson endeavoured to calm her.

'Oh, Carry, let me go—let me go,' she cried; 'lead me to the coal-cellar.'

The company endeavoured to soothe her fears. It wasn't forked lightning, they assured her. There was no danger.

'Cover the glasses over, Jabez,' moaned Georgina, 'and open the windows, and set the doors ajar, and see there are no knives about. Oh!' Another terrific peal of thunder wrung this last interjection from Miss Duck. She darted out of the room in a state of collapse, and, seizing a chair, rushed into the coal-cellar with it, and there awaited the abatement of the storm.

Jabez explained that his sister was very frightened of lightning, and he hoped the company would excuse her. She always shut herself in the coal-cellar during a thunderstorm.

'Poor thing!' sighed Miss Jackson. 'Spending her birthday in the coal-cellar! Oh, my poor friend!'

Miss Jackson, imagining that a tear ought to be trickling down her nose, was about to produce her handkerchief and wipe it away, when her brother created a diversion which cast the cruel situation of Miss Duck into temporary oblivion.

The windows had been flung open to let a current of air through the room and give the lightning egress, and Miss Jackson's brother was surveying the heavens and mentally composing an ode to Jupiter, when his attention was attracted by a figure on the opposite side of the road.

Miss Jackson's brother had been an attentive listener to the ghost story and Jabez's description of the ghost's features, and great, therefore, was his honor at beholding, when the lightning lit the figure up, an exact counterpart of the ghost that appeared to Mrs. Turvey.

'Lo-o-o-k there!' he stammered. 'Wh-ha-t's th-that?'

Jabez followed the direction of the youth's trembling finger, and then, with a vigorous 'Well, I'm blest!' darted into the hall, seized his hat and rushed across the road.

The figure turned and fled.

Jabez pursued it.

Miss Jackson had rushed down-stairs to whisper through the keyhole of the coal-cellar that a ghost had come to wish Georgina many happy returns of the day, and that Jabez was pursuing it.

Georgina came out of the coal-cellar at once.

The ghost might come there.

The storm had abated, and she ventured to join George and Bess and Miss Jackson's brother at the open window.

The ghost and Jabez were out of sight.

In about five minutes one of them returned panting and out of breath. It was Jabez.

He came into the room looking so white that Miss Jackson screamed.

'Well, what about the ghost?' said George, quite bravely, smiling at Bess, upon whom the example of the other ladies seemed likely to have an effect.

'I'm done,' answered Jabez, dropping into a chair, and violently polishing his shiny head with his pocket-handkerchief till the gas globes were reflected in it; 'I'm done. It's the rummest thing I ever knew.'

'But you never knew a ghost before, did you?' asked George, keeping up a smile, meant to be reassuring.

'Ghost be blowed!' exclaimed Mr. Jabez, jumping up. 'It's no ghost. It's Gurth Egerton himself.'

CHAPTER XV.
MR. GURTH EGERTON COMES TO LIFE.

Gurth Egerton's first feeling when saved from the wreck of the *Bon Espoir* was one of intense thankfulness that his life had been spared. But as the fearful danger to which he had been exposed receded, he began to contemplate the past less and the future considerably more.

The most terrible situations are those which fade most rapidly from the mind. A man will remember going to the dentist's to have a tooth drawn long after he has forgotten a surgical operation in which his life was at stake. There is nothing so soon forgotten by the ordinary mind as death. Many men would remember being best man at a wedding far more distinctly than being chief mourner at a funeral.

So it was with Gurth Egerton.

After the first few days on board the *Diana*, his marvellous escape seemed a trifling incident in his career, and his whole thinking capacity was exercised in the solution of this difficulty—what should he do when he got to England?

The theory that murderers are always haunted by remorse is an absurd one. Murderers are in many instances very ordinary persons. They wash their hands, forget their crime, and tread their path in life with firm footsteps. A murderer may go to the play, entertain his friends at dinner, eat strawberries and cream, and cry when his favourite dog dies. 'Once a murderer always a murderer,' is not a proverb in any language. It is most probable that the authors of the undiscovered crimes of recent years are now considered very respectable members of society. For all we know they may pay their debts with regularity, subscribe to school treats, help old ladies over crossings, and live in houses which are distinguished for the whitest window-curtains and cleanest doorsteps. They may sleep soundly, digest their food, and shiver with indignation when a ruffiany labourer is charged with assaulting his wife. Murders are committed, as a rule, under exceptional circumstances, and a murderer may look back upon 'his little misfortune' with occasional regret, but it is doubtful if ever he felt the least desire to give himself up or to exchange his liberty for a prison cell.

There is, however, a difference in murders. Some people are so anxious to acquire the title that they voluntarily accuse themselves of crimes of which they are innocent. Others give themselves up with a romantic story about their conscience having compelled them to do so. In most of these instances, if it is a man he has been drinking hard, and if it is a woman she is hysterical. Self-preservation is the first law of nature, and, as long as a murderer's mind is well balanced, he will bury his crime as deep as possible and forget it as soon as he can.

The idea that murderers are haunted for ever by the memory of their guilt is as fallacious as the smug proverb that 'Murder will out.' For one murder that comes to light there are ten that remain in eternal darkness.

It is time, however, to leave murderers in general to their peaceful enjoyments, and return to Mr. Gurth Egerton, the rescued passenger of the *Bon Espoir*, and to say somethin» of his antecedents.

His uncle, Ralph's father, had been a man who late in life came into enormous wealth—a man who, having led a life of extravagance in his youth, and breathed an atmosphere of debt and difficulty, found himself, when the capacity for enjoyment was gone, the possessor of a vast fortune.

The old man's whole nature seemed changed with his circumstances. He had squandered when he was poor; he pinched now he was rich. He had been generous when he was paying sixty per cent, for cash; he was mean to a degree now he had thousands invested in good security. He shut himself up in one of his houses, furnishing only three rooms, and cried over the expense of having a doctor to keep him alive. He quarrelled fiercely with his only son, Ralph, grudged him the paltry allowance which in his hard-up days he had cheerfully paid, and admitted only one person to his confidence.

That person was his nephew Gurth, his dead brother's son, he had been fearful that Gurth would come upon him for assistance, or would expect a gift. Gurth did nothing of the sort, and the old man could have hugged him. But Gurth's good qualities were positive as well as negative. Gurth was in a fast set of young spendthrifts, and rich heirs and minors, who paid ninety per cent, for money, and he brought the old man their

bills, and always brought him the best.

No one knew where Gurth got the money. ‘His friend in the City’ was a mystery to all the set. He didn’t choose to say it was his uncle. Gurth made money out of the transactions, too, and he was useful in advising the old miser when to sue for his money and when to renew, for he was in the confidence of his reckless companions, and they thought him a jolly good fellow to get their paper melted for them.

Old Ralph always promised Gurth to remember him in his will, and he did so after his own fashion.

He left all he possessed to his only son for life, and on his death without issue the property was to pass to Gurth. The old miser may have had some idea that by leaving it this way Gurth would try to prevent Ralph squandering his fortune—that it would make him a sort of custodian of the hoarded wealth he loved.

Gurth, who had counted upon a thumping legacy, was bitterly disappointed, and conceived a violent dislike to his cousin. He was, however, too shrewd to show it openly.

He looked the situation in the face, and convinced himself that Ralph’s was a short life. Ralph inherited the family failing, and drink and dissipation had already wrecked a vigorous constitution.

‘Ralph Egerton will kill himself in a year, at the rate he’s going on,’ said people; and, seeing that the young man was already on the verge of delirium tremens, their prophecy was reasonable.

Gurth was satisfied on the whole when he thought matters out. He was the constant companion of his cousin, and kept him well surrounded with the means of shortening his career.

He introduced him to the gambling den of Josh Heckett, and shared in the plunder. He was only drawing on account—that was his idea. If Ralph Egerton was to lose money, *his* money, what could be fairer than that he should lose it to him?

It was after his introduction to the Soho establishment that a great change came over Ralph. Gurth detected it, sought the cause, and found it.

Gertie Heckett, Josh’s pretty daughter, was at the bottom of it.

Gurth fancied that it was a vulgar amour, and nothing more. He let it run its course, seeing in it only one more link in the chain that bound Ralph Egerton to evil company.

But one day Ralph, who had been sober for a month, broke out badly, and grew quarrelsome.

Gurth kept his temper and refused to quarrel. It didn’t suit him to part company with Ralph. One day he came suddenly upon Gertie at Ralph’s house in St. John’s Wood. The girl was coming out white-faced and red-eyed as Gurth want in. He questioned the servant.

The young woman had come there in great trouble, and said she must see Mr. Egerton at once. Mr. Egerton had seen her, and there had been high words. She had gone away crying. That was all the servant could say.

That afternoon Gurth ‘tapped’ Ralph on the subject, and Ralph resented it. He was still under the influence of a long drinking bout, and his tongue was unguarded. In his rage he taunted Gurth with hanging about and waiting for him to die, that he might have his money.

‘You’re murdering me, you devil!’ he shouted, his face distorted with passion. ‘You’re murdering me in your slimy serpent way, you know you are! You want me to drink myself to death, don’t you? But I’ll do you yet, my fine scheming gentleman.’

‘You’re drunk,’ answered Gurth, biting his lip, ‘or you wouldn’t speak to me like that.’

‘I’m sober enough to tear the mask from your ugly face!’ shouted Ralph; ‘and you can retire from business. Your game’s up. You’ll never have a penny of my money, you sneak—not a penny!’

‘What do you mean?’ said Gurth, hoarsely.

‘I mean that I have played a trump card, and that you can spare yourself any further trouble on my behalf, Mr. Gurth Egerton. I’m married!’

‘You lie, you drunken fool!’ cried Gurth, springing up and seizing him by the arm.

Ralph shook him off.

‘Touch me again,’ he shouted, ‘and I’ll have you kicked out of the house, you dirty adventurer! Gertie put me up to your tricks. Gertie’s a good girl, and I’ve married Gertie. There now! how do you like it?’

For a moment Gurth stood staring in blank surprise at the drunken man. Was this truth, or was it a tipsy boast? With a supreme effort he conquered his anger, and sat down quietly opposite his cousin.

'I congratulate you, Ralph,' he said; 'you might have done much worse.'

'Damn your compliments!' muttered Ralph, reaching across to the brandy bottle, and pouring out half a tumblerful. 'Keep 'em! I married Gertie to settle your hash. We've been married six months, and to-morrow I'm going to make it public. She's a jolly good girl,' he added, with a maudlin softness in his voice, 'and it's my duty to let her position be known. She's my lawful wife, Gurth Egerton, and you can say good-bye to my money, old fellow. Better luck next time.'

With which compliment Ralph tossed off the brandy, and rolled his eyes about more wildly than ever.

Gurth Egerton bit his lip and turned his face away lest Ralph should see how white it was.

He was convinced that the drunkard spoke the truth, and he saw that his hopes were shattered. Ralph was married, and he would have children. Much in Gertie's conduct lately was clear as the noon to him now, and he understood why lately she had kept out of the way when the men were about.

His worst fears were realized. Ralph Egerton had swept fortune from him just as it seemed within his grasp.

The pair sat in silence for full five minutes. In those five minutes a daring scheme had matured itself in the brain of the one.

'Ralph, old boy,' said Gurth, 'shake hands. I'm sorry we've quarrelled. If I can do anything to help you and Gertie I will.

It is rough on me, I own, but you've a perfect right to do as you like, and I shall accept my fate quietly. Let's have a drink and shake hands.'

Gurth poured out some brandy—a little for himself, nearly a tumblerful for Ralph.

'Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Egerton,' said Gurth, raising his glass and sipping the contents.

'Gertie—God bless her!' said Ralph, pouring half the raw liquor down his throat.

He put the glass down and came across to Gurth.

'Gurth, my boy,' he said, with a foolish smile, 'I forgive you. I was jolly rude just now, wasn't I? God bless you!'

And thereupon Ralph grew quite confidential, and shook hands over and over again with his cousin; and Gurth learned that the marriage was a secret as yet, that Josh didn't know anything about it, and that Ralph had the certificate among his papers upstairs.

That night Ralph was at Heckett's, and a quarrel arose over cards. Shortly afterwards he was buried, on the certificate of Dr. Oliver Birnie, and his fortune passed into the hands of Gurth Egerton, in accordance with the old misers will; for Gertie lay out of her mind and dying slowly, and no one but Gurth himself knew of the marriage certificate.

Gurth Egerton, recovering rapidly under the kind surgeon's care from the illness which his shipwreck and long immersion had caused, sat on the deck of the *Diana* and thought out his plans for the future.

The vessel was bound for Baltimore, but he would take the first ship and go home again, What should he do when he landed in England? He had been travelling for years, leaving his affairs to be managed by his friend, Birnie. He was haunted by a constant terror, not that his crime would come to light, but that he might lose the result of it.

On the last afternoon he spent with Ralph Egerton, the dipsomaniac had boasted of having the marriage certificate in his own keeping. That certificate Gurth had never been able to find among the papers of which he had taken possession.

He had furnished the house which the old miser had occupied in the street off Russell Square and carried everything there, leaving Birnie to live at Ralph's villa at St. John's Wood. But, though he found hundreds of documents relating to the affairs of the deceased, there was no sign of the paper he so particularly wished to destroy.

He felt sure that the marriage had been performed before a registrar, and he could easily have ascertained where, but that would have been a dangerous step. It was to his interest that no attention should be

attracted to the subject by inquiries about it.

There was nothing to connect him specially with the death of his cousin. Every one present on the occasion was equally liable to suspicion, and the only man who might have spoken, perhaps, had he liked, was bound in his own interest to hold his peace.

Birnie had shown him the false certificate of death which he had signed to avoid scandal, and it had not been a bad day's work for the young doctor.

From that moment, without a word passing between them, it had been understood that Birnie lived rent-free, and had an allowance of so much a year out of the estate. To do him justice, Birnie had not been extortionate, and Gurth himself marvelled occasionally that he did not make a freer use of the power he undoubtedly possessed.

He had left Birnie not only manager of his affairs during his absence, but executor in case of his dying. With the exception of a legacy of £500 to the housekeeper, Mrs. Turvey, and £2,000 to Birnie, the whole of the property was left, in the event of his death without issue, to the nearest surviving relative of Ralph Egerton. Nothing, however, was to be touched till the anniversary of his death, and on that day a sealed letter was to be opened by his solicitors.

In this letter Gurth set forth the fact that he had heard a rumour that Ralph had been married. He left it to be inferred that had the wife or child, if there was one, at any time lodged a claim, he should instantly have recognised it, but no wife or child had ever come forward. He charged his executors to make diligent inquiry, and ascertain who was the nearest living relative of his late cousin.

This was a kind of death bed repentance. Gurth felt conscious that the record of the marriage would be advertised for, and, the books being searched, would be found, and then the property he had enjoyed during his lifetime would pass to the rightful owner.

That was the condition of affairs when he left England; but now a change had come. He had confessed to the murder of his cousin, and, as he had been picked up, so the clergyman who had received his confession might have been picked up. Hurrying to England there might be a ship with the clergyman on board. It might, for all he knew, be an ocean race between accuser and accused. Had he not firmly believed that his fate was certain, he would have kept his secret. He had regretted his rashness five minutes afterwards, but it was too late.

Then came the wreck, and he knew no more till he opened his eyes on board the *Diana*.

His presence of mind, which had deserted him in the hour of danger, had returned in the hour of safety.

He had given his name as George Englehardt when asked by the ship authorities. At any rate, it should be imagined that Gurth Egerton had perished until it was certain that his fellow-passenger, the clergyman, was lost.

He took the first ship from Baltimore, and as he neared England his plans were complete. He would let it be believed he was drowned until all chance of his accuser turning up had vanished.

So he came to London, and steadily avoided for a time all places where he was likely to be recognized.

But one night, impelled by curiosity to see his house, he crept past it in the dark.

Standing in the shadow of the opposite side, he saw Jabez Duck come out. What was Grigg and Limpet's clerk doing there at that time of night?

Shortly afterwards he saw what he supposed to be a lady bring home a little girl he had never seen before. A strange fear took possession of him. Knowing what he knew, he jumped to the conclusion that the certificate had been found during his absence, that Heckett had been communicated with, and that the child was the child of Ralph's dead wife.

That Grigg and Limpet's solicitor and this little girl should be at the house alarmed him. As 'the wicked flee when none pursueth,' so do the guilty always connect the most trifling circumstances with the discovery they most dread.

Presently he noticed that the door was ajar, and he crept up and peered in. Something might, perhaps, give him an idea of who the present occupants were.

At that moment the child cameinto the hall and saw his face. Her shriek of 'Aunty!' brought up Mrs. Turvey, and the result was that Gurth

Egerton glided rapidly away, satisfied on two points—that the child was only his housekeeper's niece, and that he was evidently supposed to have been drowned in the *Bon Espoir*, and was now a full-blown ghost.

Soon after that he saw the advertisements for proofs of his death in the papers, and also a request that 'Mr. George Englehardt,' the rescued passenger, would call on Messrs. Grigg and Limpet.

Evidently the ghost story had been put about, and there was a difficulty in deciding that his property could be dealt with.

He had never intended that it should be. Long before the time when a penny could be touched or anything be sold, he would take his place in society again, with a marvellous tale, if necessary, of his adventures and hairbreadth escapes.

He wanted to wait until he was quite certain that the clergyman of the *Bon Espoir* had not been rescued, and then, all fear being over, the sea should give up her dead.

His time of concealment was, however, considerably shortened by an accident.

Standing under a doorway one evening to escape a violent storm, he heard a cry from the opposite side, and the next moment he saw Grigg and Limpet's clerk hurrying towards him.

Obeying his first impulse, he ran away; but Jabez caught him up and seized him by the arm.

Then he felt that all concealment was at an end.

'Hulloh Duck, how are you?' he said quietly, as if nothing had happened. 'I thought you were a garrotter.'

Jabez stood looking at him, the picture of blank amazement.

'Mr. Egerton,' he stammered, 'I——'

But the ghost interrupted him curtly:

'I'm in a hurry now. Tell Grigg and Limpet I'll call on them to-morrow.'

And on went Mr. Egerton, leaving Jabez to go home through the pouring rain with a piece of information which astonished the little birthday party considerably, and brought Miss Georgina out of the coal-cellar long before the thunderstorm had subsided.

CHAPTER XVI.
LIMPET, JUNIOR, TRANSACTS SOME BUSINESS.

Messrs. Grigg & Limpet Were duly informed of Mr. Gurth Egerton's mysterious resurrection, by their faithful clerk, and sat in state all the morning, ready to receive their adventurous and eccentric client.

Both Grigg and Limpet were anxious to have the mystery of his laziness in coming to life explained, and had been puzzling their brains to account for it. Yet when, shortly after noon, Mr. Gurth Egerton was announced as having entered the clerks' office, there was no departure from the usual ceremony.

'Say we are engaged, and show Mr. Egerton into room B,' said Mr. Limpet.

Then Grigg pulled out his watch, while Limpet read the *Times*.

'Time?' said Grigg, presently.

'How long has he waited,' asked Limpet.

'Ten minutes,' answered Grigg.

'Give him another two, then,' said Limpet, as though Mr. Gurth Egerton were an egg, and it was a question of how long he should be boiled.

When the twelve minutes were up Limpet rang a bell, and the clerk went in search of Mr. Egerton, and bowed him into the presence of the firm.

Mr. Egerton did not choose to enter into details with his solicitors, Grigg & Limpet, who had prepared themselves for a three-volume novel, and were disappointed when they found their client's story was a dry summary, which would have done credit to the matter-of-fact columns of the *Times*. Mr. Egerton did not even throw in a little 'picturesque reporting.' He had been shipwrecked, and he had been saved; he had come home, and had not made himself known because he hated excitement; he thought if he showed up right on the top of the news of the shipwreck he should be inundated with inquiries about missing relatives, and worried by newspaper reporters. He had passed his house one evening, and he supposed that was when Mrs. Turvey saw him and thought he was a ghost. He had met Duck, Messrs. Grigg & Limpet's clerk, last evening, and sent a message to them. He should take up his residence at his house again tomorrow, and on any matter of business that might be necessary Grigg & Limpet could communicate with him there. He would call on Birnie himself.

That was the substance of the professional interview. Mr. Grigg listened and said, 'Exactly,' 'Indeed,' and limited his share of the conversation to other remarks of a similar character. Limpet launched out a little more freely, but Mr. Egerton politely declined to be drawn beyond the boundary he had evidently marked out for himself.

When Mr. Egerton had retired, Grigs; said, ''Strodinary man,' and Limpet nodded, and added, that 'There was something more than that at the bottom of it, or he would eat his head.'

However, as it was not for them to inquire into their client's secrets, but only to transact his business and protect his interest, they immediately set their clerks to work to prepare a statement which would show Mr. Egerton what had been done in his absence, and how his affairs stood.

When Mr. Grigg was giving instructions to Duck, a tall, good-looking young gentleman, dressed in the height of fashion, strolled into the room, and, after carefully hitching up his trousers at the knees to avoid creasing them, dropped gracefully into an arm-chair.

'Well, governor, I'm here to time, you see. They wanted to put me in room C because you were engaged, but that game wouldn't do with me, you know.'

Mr. Limpet frowned.

Mr. Grigg did the same, and more.

'Mr. Limpet,' he said, 'do you allow your son to jeer at the business?'

'Jeer at the business, be hanged!' said Limpet, junior, rattling the handle of his cane against his beautiful teeth. 'Can't a fellow have his joke? Here, charge me 6s. 8d. for it, and put it down in the bill.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Reginald,' growled Mr. Limpet; 'you annoy Mr. Grigg very much.'

‘Oh, no, he doesn’t. He can’t help being a fool.’

Reginald Limpet laughed.

‘You’re talkative to-day, Mr. Grigg,’ he said; ‘glad to see it. Shows business is good. Well, look here, governor,’ he added, turning to Mr. Limpet; ‘you asked me to come, and I’ve come. What is it you want? To double my allowance, or to get me to introduce Mr. Grigg into the best female society?’

Grigg positively writhed in his chair.

‘Pretty female society it must be that tolerates you!’ he exclaimed. ‘Limpet, settle with your son, and let him go; we’re busy.’

‘All right,’ said Mr. Reginald; ‘don’t leave off for me; I’ll smoke till you’ve finished. Got the *Sporting Life* anywhere’?’ Limpet smiled behind a parchment.

Limpet had a great admiration for the daring manner in which his boy defied Grigg. Grigg was a crusty old bachelor, and so of course, never had a son, and very likely that made him more disagreeable to young Limpet than he would otherwise have been.

‘Shall I step out of the room, Mr. Limpet, till you’ve finished your family affairs?’ asked Mr. Grigg with a withering smile.

‘Don’t do that,’ said Reginald, jumping up and taking his father’s arm. ‘You might get shut in room C, or room D, or room F, you know, and we might blow up the wrong pipe after you when we’d finished, and have to start all the clerks off in exploring parties through the whole establishment in search of you. Come away, dad; we’ll go into room double X, if it’s empty.’

Limpet called his son a foolish fellow to talk such nonsense, and went out with him into the adjoining room. Mr. Limpet’s command to his son was a very simple one. When it had been given, young Limpet was about to go, when he remembered something.

‘By-the-bye, governor,’ he said, ‘you couldn’t give me a cheque this morning, could you?’

Mr. Limpet thought perhaps he could. He went back into his private office and returned presently with it.

‘There you are, Reg,’ he said. ‘Of course you’re going to cash it at once?’

‘Rather, governor. I shall take a hansom to the bank.’

‘Well, then, I wish you’d get me a cheque-book for home, and take it back with you. I haven’t a cheque in the house.’

‘All right, governor,’ answered Reginald.

Mr. Limpet handed his son an order on his bank for a chequebook, shook hands with him, and returned to smooth the ruffled Grigg.

At the bank Mr. Reginald Limpet received £20 in gold and a cheque-book. He stowed the gold in his pockct, but the chequebook was not such an easy matter. Wherever he put it it disarranged the set of something. At last, after several vain attempts to dispose of it artistically, Mr. Limpet, junior, decided that it must go in his coat-tail pocket, and if it bulged out behind it must.

Into the tail-pocket of his faultless frock-coat went the cheque-book, and the young man, jumping into a hansom, ordered the driver to take him to the Junior Corinthian. The Junior Corinthian was Mr. Limpet’s club.

He stayed at the club for an hour, and then strolled up New Bond Street

Now, when Mr. Limpet, junior, went into the bank in the City, two gentlemen were intensely interested in his movements. One of them followed him in, and heard him ask for a chequebook on Grigg & Limpet’s account.

This gentleman was a dark man, with a hook nose; the other was a thin, wiry-looking youth of about eighteen, with a cunning-looking face, and cross eyes that seemed for ever on the watch round the corners. This young gentleman was dressed in a neat grey suit, and looked a clerk as far as his top waistcoat button; beyond that he looked like a billiard marker or a sporting gent., for the gayness of his necktie and the curliness of the brim of his billycock would have shocked a City man dreadfully.

The dark gentleman with the hook nose came out directly and began talking to him. When a policeman came by, the dark man asked him if the blue omnibuses passed there.

‘Yes,’ said the policeman, ‘but there isn’t another for twenty minutes.’

Mr. Seth Preene, the possessor of the hook nose, knew that Well

enough, but he wished to let the policeman know that he was waiting for an omnibus, otherwise the policeman might have wondered at his loitering so long.

When young Limpet came out, Mr. Preene and his young friend watched him into the cab and heard him tell the cabman where to drive to.

'Now then, Boss,' said Mr. Preene, when the cab had driven off, 'you know what to do.'

'Rumbo,' answered the young gentleman. 'He's got something in his tail pocket as he didn't 'ave when he went in.'

'And that he won't have when he gets home, eh, Ross?' said Mr. Preene, with an encouraging laugh.

'Not if Boss Knivett can help it,' said the youth with a grin. Then he hailed a hansom and desired to be driven to the street in which the Junior Corinthian Club was situated.

'Blue Pigeons at ten if it's right,' whispered Mr. Preene, as he closed the cab-door for his young friend. Then the driver whipped his horse and whirled Mr. Boss Knivett rapidly from the watchful eye of his friend.

That afternoon as Mr. Limpet, junior, strolled up Bond Street, Mr. Boss Knivett strolled also. But Mr. Limpet, junior, was a long time giving Mr. Boss the desired chance, and he began to fear he might not have a good day's sport after all.

The little bird whose tail Mr. Knivett wished to get close enough to to put salt upon without observation kept from shop-windows and from crowds and strolled about well in the middle of the streets.

Boss was almost in despair when his prey turned into the Burlington Arcade. There the fates were still unpropitious, until Boss, looking about him, saw a young lady who nodded to him pleasantly. She was a young lady very loudly dressed, and her cheeks were suggestive of artistic treatment.

Boss crossed the arcade and spoke to her quietly.

'I'm on a good lay, Liz,' he said. 'You can stand in a couple of quid if you like, if it comes off. No danger.'

'No danger? Honour bright?' said the girl.

'Not a blessed haporth. I only want you to have a fit. Do you tumble?'

'Right,' said the young lady. 'When?'

'Walk in front of that gentleman,' said Boss, pointing out Mr. Limpet, junior, 'and when you hear me sneeze drop.'

The young lady strolled quickly away, and presently she was in front of Mr. Limpet, and Boss was behind him, the people in the arcade passing to and fro and sometimes crossing between them.

Suddenly Mr. Knivett had a bad cold and sneezed violently. At the same moment the young lady uttered a piercing shriek, and went down in a heap on the ground, kicking and struggling furiously.

A crowd came about in a minute, and Mr. Limpet was in the thick of it. Mr. Knivett was squeezed up close behind Mr. Limpet. Old ladies said, 'Poor creature!' Young ladies looked at the painted face and turned away. Old gentlemen and young gentlemen crowded round and loosened Liz's bonnet-strings, patted her hands, and wondered what they ought to do.

Mr. Limpet, junior, looked on. That was his *rôle* in life. He was born to look on, and he did it admirably. Presently the beadle of the Burlington and a policeman came upon the scene. Liz was carried into a shop, and the crowd dispersed.

Mr. Knivett had not remained long. He had no idle curiosity to gratify, and a girl in hysterics had no charm for him. He was out of the Burlington and down the other end of Bond Street before young Limpet strolled out of the arcade.

Mr. Knivett was disappointed. He had found nothing in the pocket but a cheque-book; but that evening when he handed it over to his employer he was delighted to receive £5 as the price of his day's work.

'I was afraid I'd lost a day, gov'nor,' he said, clutching the gold in his hand.

'Not a bit of it, Boss,' answered Mr. Preene. 'We can do with as many blank cheques as you can bring us. My firm will always pay a fair price for them.'

That evening Mr. Knivett, looking in to see some friends at a lodging-house in the Mint, told them that Seth Preene knew a firm that was in the market for blank cheques.

For which information the friends were not grateful, one of them even going so far as to say that it was stale news.

And seeing that the gentlemen of the Mint had taken all the blank cheques found in pocket-books and all the cheque-books ‘removed from offices’ to Smith and Co.—or rather to the representative of Smith and Co., for the firm never dealt direct—for the past month, the reader will perceive that Mr. Boss Knivett has much to learn before he takes high rank in his profession.

Mr. Limpet, junior, forgot all about the cheque-book till his father asked him for it that evening.

Then he exclaimed, ‘Good gracious! It’s been in my pocket all the afternoon.’

He felt in his coat-tail pocket, but it was *not* there.

Then he felt in all his pockets, and looked upstairs, and under the table, and in his hat, and in his boots, and in all the absurd and impossible places where people imagine a lost article may by miracle be secreted.

He took a cab and went back to the Junior Corinthian, but no cheque-book had been found there.

He bad lost it. There could be no doubt about it now.

Mr. Limpet junior’s light-hearted composure was quite undisturbed. He was sorry, but it was only a cheque-book. What the deuce did it matter? Now if it had been bank-notes it would have been a nuisance.

Mr. Limpet, senior, was cross, but he recovered his equanimity under the soothing influence of Reginald’s unconcern. After all, it was only a cheque-book, of no use to anyone but the owner, and Smith and Co.

CHAPTER XVII.
SMITH AND CO. AT WORK.

The firm of Smith and Co. was not an old-established business.

The gentlemen connected with it had for a long time traded on their own account, but it was only quite recently that their talents had been united for the benefit of the joint-stock enterprise. The founder of Smith and Co. and the principal partner was, as the reader has probably surmised, Mr. Edward Marston.

Directly that gentleman had secured the necessary capital to make a fresh start in life, he had resolved to give his dormant business talent a chance of distinguishing itself. His ten years' American experience had been of the utmost value to him, and soon after his visit to Birnie chance flung him into the company of a gentleman who was looking out for a good working partner in a commercial speculation.

Mr. Walter Brooks and Mr. Edward Marston, laying their heads together, conceived the idea of starting in business in the City as financial agents. Mr. Brooks had a peculiar talent for imitating handwriting, and Mr. Marston acquired in America the knowledge of a process by which signatures could be transferred from one piece of paper to another in a manner that would defy detection.

But Mr. Marston had not round him the 'workmen' who were necessary before this knowledge could be utilized on an extensive scale.

Mr. Brooks, on the contrary, was acquainted with several gentleman who in the course of their business frequently came into possession of blank cheques. Furthermore, he was intimately connected with Mr. Seth Preene, a gentleman who had some mysterious connection with the police, and yet was willing to 'represent' the firm of Smith and Co., and act as traveller or confidential agent as circumstances required. Messrs. Brooks and Marston saw at once how remarkably useful they could be to each other; a partnership was formed, and Mr. Brooks let it be known that he was in the market for blank cheques.

Hitherto these articles had not been of much value. They were generally filled in for a few pounds, signed with a fancy name, and passed off upon ignorant tradespeople.

But the process was slow and uncertain, and accompanied by considerable risk.

Tradespeople were rapidly losing the first bloom of innocence, and cheques from unknown customers were regarded with considerable suspicion.

Marston with his capital and his process, and Brooks with his connection and experience, saw means of converting what was at present a drug in the market into a highly remunerative investment.

Brooks was to be the working partner, Marston was to be the capitalist and secret director, and the two together were to be 'Smith and Co.'

A small furnished office was to be taken, a week's rent being paid in advance, and a clerk was to be secured by advertisement.

The clerk was required to present the cheques. If the operation was successful, Smith and Co. would vacate their office at once, and turn up in another part of the City, ready to go on again. If the operation failed, the clerk would be detained. Smith and Co. would take precautions to have an early knowledge of the fact, and it is hardly probable that the manager would be found at his office on the return of the clerk, accompanied by the police.

Such was the nature of the business of the firm in whose service Mr. George Smith hoped to rise to a position of independence. It is needless to say that he played the *rôle* intended for him. He was merely an innocent tool in the hands of the clever rogues.

George had only presented one cheque for the firm at present. It was for £250, and drawn by Blumson and Co. George brought the money back all right, and the next day he was sent to an office of the firm in quite a different part of the City.

Now, when Mr. Boss Knivett delivered the cheque-book stolen from the tail-pocket of Mr. Limpet, junior, to Mr. Preene, who in due course handed it over to Mr. Brooks, the latter gentleman found it necessary to consult the senior partner.

Mr. Brooks had no knowledge of the signature of Messrs. Grigg and Limpet.

He called at Eden Villa early the next morning and laid the case before Mr. Marston.

‘We must get the firm’s signature somehow, and then run the cheque for £500. Lawyers keep big balances; they’ve always a lot of their clients’ money.’

‘That’s all very well,’ said Mr. Brooks, removing the wig and gold spectacles, in which he generally went abroad when there Was any reason why he should avoid recognition; ‘but how are we to get the signature?’

‘I have it!’ exclaimed Marston, after thinking a moment.

‘Go and buy a shilling bill-stamp, and give me your acceptance in your own name and at your private address for £100. Date it four months back, and draw it for three, so that it will be a month overdue now.’

Mr. Brooks didn’t quite see what the senior partner’s idea was, but he did as he was requested. He went out and purchased a shilling stamp in the neighbourhood, and returned to Eden Villa to fill it up and accept it in accordance with Marston’s instructions.

‘Now,’ said Marston, when it was finished, ‘leave the rest to me.’

Directly Mr. Brooks had gone, Mr. Marston took a hansom and drove over to Birnie’s.

Dr. Birnie was in, and on this occasion Rebecca admitted the visitor without any preliminary parleying through the flap. Mr. Edward Marston was a very different-looking person in his faultless clothes to the seedy-looking fellow who had once aroused Rebecca’s suspicions as to the honesty of his intentions.

‘Well, Marston,’ said the doctor, as his visitor was ushered in, ‘come to see me again?’

‘Yes, old fellow, and of course I want a favour.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it. The favours you generally want are expensive ones.’

‘You’re needlessly rude, Birnie,’ answered Marston, eyeing his old companion disdainfully. ‘I’ve never asked you for anything but the payment of a just debt. I am happy to say I am now quite independent of the assistance of my *friends*.’

He spoke the last word with a scornful accent.

As soon as Birnie understood that Marston had not come to him for money, his manner changed, and he was as cordial as he had previously been cold.

‘Excuse me, old boy,’ he said, ‘if I was rude; but I’ve been a good deal worried and overworked lately, and I’m tetchy. What can I do for you?’

‘Give me an introduction to your solicitors, Grigg and Limpet.’

‘What the deuce do you want with solicitors, Ned?’ said Birnie, with a look of genuine astonishment.

‘Well, you see, I’ve followed your example and Gurth’s—I’ve gone up in the world a little. I’ve had a bit of luck, and I’ve got some property coming to me. I want a respectable firm of solicitors. I thought you wouldn’t object to give me a letter to yours.’

Birnie hesitated a moment. He was afraid of Marston. Still, he thought to himself, if it was anything wrong he wouldn’t go to Grigg and Limpet.

‘You hesitate,’ said Marston, watching Birnie’s countenance. ‘What’s your objection?’

‘None, my dear boy,’ answered the doctor hastily. ‘Of course I’ll give it you. Glad to do anything I can for you.’

While the doctor was writing the letter of introduction for Marston to take to Grigg and Limpet, the latter turned to the mantelpiece, where several visiting-cards were lying about.

He handled them carelessly till he came to one which he lifted up and looked at eagerly.

‘Hullo!’ he said, ‘then Gurth’s been here?’

‘Yes,’ said Birnie, still writing.

‘I saw a paragraph in the papers that he’d been saved from the wreck after all, and carried back to America by a passing vessel, but I didn’t know he was in town.’

‘Yes; he’s been back some time.’

‘Where’s he staying?’

Birnie hesitated. Should he tell him? After all, if he didn’t, Marston could soon find out. Let Egerton take care of himself. If Marston wanted to bleed him, he would, and nothing could stop him. Still Birnie didn’t like the idea of anyone but himself having any influence over Gurth, and for very good reasons.

He hesitated so long that Marston repeated the question.

'Oh, I really don't know for certain,' answered the doctor, folding his note and handing it in an open envelope to his visitor; 'but I suppose he'll be at his town house for a little time.'

'Where's that?'

Birnie gave him the address. After all, he wasn't committing an indiscretion, for it was in the Post Office Directory. People of a certain position in life are doomed. They may hide their heads in the sand of fancied privacy as much as they like, but the agents of Messrs. Kelly and Co. can see them. He who aspires to the dignity of rates, taxes, and a vote cannot shield himself from the fierce light of publicity which falls upon a registered address in the Post Office Directory.

Marston thanked Birnie for the note and the information, and, lighting a cigar in the hall, was smiled to the front by Rebecca, who had been won over with a florin. It was Marston's business now to make friends wherever he went.

At the door the hansom that had brought him was still waiting.

He gave the driver Grigg and Limpet's address, and was rapidly whirled up Lilac Tree Road and out of sight.

Birnie went back into his study and sat for a moment in deep thought.

'I wonder what the deuce he's up to now!' he said to himself. 'Some deep-laid scheme, or he's altered considerably since the old days. It's devilish unfortunate his turning up at all. Gurth's a fool, but this man's a rogue, and you never know how to be prepared for a rogue.'

It was hard on Birnie, now that he had settled down into a sober, useful, respectable life, that the fellow should turn up again and presume on their old acquaintanceship. And now if he was going to get thick with Egerton again. 'By Jove!' exclaimed Birnie, 'I'll nip that little game in the bud if I find it necessary.'

The next morning Mr. Brooks received a letter at his residence which very much astonished him.

It was a letter from Messrs. Grigg and Limpet, informing him that they were instructed by Mr. Edward Marston to require the immediate payment of £100 and expenses on his dishonoured acceptance. To avoid further proceedings, Mr. Brooks was requested to remit the amount without delay.

Mr. Brooks went off: to Eden Villa at once.

'What the dickens does this mean?' he exclaimed, flinging down the lawyers' letter on the table.

Marston looked at it and laughed.

'It means I am going to show what can be done with capital and brains combined. Take this and pay your just debts at once, sir.'

Marston drew a hundred-pound note from his pocket-book and handed it to Brooks. Mr. Brooks took it mechanically.

'I'm blest if I see what you're up to now,' he said.

'That shows how much your firm stood in need of new blood. Send this note and the few shillings expenses, and then Grigg and Limpet will have recovered the debt.'

'And they'll hand the money over to you,' said Brooks. 'I don't see where the pull comes in.'

'Brooks, I've a great respect for you as a man of business, but, upon my word, your faculties are beginning to fail. Grigg and Limpet will remit this money to me *by cheque*.'

'Oh!'

That was all Mr. Brooks said, but it contained a whole dictionary of words. It was an 'Oh!' of sudden revelation, of admiration, of ecstasy, and of triumph.

Marston watched the effect of his brilliant idea on his companion with pleasure. It was his desire to dazzle all men with whom he came into contact, to stand a head and shoulders above his fellows. Now that he had what he was pleased to call 'a fair start,' his ambition was boundless.

His feet, at present, were on lowly stepping-stones; as he progressed, and the field of fortune opened out before him in a series of golden vistas, he would spurn the humble instruments of his advancement from him, and reign unquestioned and unchallenged in a new world.

'Brooks, my boy,' he said, when that gentleman had got over his mingled admiration and enthusiasm, 'I am only at the beginning of the work I have to do. I am afraid you won't be able to go very far on the

road with me if you don't brighten up a bit.'

Mr. Brooks hoped Mr. Marston would always be able to make use of his services.

'Well, it will be time enough to talk about it when I can't. At any rate, we won't dissolve partnership till there's a rattling good profit to divide. Now cut back to the office and send your messenger to the solicitors with the money. They've promised to remit me at once if they recover it, as I've said I'm leaving town. I shall have their cheque to-morrow, and then we can set to work.'

'Shall I come up to you to-morrow?'

'No, I think not. I'll come down to the office to you. There's no danger over the other cheque, I suppose? The office isn't watched?'

'No; Preene's got the matter in hand, and he's put the Yard on the wrong scent altogether. I shall have the tip from him if there should be danger.'

'Very well, then, I'll come round at eleven if I receive the cheque. Get your clerk out of the way, so that you are alone when I come. Good-morning.'

Mr. Marston bowed Mr. Brooks out and returned to his library to finish his cigar and a romance he was reading when his partner interrupted him.

Mr. Marston had just got to the death of the heroine, a very lovable character. The description of her last hours was most pathetically drawn by the author, and, as Marston read, the big lump came in his throat and his eyes filled with tears.

Mr. Marston had a most sympathetic nature, and any story of human suffering distressed him immensely.

CHAPTER XVIII.
THE FORGED CHEQUE.

On the morning following Mr. Brooks's interview with the senior partner at his private residence, George, on his arrival at the office, was instantly despatched on a commission which would keep him out of the way till twelve o'clock.

Exactly at eleven, the time appointed by the senior partner, a gentleman arrived at the office—the said office being on the second floor of a particularly dingy house in Gutter Lane.

It was not the elegant Mr. Marston who entered the little room with 'Smith and Co. (Temporary Office)' pasted across the door—that is, if one might judge by appearances. The gentleman who came in and accosted Mr. Brooks in a familiar manner was a German-looking gentleman, with the black silk square-looking cap which gives such a round appearance to the face, and the peak of which comes down over the eyes like a shade. The clothes he wore were German in cut, and the tight military trousers dropping well over the Wellington boots were unmistakable; and, to complete the character, there was the signet-ring on the first finger of the left hand. He carried an overcoat across his shoulder, German fashion, and carefully tucked under his arm was the red Baedeker, without which no German feels himself safe in the mighty City of London. Opening the door cautiously, the German gentleman peeped in.

'Ees dis de ofeece of Herr Gutzeit?' he asked politely.

'Rumbo,' was the strange answer returned by Mr. Brooks. 'Rumbo, guv'nor; I'm alone.'

How on earth Mr. Brooks could expect a German gentleman to understand English slang I don't know, but the German gentleman evidently did, for he stepped inside and closed the door.

'I wasn't sure you'd be alone,' he said, as he turned the key, 'so I thought it best to keep up the character.'

'You make a fine German sausage, Marston,' answered Mr. Brooks, regarding his visitor, with admiration. 'Blest if it don't make me want some sauerkraut to look at you. But you didn't come down the Camden Road that guy, did you?'

'No,' answered Marston, for he it was; 'I wore my coat over the costume, and left my hat to be blocked coming along. But, business, business. Where's this young Smith?'

'He's gone out—won't be back till twelve.'

'Well, we'll have the cheque done by then. Grigg and Limpet remitted at once. Look here.'

Mr. Marston pulled out his pocket-book, and drew from it a cheque, which he showed to Mr. Brooks. It was Grigg and Limpet's cheque for £100.

'Capital!' exclaimed Brooks. 'By Jove! it was a splendid dodge, Marston. About the cheapest way of getting a signature to copy I ever heard of. I'm ready; sit down.'

The pair of worthies sat down.

Mr. Brooks, producing the stolen cheque-book from his pocket, tore out a cheque and placed it side by side with Grigg and Limpet's genuine draft for £100.

'How much shall we make it?'

'£500,' answered Marston. 'Less won't pay us for the trouble we've taken.'

'Is there sure to be enough to meet it:'

'Certain; they always keep a big balance. I've ascertained that.'

Mr. Brooks proceeded to fill up the blank cheque for £500, imitating exactly the style of writing in the body of the genuine cheque. That was his part of the work. When that was done, and only the signature required, he handed both cheques over to Marston.

That gentleman then subjected them to an ingenious process, into the details of which, from motives of prudence, it will be perhaps, as well not to enter.

Neither spoke during the operation. When it was finished, Marston lifted the genuine cheque, and handed it to Brooks.

'Look!' he said.

Brooks turned it over and glanced at the back.

‘Not a mark on it!’ he said, after examining it carefully.

‘Now look at the forgery.’

Mr. Brooks took the duplicate cheque and looked at it closely.

‘Why, there’s no signature at all!’ he said. ‘What’s the use of this?’

‘That’s just the beauty of this process, my dear fellow,’ exclaimed Marston. ‘The old transfer business was clumsy, and almost sure to be found out. This, on the contrary, is elegant and defies detection. The man who invented this process made a fortune in America.’

‘Why didn’t he come over here?’

‘He met with an accident,’ said Marston, laughing. ‘He was shot in a drunken row. It was by the merest fluke that I got to know this process. I thought it might be useful some day.’

‘But I don’t quite see the use of it,’ urged Mr. Brooks, still gazing anxiously at the apparently unsigned cheque.

Marston took it from him, and drew from his pocket a little box containing a fine white powder. This powder he spread over the lower part of the cheque till it completely covered it.

He left it so for a few minutes, then he took the cheque up and emptied the powder back into the box passing his fingers carefully down the paper to see that not a grain remained.

‘Now look at it,’ he exclaimed.

Mr. Brooks did look, and he was delighted at what he saw.

A faint violet signature was at the bottom of the cheque. It was perfect. Every dot, every line.

‘I guess the rest,’ he said. ‘Any special ink wanted?’

‘None,’ answered Marston. ‘Fire away.’

Mr. Brooks did fire away. He went carefully over the faint violet outline with a pen and ink, and when he had finished and the signature was dry, he put the two cheques side by side, and dapped his thigh with delight.

‘By Jove, Marston, it’s perfect; the money’s in our pocket.’

‘Not yet,’ answered Marston; ‘but it soon will be. What time will your clerk be back? We ought to send him to cash it at once. I shall cash the genuine one first, in case of accidents.’

Mr. Brooks’s face suddenly fell.

‘H’m!’ he said, ‘that’s awkward, too. I forgot to tell you, but the rummest thing in the world occurred yesterday. When I got back after seeing you, I gave Smith a note for Grigg and Limpet, with the money in it, to take at once. “Grigg and Limpet,” he says, looking at the address, “why that’s where my landlord is.” Of course I asked him a question or two then, and it turns out this greenhorn of mine is lodging with a man named Duck, one of Grigg and Limpet’s clerks.’

‘That’s awkward. He may have said something already,’ said Marston, looking grave.

‘Not he; he’s a gentleman,’ answered Mr. Brooks; ‘so I knew how to tackle him. “Mr. Smith,” I said, “you occupy a post of confidence with the firm, which will lead, I hope, one day to great things. I need hardly tell you, Mr. Smith, that, in our business, confidence between employer and employed is necessary. I trust you do not talk with your landlord about the business of the firm?”

‘He stammered and blushed, and said he might have said something, but not lately. I told him to take the note and put it in the firm’s letter-box and come away, but on no account to mention to any one from whom he came, and not to breathe a word to his landlord that our firms had business together. He promised.’

‘But how do you know he didn’t?’

‘My dear fellow,’ said Mr. Brooks, ‘he’s as honest and innocent as a baby. I’d trust him with anything. He kept his word, I’ll swear; but still I don’t think, under the circumstances, it will be advisable to send him to cash Grigg and Limpet’s cheque.’

‘Certainly not,’ said Marston; ‘and what’s more, you must get him away from here at once, and away from his lodgings. He’s a link, and I hate links. Directly a link is established, if a clever man doesn’t find it, a fool will blunder on to it. He must be got out of the way at once.’

Mr. Brooks recognised the necessity of removing the ‘link’ at once. Duck would be sure to hear of the forgery on his masters, and George’s very greenness might furnish a clue to the whole thing at any moment.

‘In the mean time,’ asked Marston, pacing the room impatiently, ‘who’s going to cash this cheque? Will you?’

Mr. Brooks hesitated, and humm’d and ha’d. It might be dangerous. He

might be detained, and he had no idea of being detained. If George had been detained it wouldn't have mattered.

They would all have time to clear out. No; on consideration it wouldn't do at all for him to take the cheque.

They were on the horns of a dilemma now, and it was necessary to act at once. The person presenting the cheque must be a gentlemanly person to inspire confidence, and there wasn't one of the regular gang they could trust.

Suddenly Marston brought his fist down on the table.

'I have it,' he exclaimed. 'There's only one way. This follow must present the cheque and bring the money back to you.'

'Yes; but suppose he talks about it to Grigg and Limpet's clerk when he goes home?'

'He won't talk about it.'

'What do you mean?'

'You most not give him the cheque till to-morrow to present. By that time I shall have arranged everything.'

'You can't stop him talking.'

'No, but I can stop him ever going back to Duck's again.'

CHAPTER XIX.
GERTIE MAKES A PROMISE.

Since the accidental meeting with Marston at the house of the dog-fancier, Heckett, Ruth Adrian had avoided the place. The sight of her old sweetheart had opened the floodgates of memory, and the torrent sweeping over her had washed away all that time in ten long years had piled above the remains of the hurried love. Once more it lay bare; once more her heart was filled with it. Her love had been so earnest, so real, it had permeated her whole being. It had been a task almost superhuman to crush it, but once she believed she had succeeded.

Devoted to her father and mother, occupying all her spare time in acts of quiet benevolence, she had managed to find in the new life she led a means of distraction and forgetfulness of the past. But, at the sight of the idol she had so ruthlessly shattered, the structure she had reared to hide the empty pedestal crumbled away, and the work of years was undone.

The meeting with her discarded lover at Heckett's had seriously alarmed her. All through the years, hearing nothing, she had hoped that he might have altered his course of life, and in the new world to which he had gone found some good woman to be his wife who would have led him gently back into the path of rectitude.

Now she knew that her hopes had not been realized. She had seen enough of the world to know that men like Marston did not associate with men like Heckett for any good. In her visits to Gertie she had gathered from the child's innocent chatter enough to feel certain that the animals were only a blind to hide the real nature of the burly old ruffian's business. Lying awake night after night, she pictured Marston as the leader of some desperate gang of men at war with society. She knew that his talents, if misapplied, would enable him to carry crime into the region of the fine arts, and she dreaded to think of the ultimate fate of one who had been the hero of her girlhood's dream.

Gradually she worked herself into the belief that she was responsible for this man's sinful life. God had flung him across her path in order that she might rescue him. Perhaps she ought to have married him, and by her influence have won him from wickedness. A glorious work had been committed to her hand, and she had shrunk back like a coward. Was it too late now? Ruth Adrian shuddered as she pictured Marston hurried into crime, reckless of everything, because of her conduct to him. How could she atone now for the evil she had unwittingly wrought?

Anxieties and distress of mind began to affect her health, and the old people noticing her pale face and haggard look, besought her not to overwork herself by her constant labours among the poor. Talking of these labours the name of Gertie Heckett came up one morning at breakfast.

Ruth, with a blush of shame, confessed she had not seen the child for a fortnight.

Mr. Adrian was astonished.

'Why, my dear,' he said kindly, 'I thought little Gertie was your favourite pupil.'

'So she was, papa; but I—I haven't been well enough to go there lately.'

Ruth stammered and blushed, for the fact had dawned upon her that she was neglecting Gertie, and leaving the child alone and exposed to the pernicious influences of her old surroundings.

'I have put my hand to the plough and turned back,' she thought. Already the influence of Marston was asserting itself. To her dread of meeting him she had sacrificed the little friendless child whose future so much depended on her constant care.

'I will hesitate no longer,' said Ruth to herself. 'It is the Lord who has flung this man across the pathway of my life again. With God's help it shall be for good and not for evil.'

Later in the day, as Gertie sat upstairs talking to Lion of the good lady that never came now, Ruth Adrian pushed the door open and walked in quietly.

Gertie, with a cry of delight, jumped up and ran to her, lifting her little face to Ruth, and Lion, leaping up, placed his huge forepaws on her shoulder, and gave a deep bark of welcome.

'Oh, Miss Adrian!' exclaimed Gertie, as with flushed, happy cheeks she sat down by Ruth's side and gently drew Lion down into his proper place

in the ‘class,’ ‘we were afraid you were ill. Lion and I have watched day after day, and we’ve said our lessons over for fear we should forget them.’

It was Gertie’s firm belief that Lion did say his lessons, and that his education was progressing rapidly. If he didn’t understand everything she told him about history and geography, why did he always wag his tail?

‘And do you know, Miss Adrian,’ Gertie went on, when Ruth had explained her absence as well as she could, ‘the parrot’s getting much better. He swears a little still, but I’ve taught him some good words, and he uses them now instead of the bad ones.’

‘Bless your eyes!’ shrieked Polly, rubbing his beak against the cage.

‘That’s much better than what he used to say about our eyes,’ said Gertie, delighted at Polly’s attainments.

‘Very much,’ answered Miss Adrian, with a smile. ‘But I suppose he isn’t quite cured yet.’

‘Oh, no, not quite, but nearly. You know I fancy grandfather made him swear, and grandfather’s very little here now. Since that gentleman——’

Gertie hesitated. Child as she was she remembered that Miss Adrian had seemed distressed at the sight of Marston.

‘Go on,’ said Ruth, taking Gertie’s hand in hers and listening with a heightened colour. ‘What about that gentleman?’

‘Well, since he came grandfather’s been out a good deal, and I fancy they’ve got important business together.’

The colour faded from Ruth’s cheeks. It was as she feared, then. Marston must be mixed up with very bad company indeed if he and old Heckett had business together.

She questioned Gertie eagerly, and ascertained that Marston had been once or twice, and that he always talked in a low tone with her grandfather. She had heard something once about some gold and thousands of pounds, so she supposed it was very important business.

Gertie’s head was full of other things, however, besides Marston, and she soon left him to chatter about Lion, and the parrot, and the animals, and her lessons, and all the old topics in which Ruth had once taken so much interest.

Ruth let her prattle on, but her thoughts were far away. She seemed as though she were thinking out some plan of action.

Suddenly she stopped Gertie in the middle of a long aneedote about Lion and a cat, and said in a serious voice,—

‘Gertie, will you do me a very great service?’

‘Oh, yes, Miss Adrian, anything.’

‘Listen, then. If ever this gentleman who comes here to see your grandfather should, to your knowledge, be in any danger or ill, or if you should hear anything about him that makes you think he wants a friend, will you let me know?’

Gertie said certainly she would.

‘Don’t tell any one I have asked you this, Gertie.’

‘Oh, no! no one shall know it except Lion, and he’s heard what you’ve said, of course.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind Lion; he’s in all our little secrets,’ said Miss Adrian smiling; ‘but I hope Polly will be discreet.’

Gertie laughed at the idea of Polly revealing a secret; and Polly, who had heard its name mentioned, whistled and blessed their eyes for a good five minutes.

Miss Adrian, to satisfy her conscience, gave Gertie a short lesson; but she could not deceive herself. She knew that her visit was more on Marston’s account than on Gertie’s.

When she rose to go, Gertie hoped she would come again soon, and she promised that she would.

‘Perhaps I shall have something to tell you about *him*, you know,’ said Gertie, archly.

Miss Adrian flushed scarlet. Was it possible she had betrayed herself even to this child?

She stooped down and patted Lion’s head, and then kissed Gertie affectionately.

‘Good-bye, Gertie,’ she said; ‘and remember to let me know if anything happens.’

She got halfway down the stairs, and then the thought struck her, how

would Gertie communicate with her. The child did not know where she lived.

She turned back again and wrote her address on a little piece of paper, which she gave to the child, and bade her take care of it and not let any one see it.

Gertie folded the piece of paper, and put it in her bosom.

She followed Miss Adrian downstairs, and watched her up the Dials as far as she could see her; and then she went back and showed Lion the piece of paper, and promised him some day they would go and call on the good, kind lady, and perhaps have tea with her.

From the moment Gertie had it in her power to render Ruth Adrian a service she longed for the opportunity. She almost prayed, that something might happen to Marston in her presence that very day, in order that she might show her good, kind friend how grateful she was, and how faithfully she could keep a promise.

CHAPTER XX.
GERTIE MAKES A DISCOVERY.

At the back of the room where the animals were kept was another little room, which Heckett himself occupied. Gertie's room was upstairs, and she never went into her grandfather's, having particularly been enjoined not to do so.

But on the day of Miss Adrian's visit a peculiar thing happened. Lion, who had been wandering about after Miss Adrian left, went into her grandfather's room, and was gone so long a time that Gertie called him. He didn't answer, and Gertie, passing in, saw him biting at a piece of rag that seemed to stick between the boards. Gertie, terrified lest he should be doing some mischief for which her grandfather would beat him, ran in and drove him out.

Then she stooped down to pull the piece of rag up and see what it was.

She pulled hard, but it wouldn't come out. She supposed it must have got trodden between the boards. She gave one more determined pull, and suddenly, to her intense astonishment, the floor yielded and she went down with a bump, pulling what at first she supposed to be a huge piece of the flooring up with her.

Her terror at what her grandfather would say when he discovered, as he must do, that she had been into his room, yielded to astonishment as it gradually dawned upon her that the flooring she had really pulled up was a trap-door.

The piece of rag was the corner of a canvas bag, which had evidently been slightly shut in and which Lion discovering had pulled further and further through.

The reason that he could not draw it quite through was evident, for the bag which Gertie had pulled up with the door lay on the floor, and it was full of something hard and heavy.

Gertie scrambled up off the floor, picked up the bag, and peered into the open space below the flooring, wondering why her grandfather had such a queer cupboard as that.

As she looked down she was astonished to see that the space was full of canvas bags like this one, only some of them were larger and looked peculiar in shape. She lifted one up and opened it and saw only what she thought was a pewter pot in it.

She thought it very strange that her grandfather should keep pewter pots and heavy bags under his floor; but while she was looking and wondering she heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

In an instant she was seized with a paroxysm of fear. If her grandfather found her there, what would he do? The footsteps sounded nearer.

Hastily flinging in the bag and closing the trap-door, Gertie, hardly knowing what she did, crept up into a corner behind a box near the door, which was ajar.

She was covered with dust from kneeling on the floor, and her face was so hot and flushed she feared to meet her grandfather. She hoped he was corning in with some one and would go out again directly.

From her corner she could peep through the crack of the door.

She saw a gentleman, who looked like a foreigner, enter first, closely followed by her grandfather, and then another gentleman with a dark face and a hook nose.

Lying close and trembling in every limb, she was obliged to listen to their conversation.

'Gertie,' said her grandfather.

There was no answer.

'All right,' said the old man; 'she's gone out for a minute, I expect. Shut the door and then she can't come in.'

The foreign gentleman, who had a black silk cap on, but who spoke very good English, closed the door, and then, addressing the other two, appeared to be giving them instructions.

Gertie didn't hear quite all they said, but she caught the name of Marston spoken by her grandfather, and she instantly made up her mind it was Marston who was being talked about. She listened eagerly. The chance of serving Miss Adrian had come sooner than she could have hoped.

Sometimes the three men spoke so low she could hardly make out

what they said, but she heard something about the police, and that to-morrow some one, whom she presumed to be Marston, was to be met by one of them after he had come from the bank with the money for a cheque.

'They'll search his lodgings, of course,' said the foreign gentleman; 'and we must take care something's found there. Who'll do it?'

'I'll manage it,' answered the dark gentleman with the hook nose. 'I shall go with the 'tecs, and shall give the information. Leave the case to me; I'll make it straight enough. If you want him put out of the way for a bit, you can reckon it done.'

Gertie heard this, and more, and she instantly concluded the gentleman in whom Miss Adrian took so much interest was in danger.

Child as she was, she had been bred amid surroundings which inculcated habits of self-dependence and fertility of resource. Lying there, half-dead with fear, she had still enough sense left to plan out her course of action.

She would go to Miss Adrian's at once and warn her.

When the three men had agreed together what they were to do, the dark gentleman with the hook nose went out and left Heckett and the foreigner together.

'That big affair I spoke to you about is ripening, Heckett,' said the foreigner. 'We shall rely on you.'

'I'll be in it,' growled the dog-fancier; 'but I shall want my fair share.'

'It'll be the biggest thing you ever did in your life. I shall set Brooks to work directly I'm sure of my ground, and then you must be ready. We may have to start any night.'

The two worthies then conversed together in a lower tone, and presently the foreign gentleman said 'Good-day' and went out.

Josh Heckett, left alone, looked about him.

'I wonder where the deuce that gal's got to?' he said.

He came and peered into his own room and went out again.

'She must be out in the Dials,' Gertie heard him say. 'I hope she don't leave the place like this often.'

Presently Gertie heard the clang of his heavy boots going down the rickety stairs.

'He's gone out to look for me,' she thought.

She slipped out from her hiding-place, rushed upstairs to her own little room, and knocked the fluff and dust off her dress.

While she was there her grandfather came in again, and shouted up the stairs:

'Gertie, are you there?'

'Yes, grandfather,' she called out. 'I had a headache, and laid down, and dropped off to sleep.'

'Well,' growled the old man, 'come down and look arter the place. If you go to sleep again I'll wake yer up.'

Gertie came down trembling. The old man eyed her keenly for a moment, then bidding her keep her eyes open and not leave the place again, he lit his pipe and went out.

Latterly Josh Heckett had been very little at home, leaving the business, such as it was, almost entirely to Gertie. The child noticed that he never bought any fresh animals now, and that anything sold was not replaced.

She asked him once if the stock wasn't getting low, and he nodded his head.

'I'm going to give up business, my lass,' he said, with the nearest approach to a smile, his stern, fierce face could manage.

'We're going to make our fortunes and retire.'

Gertie listened to her grandfather's retreating footsteps, then she flung herself down by Lion, and, throwing her arms round the dog's neck, cried out:

'Oh, Lion, Lion, however shall we let Miss Adrian know?' She sat by the dog as the hours went by, endeavouring to think how she could get to the address on the piece of paper without being discovered.

She didn't know if it was near or far. She thought she would wait till the night, when it was time to feed the animals, shut up the place, and go upstairs to her own little room.

She always locked the door at night, and her grandfather had another key which he let himself in with, as he had to pass through the 'shop,' as

he called it, to get to his bedroom.

Perhaps she could get out and get home again before he came in.

As the afternoon waned and the evening brought the longed-for darkness, Gertie's plans began to assume a more definite shape.

Trembling and almost terrified at her own boldness, she put on her bonnet and cloak, and went the round of the cages and the hutches and kennels, giving the few animals that were left their evening ration. For each she had a kind word, and they all came at her call as close to her as their surroundings would allow them.

When she had given Lion his biscuits, she kissed him and told him to be very good while she was away, and that she would be back directly.

Suddenly she recollected that she had disturbed the things in her grandfather's room, and had not put them tidy.

He might notice them and suspect something.

She went into the mysterious chamber, and Lion followed her. When she had put the room as she had found it, she recollected that she had disturbed the things under the trapdoor. It took her a long time to find where to lift the trap. But presently it yielded, and the store beneath lay exposed to view.

She put the little bags and parcels as tidy as she could, holding a candle which she had lighted so that the light fell on the buried treasure.

Stooping over, her head below the flooring, and her little hands busily engaged in putting the bags as she found they were before, she did not hear the outer door open.

Josh Heckett had come home early to meet some friends.

As he entered the room he saw the candle-light streaming through the door of his bedroom.

With a cry of rage he sprang forward and rushed in.

Gertie uttered a scream of terror at the sudden appearance of her grandfather, and knelt glued to the spot.

The old man's face wore a look of fury she had never seen before.

'Little wretch!' he shrieked, seizing her by the shoulders. 'So this is how you repay me for all I've done for you! You'd rob me, rob me!' he shrieked, raising his voice and burning with passion; 'rob a poor old man who's kept you from the workhouse, you brat! Curse you, what have you taken? Quick—quick.'

He shook the child violently in his rage, as though he expected gold to fall from the folds of her dress.

'Oh, don't, grandfather—don't,' moaned Gertie, white with terror. 'I haven't touched anything—indeed I haven't.

'Who put you up to this? Who set you to rob a poor old man? Speak, you little devil, or I'll wring your neck.'

He seized the child in his blind rage by the throat so violently that she uttered a shriek of pain.

The next second something sprang at the old man—something which with fierce eyes had watched the scene from a corner of the room.

As Gertie shrieked out, the huge mastiff Lion uttered a fierce growl, and, springing at the child's adversary, seized him by the throat.

Gertie leapt to her feet. 'Lion, Lion,' she cried. 'Oh, don't, don't.'

Josh Heckett, old as he was, was still a powerful man. He gripped the dog, and they struggled fiercely for a moment.

With almost superhuman effort he freed himself from the fierce beast, and then, beside himself with pain and rage, uttered a volley of oaths and cried out that he would kill Gertie.

The child, once free, darted from the room and tore down the stairs and out into the Dials, never stopping to look behind her till, white, breathless, and almost fainting, she had got clear of Little Queer Street and could pause for breath.

As she did so she heard a quick patter behind her, and in another second Lion was by her side.

With a cry of joy the child dropped on her knees, and, seizing his head, kissed him passionately.

'Oh, Lion, you'll take care of me, won't you?' she moaned.

'I shall never go back home again. He would kill us both.'

The huge brute wagged his tail, then, looking up into his little mistress's face, licked her check gently.

It was lucky for Gertie that they were in a dark, quiet corner, where there was little traffic, or they would have had a crowd round them.

As it was, Gertie felt safe directly Lion was with her, and, wiping away her tears, hurried along towards Oxford Street.

She wanted to get out into a main thoroughfare and ask someone the nearest way to Miss Adrian's.

Josh Heckett, bleeding and half-mad with rage, ran down the stairs after Gertie. As he did so the dog followed him, and, rushing past him, bounded out of sight.

The old man's first impulse was to follow the fugitives.

But he remembered his treasures lay unguarded upstairs.

'Curse her!' he growled, 'Let her go. She'd ha' robbed me; that's what she'd ha' done. And arter all these years as I've been a good friend to her, too! She wasn't on that lay alone, though. Some of my pals has got scent of my cupboard and put her up to this. It's lucky I spotted the game in time.'

Heckett convinced himself that he had fallen on some scheme to rob him, and he determined to nip it in the bud. All that night he lay with a loaded pistol under his head, and the next morning he made arrangements to sell his business, and to move his 'traps' to fresh diggings.

'The gal can go out to starve and earn her own livin'; and a good job,' he said to himself; 'she was getting in the way as it was.'

But having made his arrangements, and his anger against Gertie having cooled down a little, he began to wonder where she could have gone to.

Then, with the cunning of his class, he concluded that she would go to the person who had instigated her to examine his hidden treasure.

'I'll find her somehow,' he said; 'and then I shall see who's playing double with Josh Heckett. Whoever it is 'll pay for it pretty handsome before I've done with'em.'

CHAPTER XXI.
GURTH EGERTON BECOMES AMBITIOUS.

Mr. Gurth Egerton, immediately after he had decided to resume his earthly career and cease to be a ghost or a drowned passenger of the *Bon Espoir*, was mush exercised in his mind as to what course he should pursue.

He was tired of travelling about, and he was anxious to settle down and become a useful and ornamental member of society.

The vague memory of that fatal night, which the thought of appalling death had revived, had vanished once more with safety. He was quite satisfied now that the man to whom, in a moment of superstitious weakness, he had confided his secret had passed to where he could do him no earthly mischief.

The threat made by the clergyman, amid such dramatic surroundings, to bring him to justice if possible, had lingered long in his mind; but the impression was weakened as time went on, and now that every fear from that quarter was removed, Ralph's heir felt that he had undisputed possession of his inheritance, and the best thing he could do was to enjoy it and turn it to some account.

From the moment he found himself a rich man by Ralph's death, he had carefully avoided all intercourse with his old companions. Birnie was the only one he kept up a friendship with, and Birnie's friendship was a thing he was bound not only to accept but to cultivate.

No word had ever passed the doctor's lips that would even imply that he suspected Garth of the blow from the consequences of which the whole party had been shielded by his presence of mind and fertility of resource.

Immediately after the occurrence Gurth, a prey to nervous dread, had rushed away to the sea-coast, leaving his address with Birnie, and he had remained away until a letter from the doctor brought him to town to attend the funeral.

They had a short interview then, and Birnie said very little. He simply explained to Gurth that his cousin was dead, that his certificate had been accepted, and that, as the head of the family, it was incumbent upon him to take his position at once and arrange his cousin's affairs.

Nothing in the words, but something in the look and manner plainly showed Gurth Egerton that Birnie must be his friend if he wanted to enjoy himself.

He was profuse in his thanks to the doctor for his kindness to poor Ralph, he begged him to remain in the villa where his cousin died, and he asked him as a favour to accept an annuity out of the estate. He framed a neat little falsehood, setting forth that poor Ralph had told him that Birnie had always been a friend of his, and that if anything happened to him he should like Birnie not to be forgotten.

The doctor listened placidly, rubbed his hands gently, declared he didn't desire it, but, as Gurth put it in a sentimental way, out of respect to his dead friend's memory he would accept the proffered benefits.

He had never asked for anything, he had never thrown out a hint that he knew anything and must be paid for secrecy; everything had been spontaneous on Gurth's part, and therefore Birnie need have no hesitation in sharing in the sudden good fortune of his old comrade.

When Gurth, feeling restless and not knowing what to do, at last made up his mind to travel about the world, revisiting town only at long intervals, he again came to Birnie, as his best friend, and talked matters over with him.

Birnie suggested that someone in whom he had perfect confidence should be left executor; and what was more natural than that Gurth should immediately appoint him? In whose hands could his affairs be so safe? Thus Birnie was duly left executor, and Grigg and Limpet were appointed his solicitors, in order to relieve the doctor of any responsibility.

Birnie had never asked for this arrangement, therefore he could accept it with a good grace. Birnie was a man who never asked for what he wanted. But somehow or other he generally got it. When, after his supposed death at sea, Gurth turned up again in the flesh, Birnie gave him a hearty welcome, and they renewed their old friendship. From the first moment the Turvey ghost-story came to his ears, the doctor formed a decided opinion that Egerton was among the saved and keeping out of

the way for some reason of his own. But he kept his opinion to himself, and professed to be as astonished as anyone when the ghost turned out to be real flesh and blood.

Birnie was doing very well, with his house rent free, his annuity, and a steadily improving practice, and he was quite content that Gurth should keep him out of his executorship for a good many years yet. A vulgar-minded person might have suggested that Gurth alive was, perhaps, worth quite as much to the doctor as Gurth dead. The doctor would have repelled the idea with virtuous indignation. All he got from Gurth was given freely and unsolicited. The Birnie conscience was as clear as crystal in that particular.

The resurrection of Egerton did not, as I have said, disturb the doctor's equanimity an atom, but the resurrection of another of his old comrades did.

Birnie would as soon have met the devil as Edward Marston. Gurth was rich and useful. There the spirit of *camaraderie*, was strong in the Birnian soul. But Marston was poor and detrimental; under such circumstanccs old friendship was a thing Dr. Birnie would prefer to forget.

Marston, however, was not the man to allow himself to be forgotten. Needing an old friend when his fortune was at a low ebb, he turned to the one Providence flung in his way and made use of him.

He was moderate—far more moderate than Birnie had expected. He took £500, certainly, but he came for no more. All the favours he asked from the doctor after that were quite remote from financial ones.

Birnie hated Marston, because he felt he was dangerous. He was a link with a time Birnie would much rather forget. Further, Marston was unscrupulous, and he never knew to what extent he might not trade on the secrets of the past.

Old Heckett was another of his *bètes noires*, but he was civil to him for the sake of peace. Now and again, during the years that had elapsed since Ralph's death, Heckett had come for a loan, pretending he was hard up, and he had had it; but the old man had been given pretty plainly to understand that if he took liberties things might be made uncomfortable for him.

The balance of power was certainly on Birnie's side in Heckett's case. The relative position of the men left the one completely master of the other.

But, with regard to Marston, Birnie knew positively nothing, except that he had left the country in a hurry and gone to America, where it was fondly hoped he had broken his neck long ago.

When, at the interview in which he requested an introduction to Grigg and Limpet, Marston mentioned his intention of looking up Egerton, Birnie was vexed. He had very good reasons for wishing to keep Egerton away from Marston's influence if he wanted to retain his own.

More than that, he feared that Marston might have designs upon Egerton's banking account, and he determined, if possible, to stop the meeting.

Marston, however, had been too quick for him. He had seen Gurth, and had a long chat with him before Birnie arrived.

The doctor was agreeably surprised to find that no money had been asked for. On the contrary, Marston had informed his former comrade that he had been remarkably lucky, was doing well, and hoped to permanently establish himself in this country. His ambition was to make a fortune as financier, and eventually enter Parliament and shine in the political world.

When Egerton told Birnie this the latter was honestly astonished.

He had expected Marston to represent himself as poor and unfortunate, and make a demand for substantial help.

He listened open mouthed to Gurth's narrative, but offered no remark. However astonished Birnie might be, he never confessed it. For a man to be astonished is for him to see or hear something unexpected. Birnie prided himself upon being prepared for anything that might happen.

The next best thing to having any gift or virtue is to pretend to have it. Birnie owed much of his later success in life to constantly bearing this maxim in mind.

Marston's interview with Gurth Egerton had a great effect, though it was quite contrary to what Birnie had supposed it would be.

For years Egerton had wavered, unable to decide upon any course in life. Suddenly the ambitious views of an old comrade opened out a new vista before him.

Here was a man who had led a roving life, who had been under a cloud for years—a man whom Egerton had known to be in the very depths of poverty—here was this adventurer, Edward Marston, without fortune and without position, boldly aiming at both, and not hesitating to aspire to political fame.

If Marston could do all this with no advantages, what could not he, Gurth Egerton, do with the money at his command?

Here, at last, was an aim in life. He would put all the old foolish fears behind him and be somebody. The fortune for which he had dared and endured so much should be of some use to him. Ten years of his life had been wasted He would make up for the lost time, and take a place in society. It had been his ambition in the early days of his penury to be a great man, admired, caressed, and fêted. When wealth came to his grasp the ambition faded away, overgrown by a new set of sensations altogether.

But the bold words of Marston called the faded fancies into new life. Yes, here was something to live for—fame, position. In the pursuit of them he could forget the past.

He paced the library, thinking aloud, for an hour.

Mrs. Turvey, passing down the stairs, heard him, and muttered to herself that master seemed uneasier in his conscience than ever.

But Mrs. Turvey was wrong. Conscience was torpid for the present. Ambition had taken possession of Gurth Egerton and there was room for nothing else. Conscience and ambition are bad companions. One always lags behind and holds the other back.

Gurth Egerton walked himself tired, and then sat down and shut his eyes and looked into the future.

He saw himself married to a charming wife, his house filled with gay company, his name in the papers, and his doings on every tongue. He saw himself loved, honoured, and powerful.

It was late in the afternoon when Egerton sat down to think. He sat thinking and dreaming till the shadows deepened and darkness crept gently over the room.

‘I *will* take a position in the world!’ he exclaimed, rising and pacing the room. ‘There is nothing to stand between me and my ambition now.

As he uttered the last words he paused opposite the window and gazed out into the street below, in which the dim light of the gas-lamps was struggling with the deepening shadows.

He looked out into the quiet street with eyes that wandered far beyond into a world where he was famous and beloved.

And as he gazed there crept up the street, between him and his ideal future, a little girl followed by a big mastiff dog.

CHAPTER XXII.
MR. JABEZ DISSEMBLES.

La! Mr. Jabez, what a time it is since you called!' said Mrs. Turvey, with a toss of the head that sent her cap awry.

Mr. Jabez, who had come to see Mr. Egerton on behalf of the firm, and was thus apostrophized in the hall by 'the guardian angel of the house' (the title Mr. Duck had himself conferred on her in a poetic flight), felt very uncomfortable. He shone still, but very weakly; his shine was like the second-hand business that the sun indulges in between a snow and a thunderstorm on a modern midsummer day. He stammered out something about business, and went very hot and red, and was intensely relieved when Mr. Egerton called over the bannisters to him.

'Come up, Duck,' said Mr. Egerton; and Duck did go up, two stairs at a time.

Mrs. Turvey looked after him.

'So, Mr. Jabez Duck,' she muttered, 'you're too busy to call, are you?—and you haven't a word to say for yourself. A pretty fine thing, indeed, after coming here to tea week after week, and me a-buying muffins and Sally Lungs, and delicacies no end for you, and then to be treated like this. But you've got hold of the wrong sort, Mr. Jabez Duck. I can tell you. I ain't one o' them slips o' gals as is to be made a fool of, and played fast and loose with.'

It was, perhaps, hardly necessary for Mrs. Turvey to state that she was not a slip of a girl. No one could have brought such an accusation against her.

To tell the truth, the love affairs of Jabez and Susan had not progressed lately so satisfactorily as could be wished by the lady. Up to the time of Mr. Egerton's sudden reappearance in the land of the living, Jabez had been most assiduous. The wooing, it is true, had not been very long or very romantic—they were past the age of 'linked sweetness long drawn out'—but it would be impossible to say that the courting had been devoid of poetry.

Jabez had inundated the lady with poetry. Susan had a nice little collection of Jabez's poems upstairs. 'I wish he wouldn't write such rigmaroles,' she said one day, as she tried to understand a 'Sonnet to my Susan,' which Jabez sent on a sheet of Grigg and Limpet's headed note, and which he assured her he had composed with his window open, gazing at the stars, and thinking of her. Mrs. Turvey, reading the following, might well require time to consider what it meant:

SONNET TO MY SUSAN.=

The stars are in the sky, Susan,
And I am sitting here;
But you are in my eye, Susan,
Among the moonbeams clear.
My heart your image holds, Susan,
And will the while it beats,
All through the winter colds, Susan,
As well as summer heats.
I think of you by morn, Susan,
I think of you by night,
My love, oh, do not scorn, Susan,
My hopes, oh, do not blight!
The bullseye of my soul, Susan,
Thy dart of love has struck,
And while the ages roll, Susan,
I'll be your Jabez Duck.

This was only one of the 'rigmar'oles' in writing which Jabez had begirded the time of Grigg and Limpet, which hung heavily on his hands—too heavily to be relieved by anything but verse. Now all of these 'rigmaroles,' full of poetical declarations, Mrs. Turvey, being a wise woman, had treasured, and Mr. Duck was painfully aware of the fact.

Things had altered considerably with the reappearance of Mr. Egerton. Susan still remained—but where was her legacy? Jabez was a poet, but there was quite enough prose in his composition to appreciate the

difference between Mrs. Turvey plus five hundred pounds and Mrs. Turvey pure and simple.

Pure Mrs. Turvey was, but perhaps simple is hardly the word to apply to her. Jabez declared that she was anything but simple when she gave him a bit of her mind that morning as he came down from his interview with the master. She put the case very neatly indeed; Grigg and Limpet couldn't have put it better. Jabez had proposed and been accepted. Mrs. Turvey was anxious to give up housekeeping for some one else and take to it on her own account; and, having been led to believe that she would be Mrs. Duck, she was not inclined to be disappointed.

As a business woman, Mrs. Turvey put it very plainly to Mr. Duck as a business man. If within a specified time he was not prepared to carry out his contract, Mrs. Turvey would consult Messrs. Grigg and Limpet, and appeal to a jury of her fellow-countrymen.

'And if them rigmaroles of yours as I've got upstairs, every one on'em a-breathin love and nightingales, and stars and things, ain't evidence enough to convict a man of horse-stealing, my name ain't Susan Turvey.'

Why Mrs. Turvey should imagine that stealing her heart was horse-stealing I can't say. She was given to a confusion of metaphors. But Jabez had no difficulty in apprehending her meaning. The situation which the indignant Susan conjured up to his mind, of Grigg and Limpet being instructed to commence an action for breach against their own clerk, and, worst of all, the idea of his letters being read in court, so thoroughly overcame him, that he could only give two short gasps for breath and stagger down the steps.

When he got out of sight of Mrs. Turvey standing like Nemesis at the front door, he paused and wiped the perspiration from his face.

'My poems,' he murmured, 'and in full court. Published in all the papers. Here's a pretty mess I'm in!'

Once Mr. Jabez had had dreams of publishing his poems; now there was a chance of his dream being gratified, but it was Dead Sea fruit.

He walked on, a prey to a variety of emotions. Gradually he Worked himself into a rage.

'It's all that cursed Egerton!' he exclaimed, giving the firm's client an imaginary kick. 'Why didn't he stop at the bottom of the sea, instead of turning up in this Coburg melodrama style? He robbed me of £500 and let me in for a breach.'

The more Mr. Duck thought of the grievous injury which Gurth Egerton had inflicted on him, the more annoyed he became. Susan's £500 was just the little capital Jabez wanted to make a start in life on his own account, in a line for which he had alwy's had a fancy, Now, not only was that rudely dashed from his grasp, but Susan remained on his hands.

All day long Mrs. Turvey's threat rang in his ears. He got trying to remember what the poems were about. He regretted now that he had let the divine afflatus run him into so many extravagances of diction. He felt that as a poet he had said more than he meant as a man.

It would never do to let those poems come out. Never. There was but one alternative. He must marry the lady to whom they were addressed, and thus make them his property again, unless—well, unless he could get possession of the poems without taking possession of the owner.

Could he?

That was the question.

Mr. Jabez had been brought up to the law, and he knew what he might do and what he might not do. He would do a good deal to get those letters back again. He sat down in the office with a deed in front of him, which he was expected to read, but his thoughts were elsewhere. They were on a deed of daring in which he was the hero. Idea after idea floated through his brain. Wills and valuable documents he had seen abstracted by the score in dramas and comedies, but then the purloiner only had to walk from the wings and enter R. U. E. or L. U. E., as the case might be'. There was no front-door to be got through without ringing the bell; no owner of the property handy to call the police. Dramatic authors always keep the coast so beautifully dear for their evil-doers.

If, however, Mr. Jabez was constrained, after consideration, to abandon all idea of imitating the heroes of melodrama in their wilder flights of daring, his thoughts had not wandered in that direction quite in vain. From the villain of the domestic drama he determined at least to take a hint. That interesting personage does not generally go about his nefarious deeps openly. He dissembles.

That was exactly what Jabez determined to do. Instead of rushing

headlong into the imminent deadly breach—breach of promise—he would bide his time and dissemble.

He commenced dissembling that very evening, by calling on his way home and assuring Mrs. Turvey that her accusations were quite unjust, and that he should be happy to eat the pipelet of peace and drink the tea of tranquillity with her whenever she would condescend to invite him.

Mrs. Turvey was partially appeased, and exerted herself to win the wanderer back again. Jabez had no reason to complain of the result of his first essay in the art of dissembling.

He learned where Susan kept his letters.

CHAPTER XXIII.
THE ADRIANS AT HOME.

The home of Ruth Adrian was not altogether a happy one, and yet her father and mother idolized her, and were both very worthy and lovable people.

Mr. Adrian was a kind-hearted old gentleman, who had made enough in trade to enable him to retire, and live modestly in a sixty pound a year house, keep two servants, and go out of town for a month once a year. He had been out of business some years, and was prepared to pass the rest of his life quietly with the *Times* newspaper, half-price after four o'clock, and the books of a non-fictional character which he borrowed from the local circulating library.

Perhaps 'non-fictional' is hardly the word to apply, for Mr. Adrian's favourite literature was travel and exploration, and travellers and explorers of all ages and all times, more especially of modern times, have found fiction a by no means to be despised element in their veracious and soul-stirring narratives.

Mr. Adrian had had but one romance in his life. He had fallen in love with a beautiful girl, and fancied once that his passion was returned. He woke from his dream to find his lady-love the affianced wife of a successful rival, a country gentleman named Heritage. He had got over the blow and found another wife. Having devoted his youth and manhood to commerce, he had never wandered during his short holidays further than the coasts of his native isle. In his old age, when he had the leisure, he had not the inclination. He had become wedded to a certain routine of life; he liked English food and English habits, and was content to read all about foreign countries in the letters of 'Our own Correspondent.'

Europe, even in literature, however, had no great attraction for John Adrian. He loved to lose himself in virgin forests and jungles, to sup with savages, and dance war-dances with the warriors of the Far West. He was at home in the South Sea Islands, and familiar with Central Africa. He could tell you more about the manners and customs of the Aztecs and the Bosjesmans than he could about the peculiarities of his next-door neighbour; and he had the most sublime faith in the perfect veracity of the thousand-and-one books of travel which he passed his leisure in devouring.

Mrs. Adrian, on the contrary, was eminently practical. A good-hearted, loving wife, and a fond and devoted mother, she was yet, at times, a sore trial both to her husband and daughter.

Mrs. Adrian was eccentric, and prided herself upon her outspokenness; further, Mrs. Adrian, in spite of much real nobility of nature, was mean in small things. Once a busy housewife, seeing to everything herself, and trotting about her house from morning to night, she had of late years grown rapidly stout, and at last arrived at a state of corpulence which, in conjunction with shortness of breath, compelled her to sit still and let Ruth superintend the domestic arrangements. It was her infirmity of body, doubtless, which gradually developed an infirmity of temper. Mrs. Adrian in her young days had been inclined to speak her mind and find fault. Now that she had nothing else to do, the practice had grown on her, and she was, at times, what Mr. Adrian, putting it very mildly, called 'exceedingly trying.'

She would have gone through any discomfort, she would have sacrificed any pleasure, really to promote the happiness of those she loved; and yet she found her principal occupation in grumbling at what they did, and rendering them occasionally as uncomfortable as she could.

Mrs. Adrian looked with anything but an approving eye on Ruth's missionary work. In her plain-spoken way she shot many little arrows at her daughter which went home.

One evening after tea the Adrians were seated round the table. Mr. Adrian was deep in the marvellous adventures of a gentleman who had spent a year in Patagonia, and Mrs. Adrian was knitting.

Ruth sat gazing in the fire. For a wonder, she was doing nothing. Both her mother and father had noticed a change in her for some time past.

Mrs. Adrian, looking up from her knitting, and noticing the far-away look on her daughter's face, spoke her mind on the subject.

'What's the matter with you, Ruth? Why don't you do something instead of sitting mumchancing there, staring at the fire as if you expected to see somebody walk out of it? I hope you're not going to sit like that long. It gives me the creeps.'

Ruth coloured, and picked up the work which had fallen into her lap.

'I beg your pardon, mother dear,' she said softly; 'I was thinking.'

'Well, my dear, I could see that; but you can think without looking like a death's head at an evening party. It's my idea you've something on your mind. What do you think, John?'

'Eh, my dear? What do you say?' asked Mr. Adrian, looking up from his book.

'I said, if you'd leave those blessed Paddygonians you're always talking about——'

Patagonians, my dear.'

'Oh, bother!—Pat and Paddy, it's the same thing. If you'd leave them and look at your own flesh and blood, you'd be doing your duty as a father better——'

'What's the matter now, my dear?'

'Matter? Why, you oughtn't to ask. Look at your daughter—she's thin, she's pale, she's listless. It's my opinion she's killing herself over this mission work, as she calls it—worrying herself about a pack of ungrateful varmints that would take a track from her with one hand and pick her pocket with the other.'

Ruth could never convince her mother that her missionary labours did not consist in giving tracts. The old lady would recognize no other process of visiting the poor.

'Mother,' she said gently, 'you wrong my poor friends very much.'

'That's right, Ruth, prefer ragged ragamuffins to your mother. If that's your religion, I'm sorry for you. If you've got a tract on honouring your father and mother, I'd recommend you to read it. Wrong your friends, indeed! What are they? A grateful lot, I dare say. Give you all they've got, my dear, wouldn't they? Well, as all they've got generally is a fever and a few specimens of natural history, I dare say they would.'

Ruth coloured, and looked pained.

'Don't tease the girl so, Mary,' said Mr. Adrian, looking up from his book. 'She isn't well, and you worry her.'

Ruth cast a grateful look at her father, and then crossed the room, and, stooping down over her mother, stopped the sharp retort that was rising to her lips with a kiss.

Mr. Adrian took advantage of the pause.

'Just listen to this. It's really very wonderful. Fancy, the Patagonians always sleep with their mouths open. The Rev. Mr. Jones ascertained it for a fact, and he gives the following interesting description of it.'

'Don't, John, for goodness' sake!' exclaimed Mrs. Adrian, freeing herself from Ruth's embrace. 'Have your Patagonians, and welcome, but don't bother me with them. All I can say is, if the Rev. Mr. Jones went all the way to Patagonia to see the natives keep their mouths open, he'd have done more good by stopping in Whitechapel and teaching the natives there to keep their mouths shut.'

'My dear,' said the old gentleman, smiling, 'if you are so very caustic, I shall have to collect your observations and publish them.'

'Oh, I know what I say is ridiculous in your eyes, John. If I was a Patagonian woman, with a ring through my nose, you'd listen fast enough, I dare say, though I did talk in an outlandish language.'

'The Patagonian women, my dear Mary, do not wear rings through their noses, Mr. Jones, who lived among them——'

'More shame for him! I dare say he left his wife and children to the parish.'

Mr. Adrian was fairly roused on his favourite subject. He rushed with ardour to the defence of the Rev. Mr. Jones and the ladies of Patagonia.

Mrs. Adrian replied with all the homely sarcasm of which she was mistress.

Ruth, who knew of old that the duel would probably rage till supper-time, or till Mr. Adrian, exhausted, resigned the Patagonians to their fate, and sought refuge in the *Times*' City article—a neutral ground, which Mrs. Adrian allowed him to enjoy in peace—was about to creep out and have a quiet half-hour in her little room by herself, when the servant entered with an announcement that a 'young person and a dawg' were at the door, asking for Miss Ruth.

Ruth started up, and her cheeks went a burning crimson. It was Gertie come to warn her that Marston was in danger. What should she do?

She stammered something, and was about to leave the room and go out to Gertie, when Mrs. Adrian stopped her.

‘Ruth!’

‘Yes, mother.’

‘If it’s *one* of those horrid people you visit, don’t let her come in. We don’t want fevers here.’

‘Oh, mother, there’s no fear of that. It’s little Gertie Heckett.’

‘What, the model child of Seven Dials? Take your father’s overcoat out of the hall at once.’

‘Mother!’ exclaimed Ruth, reddening, ‘how cruel you are! I shall bring her in, and you shall see her.’

‘I shall have to sprinkle the room with camphor if you do. I expect we shall all be murdered in our beds; that’ll be the end of your encouraging all these bad characters.’

Ruth was out of the room and in the hall before her mother could finish the sentence.

Gertie, shamefaced, trembling, and red-eyed, stood in the hall; Lion was close by her side, motionless as a statue. He wagged his tail as Ruth came towards him, but he never barked. He was a well-bred dog, and knew how to behave in a lady’s house.

Ruth stooped down and kissed the poor trembling little one, and tried to put her at her ease. All was so new and strange to her, and the excitement of the last two hours had been so great, that Gertie was quite unnerved. She attempted to speak, and then the pent-up emotion found an outlet. Sobbing hysterically, she fell on her knees and asked Ruth to protect her.

Ruth was deeply moved herself; the genuine grief of the child and her quick sobs told her that Gertie had gone through much that evening.

‘There, there, don’t be afraid, Gertie,’ she said, wiping away the little one’s tears and patting Lion’s head gently. ‘Lion and I will take care of you, won’t we, Lion?’ For the moment, in her sympathy with the child, she had forgotten herself; but it was only for a moment.

Looking round nervously at the half-open sitting-room door, she whispered to the child, ‘Have you heard anything about *him?*

‘Yes, miss, I have.’

Between her sobs, and in a low voice, Gertie told her little story, never stopping till she had explained how her grandfather had threatened her life, and how she would never dare to go back again.

The child felt, even as she spoke, that she was playing the traitor—that she was revealing a secret which might bring harm to him who had brought her up and fed her, and who was the only relative she had in the world.

She was shrewd enough to see all this, and when her tale was done she looked up beseechingly in the face of her protectress.

‘I’ve done this for your sake, miss,’ she said; ‘but you won’t let any harm come to grandfather through what I’ve told you, will you?’

‘No, Gertie, I won’t; I promise you. And now you must come in and speak to my father and mother, and we must see what ean be done with you. Come along; don’t be frightened.’

Ruth took her by the hand.

‘Please may Lion come too?’ asked Gertie, laying her hand on the dog’s head, as though loth to leave him for a minute.

‘Certainly, my dear! Come along, Lion.’

When Ruth entered the sitting-room, leading Gertie, and followed by the huge mastiff, Mrs. Adrian gave a little scream.

‘Good gracious, Ruth!’ she cried, ‘what will you bring into the house next?’

‘Don’t be frightened, mother. Lion’s very gentle. Lie down, Lion!

Gertie nodded to Lion, as much as to say he might obey Miss Adrian. At his little mistress’s signal he sank down on his haunches, and, with his ears up and his eyes open, waited for further orders. What he thought of the proceedings it is impossible to say; but he had evidently made up his mind that Gertie was among friends, for he didn’t even growl when Mrs. Adrian called him a ferocious-looking beast, and horrified Gertie by asking how many people he usually ate at a meal.

With sundry reservations, Ruth told Gertie’s story for her, and then she begged that for the present, at least, she might be allowed to offer the child the shelter of their roof.

Mr. Adrian’s kind heart went out to the poor little child who had remained so simple and so gentle amid such surroundings, and he was as interested in her as though she had been a young Patagonian or a small

South Sea Islander. He gave his consent directly.

Mrs. Adrian was not so easily mollified. She was sure that it was a plot, that robbers would come in the night, and that Gertie was to get up and let them in. Then she insisted that the child had various infectious complaints. But at last, having exhausted her objections, and made out fully to her own satisfaction that she was being turned out of house and home by a juvenile malefactor and a bloodthirsty mastiff, she gave her consent, and, having given it, was condescending enough to acknowledge privately to her daughter later on that Gertie was an interesting little thing, and much to be pitied.

That night Gertie slept with Ruth, and Lion, with much coaxing, was persuaded to accept the hospitable offer of the mat outside the door.

To Gertie all was new and strange, and the momentous events of the evening had not been without a disturbing influence on her mind; but Gertie was a child, and soon fell asleep.

Happy childhood, when nothing that happens can banish sweet sleep from our eyelids! How many of us, grown to man’s estate, would give all that such an estate confers upon us for the privilege of closing our eyes and forgetting as easily and as quickly as Gertie Heckett forgot all that happened to her during the most eventful day in her little life!

CHAPTER XXIV.
OLD SWEETHEARTS.

Ruth Adrian had only gathered from what Gertie had told her that Marston was in danger of being betrayed by his companions. The child had heard but a portion of the conversation, and even all of that she could not remember.

Ruth concluded that Marston had been mixed up in something that was, she feared, discreditable, and that he was to be made a scapegoat.

If this was so, the sooner he was warned the better. But how was she to warn him? She did not even know where he lived, and before she could find out it might be too late.

He might be living under an assumed name; a hundred reasons might prompt him to conceal his identity. What was she to do?

At breakfast she was pale and absent-minded. Her mother noticed it, and taxed her with wilfully destroying her health by worrying about a pack of vagabonds.

Poor Gertie was the 'pack of vagabonds.' Fortunately the child had been relegated to the kitchen by Mrs. Adrian's express command, and did not hear the good lady's opinion of her. This did not decrease Ruth's perplexities. She foresaw a constant source of dispute in poor Gertie's presence. Her mother's heart was large, but her tongue was bitter; and although doubtless she really heartily sympathised with the child's friendless and forlorn condition, she would none the less make her a constant target for her arrows.

She determined, therefore, to find, if possible, some nice respectable person with whom Gertie could be placed for a while, and taught to make herself useful. Ruth would pay what she could out of her pocket-money, and she was sure her papa would help her, though Gertie was not a Patagonian nor a South Sea Islander, but only a poor little English outcast.

'What do you intend to do with this white elephant of yours, Ruth?' said her mother presently.

Ruth looked up vacantly.

'White elephant, mother? What white elephant?'

'This child.'

Mr. Adrian laughed.

'Rather a baby white elephant, Ruth, isn't she?' he said. 'And she comes without her trunk.'

'John, don't make foolish remarks. It's no laughing matter,' exclaimed the mistress of the house. 'I'm not going to have this turned into a Reformatory or a Home for Lost Dogs for anybody. It isn't respectable.'

'I'm sure the child's respectable enough, or Ruth wouldn't have anything to do with her.'

'Well, she has more clothes on than your favourite people wear, I confess, and I dare say she won't want to eat the housemaid or to worship the kitchen fire,' exclaimed Mrs. Adrian; 'but, according to the way I was brought up, she belongs to a class of people with which all conversation is best avoided. Her friends, I dare say, are burglars and murderers of the worst description.'

'But mother——' began Ruth.

'Don't argue, my dear. It's no use. I dare say Miss—Miss what's her name—*Miss* Heckett is a little angel of purity and virtue—a paragon reared in the Dials; but as your mother I respectfully decline to have her under my roof. You must send her away.'

'I will, mother,' answered Ruth, a shade of annoyance in her tone. 'I'll find a home for the poor child to-day.'

'There are plenty of refuges and reformatories, I'm sure, where they'd be glad to take her. There are places advertised in the paper every day.'

'You shan't be troubled with her long, mother.'

Ruth took up the paper as she spoke, and began to read the advertisement-sheet.

She had a dim idea that she might find some place advertised which would afford her little *protégée* a temporary asylum.

Glancing listlessly over the advertisements, she suddenly gave, a little cry, and her face flushed crimson.

'Whatever's the matter now, Ruth?' asked Mrs. Adrian, pouring tea into the slop-basin instead of her cup in her astonishment.

‘Nothing!’ stammered Ruth; ‘nothing at all!’

She endeavoured to hide her confusion, and kept her face behind the paper, reading one paragraph over and over again:

‘Lost, a pocket-book containing a cheque. Anyone bringing the same to Mr. Edward Marston, Eden Villa, Camden Road, will be handsomely rewarded.’

Could it be the same Edward Marston?

Ruth firmly believed that it was. It seemed as though Providence had shaped events so that she might read the paper, and thus find at once a means of communication with the man she wished to save.

Perhaps, after all, the conversation Gertie had heard was connected with this very chcque. It might have been stolen from him by Heckett and his companions.

She went downstairs and questioned Gertie, who with Lion at her feet, sat in a Windsor chair, timidly regarding the two servants, who eyed her in return with ill-concealed suspicion. Gertie assured Ruth that she had heard a plan for getting the gentleman out of the way discussed, and that one of the men had said, ‘We must make London too hot to hold him.’

Ruth easily allowed herself to be convinced that Marston was in real danger.

She determined to put her scruples on one side, and act at once.

She could trust no one with her secret. She would go herself. What harm could come of it? None. And the good that might result was incalculable.

Between ten and eleven Ruth, deeply veiled, rang the visitors’ bell at Eden Villa.

When the servant came to the door and asked her her business, she trembled, and felt inclined to run away.

Mustering all her courage, and speaking quickly, lest the girl should detect her agitation, she asked if Mr. Marston was within.

‘I’ll see, ma’am,’ answered the girl cautiously. ‘What name?’

‘Say Miss Adrian, on important business.’

The girl asked Ruth inside the hall, closed the door, and went in search of her master.

Ruth went hot and cold, and trembled violently. A sudden revulsion of feeling came on her, and she seized the handle of the door to open it and fly.

At that moment the girl returned and requested Ruth to follow her.

Hardly knowing how she walked across the hall, Ruth obeyed, and was shown into an empty room.

A minute afterwards Marston entered.

‘Miss Adrian,’ he said, bowing, ‘to what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for this visit?’

He spoke in an easy tone of every-day politeness. His expressive features belied the indifference he endeavoured to assume.

‘I beg your pardon,’ gasped Ruth, ‘but——’ Then her brave spirit gave way. Distressed, terrified at the position in which she found herself, a thousand old memories of the times past rushed upon her, and, bursting into tears, she buried her face in her hands.

In a moment Marston was by her side.

‘Ruth! dear Ruth!’ he exclaimed, ‘for Heaven’s sake what does this mean? Dare I hope that——’

Ruth drew away the hand he had seized.

‘Mr. Marston,’ she exclaimed passionately, ‘it means that I was wrong to come here. I came to warn you of a deadly peril; hear me, and let me go.’

‘Ruth, if you have come to tell me of the deadliest peril I shall ever be in on this side of the grave, I will welcome it since it has brought us face to face once more.’

Was he acting, this man, or were the impassioned accents in which he spoke the honest reflex of his feelings?

‘Hush!’ exclaimed Ruth; ‘you must not speak to me like that. We are strangers.’

‘We have been; but need we be any longer? I am not the man I was, Ruth. Ten years ago I left England, an adventurer, a schemer, a villain, if you will. I return to it to-day with a fortune acquired by honest industry, with a home which I can offer without a blush to the woman I would

make my wife, with a heart cleansed from the old corruption. Oh, Ruth, with God's help and yours I could do so much!'

Ruth stopped him ere he could say another word.

'Listen to what I have to say, and let me go,' she said, her voice trembling and her face deadly pale. 'I have come here to tell you that there is a plot against you. A man named Heckett——'

Marston started. He remembered that it was at Heckett's he had first seen Ruth after his return.

'What do you know of Heckett?' he said, assuming a careless tone.

'Nothing,' answered Ruth; 'except that he and some associates of his wish you no good. There is some scheme afloat with regard to a cheque and your going to a bank. Mr. Marston, if you are linked with these men in any scheme, they will betray you. For your own sake, beware of them!'

'Good gracious, Ruth! what do you mean?'

'I don't know,' exclaimed Ruth, feeling hot and confused. 'I'm sorry I came. It was wicked and foolish of me. But'—her voice faltered—'for the sake of old times, believing you were in danger, I tried to save you. You know best, perhaps, what you have to fear.'

Ruth turned to go. Marston put out his hand.

'Ruth, from the bottom of my heart I thank you. But I am in no danger. It is most probable these rascals have obtained possession of a cheque which was in a pocket-book I lost, and your informant, whoever it may be, has overheard their conversation about that.'

Ruth flushed scarlet, and a sense of shame camc suddenly upon her. She saw it all now. Marston was right, and Gertie had mistaken what she had heard. Ruth had placed herself in a false position.

She walked towards the door, and would have gone out at once, but Marston detained her.

Ruth, is there no hope for me? I have never ceased to love you, and I have bitterly atoned for the past. If I prove to you and to the world that I am free from reproach, that I am worthy your love, may I not see you again?'

Ruth shook her head.

'That dream is over,' she said softly. 'Our paths in life are henceforward separate as the poles.

Marston seized her hand and held it, in spite of her struggle to free herself.

'Listen, Ruth Adrian,' he exclaimed with well-assumed earnestness. 'Once before, when my fate trembled in the balance, you cast me off. You might have been my salvation ten years ago. Now listen to me. Once again I am in the old country, free, independent, and ambitious. On you, and you alone, depends my future. Cast me off now, and I shall have no hope, no anchor. I am in your hands to make or mar. Think well of it, Ruth Adrian, and give me your answer when we meet again. Till then, God bless you!'

He stooped down and pressed his lips to hers almost fiercely. She tore herself free, and her bosom heaving with indignation, her cheeks crimson with shame, she rushed from the room and from the house.

When the door was closed behind her, Marston's manner altered instantly. A smile passed across his face—a smile of extreme self-congratulation.

'I think I shall win her over yet,' he said softly. 'Poor Ruth! There are a few sparks of the old love left, even in my cold heart. I want a wife, too, and she must be a lady. A bachelor can't get the right set of people round him. Poor Ruth! how capitally she wears.'

He paced the room for a minute or two, and then he looked at his watch.

'I must go and warn Heckett,' he said, 'that there's a traitor in the camp somewhere. That girl has heard him say something, and has told Ruth. That link must be broken, at any rate.'

Marston did not attach any serious importance to what Ruth had told him. He gave a shrewd guess at the source of her information and what it was worth.

Still, as he had further need of Heckett's services, and as that worthy's house was, for the present, the centre of some rather important operations, he thought it just as well to investigate the matter at once. If Miss Gertie was in the habit of listening to conversations and reporting them to customers, the sooner Miss Gertie had a little change of air and scene the better.

CHAPTER XXV.
GEORGE HAS ‘THE STRAIGHT TIP.’

George had got on capitally in his situation. He found the Work remarkably easy, the salary was paid regularly, and he was earning the sweet bread of independence—the first he had ever tasted in his life.

He had some vague idea that he wouldn’t always be a city clerk. He didn’t believe that his father’s temper would last. Eventually, of course, he would be forgiven, the prodigal would return by special invitation, plus a Mrs. Prodigal, the fatted calf would be killed, and George, having proved that he was of some use in the world, and could earn money as well as spend it, would settle down to a country life. Bess’s father would have a nice little cottage somewhere, and everything would come right.

But George was not going to make the first advance. His father had cast him off, and cast off he would remain till he was sent for. He didn’t even let his father know his whereabouts or that he was married. Bess wrote once to her father to say she was in London and well and happy, and she hoped he would have faith in her and believe all she had done was for the best. But she gave no address, for George was determined to cut himself completely adrift from old associations. For the present he was Mr. George Smith, and nothing that concerned Mr. George Heritage concerned him.

Bess was very happy; she would have been happier still if she might have told her father all, looked up with unblushing cheeks in his dear old face and asked his blessing.

That was the one thing denied her. But George did his best to console her, and Bess believed the world did not hold his equal. It seemed sometimes that she was dreaming when her face was pressed close to his, and he kissed her and called her little wife. She dreaded to wake up and find it all unreal.

George was sure that had he chosen from the Belgravian conservatories of rare English girlhood he could not have improved upon his sweet wildflower of the Surrey hills. Bess was not only beautiful and amiable; she was the cleverest little woman in the world. It was a treat to watch her sew a button on. She no sooner took it between her rosy fingers and tickled it gently with the needle than, hey, presto! there it was as firm as a rock. And then her cooking. I should like to know what beautiful young lady of society could have come near Bess in the matter of pie-crust. No duchess in the land could ever hope to equal her haricot mutton; and I’m quite sure that the united efforts of the whole of the upper ten thousand would have failed to make a shilling go as far as Bess could make sixpence go.

One proof of her skill absolutely astonished her husband, he saw a very beautiful bonnet in a shop in Regent’s Street, and he told Bess he should like to buy it for her.

‘You dear old goose,’ said his wife; ‘why, you’d have to pay three guineas for it!’

George whistled. He thought that was a great deal of money for a small feather, a bunch of roses, and a plain straw.

Next morning Bess said to him at breakfast, ‘George, you-wanted to make me a present of a three-guinea bonnet yesterday; give me ten shillings to spend instead.’

There was half a sovereign in Bess’s plump little hand directly. That evening they arranged to go for a stroll to look at the shops. Bess went to put on her bonnet, and when she camc into-the parlour George backed into the fireplace with astonishment.

Bess had on the beautiful three-guinea bonnet!

‘Why, how ever did you get it, my dear?’ he said. ‘It’s-awfully extravagant!’

Bess gave a merry little laugh.

‘How much do you think it cost?’ she said.

‘Why, three guineas, of course,’ said George.

‘Nonsense, you dear old stupid! It cost ten shillings!’

‘Did they let you have it for that after all?’

‘*They* let me have it? No. I made it myself, and the ten shillings you gave me paid for all the materials.’

‘Wonderful!’ said George. And all that evening as they walked about he

felt inclined to stop the Ladies and gentlemen in the street and exclaim, ‘I say, look at this bonnet. Did you ever see anything like it? My wife made it, and it only cost ten shillings. Isn’t she clever?’

George’s respect for his wife increased every day as he saw the marvels her tiny fingers accomplished. He wished Smith & Co. could see her. Once he did go so far as to take Smith & Co. an apple turnover which his wife had made; but it looked so nice that, Smith & Co. (per Mr. Brooks, the manager) not arriving till late, George ate it himself.

On the day following the momentous interview between the partners in the firm of Smith & Co., George presented himself at the office in Gutter Lane.

Mr. Brooks arrived a little later than usual, and busied himself with some papers at his desk for a while.

Just before eleven be took a cheque from his poeket-book, exclaiming, ‘By Jove! Smith, I’d nearly forgotten it!’

‘Forgotten what, sir?’ said George.

‘Why, I received a cheque from Grigg and Limpet yesterday afternoon to buy tallow with for their client on the open market to-day.’

‘It isn’t too late to buy tallow, is it?’ asked George, innocently.

‘No, but they only take gold or notes on the market. You must run and cash this at once and bring the money back here. It’s most important we should operate early.’

George had heard of surgical operations, but operations on the tallow market were mysteries of city life which he had not at present penetrated.

Anxious to acquire information in order to qualify himself for commercial eminence, he was about to question Mr. Brooks when that gentleman cut him short.

‘Take the chcque at once, Smith; be back quickly,’ he said. ‘Hulloa, it’s payable to order! What a nuisance!’

‘It must be endorsed, mustn’t it?’ said George, anxious to show what a lot he knew. In the course of his career he had had many cheques payable to his order, and he knew where to write his name. He wasn’t like that innocent major who, having lived all his life on discount, assured the financial agent who offered to do a three months’ bill for him that he didn’t know how to accept one.

Mr. Brooks recognized George’s business knowledge with a pleasant smile. Yes, it did require the name of Smith and Co. on the back; but, a most unfortunate thing, he had sprained his thumb, and couldn’t write.

‘Here, Smith,’ he said, tossing the cheque across to him, ‘just write Smith and Co. on the back for me, will you?’

George hesitated.

‘Is that correct, sir?’ he asked.

‘Of course it is! Why, what office have you been brought up in? Any clerk can endorse a firm’s signature; it’s quite usual in large firms.’

George coloured to think how he had betrayed his ignorance. He hastened to atone for it by endorsing the cheque ‘Smith and Co.’ at once.

‘That’s it,’ said Mr. Brooks. ‘Now off you go, and make haste back.’

George took the cheque and, buttoning it securely in his breast-pocket, went off to the bank with it.

As he went along he fancied that he was followed. He couldn’t get rid of the idea that a tall dark man with a hook nose was watching him. He put his hand on the pocket containing the cheque and hurried on.

At the bank where he presented the cheque, to his astonishment he saw the tall dark man at another desk, and heard him inquire about opening an account.

The cashier took the cheque, cancelled the signature, and handed George five hundred-pound notes.

The dark man concluded his inquiry, and walked hurriedly out.

A little way from the bank George had another surprise. He ran up against Mr. Brooks.

‘By Jove! Smith,’ exclaimed the manager, ‘we shall be late! I must go straight on to the tallow market. Give me the notes, and go back to the office.’

George handed the notes to the manager, glad to be released of the responsibility of carrying them through the crowded city, and walked leisurely on to the office.

Mr. Brooks was evidently in a hurry. The moment he had the notes in his possession he walked as fast as he could to the Bank of England, and

there obtained gold for them.

Two minutes afterwards he was in a hansom cab, being driven rapidly to the other end of London.

George walked on towards the office, and just as he got to Gutter Lane some one tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned, and beheld to his astonishment the same dark face and hook nose that had attracted his attention at the bank.

'I beg your pardon,' said the stranger; 'but have you just presented a cheque at the bank?'

'Yes,' said George; 'why do you ask?'

'I'll tell you,' replied the stranger. 'I'm a detective.'

George started and coloured.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, 'but I really can't see what that has to do with it.'

'I'll tell you. Don't make a fuss; just listen to me, for what I'm going to say is for your good. I want to save you from a jolly mess.'

What on earth did the man mean? George had plenty of courage, but he really felt alarmed at being talked to like this by a detective.

'You're a green un, I can see,' said the man; 'and you've been made a mug of. You're mixed up with the awfullest set of swindlers in London. They'll all be in quod in half an hour; and it's because I see you've been made a mug of I want to give you a chance of getting clear.'

George went hot and cold. Smith and Co. swindlers! A hundred little things, many that he had thought nothing of, now rushed back to his memory. A sudden revelation came, and in a moment the fabric of commercial eminence he had reared for himself fell to the ground.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, as the situation dawned upon him, 'I must clear myself, and at once. What can I do?'

'Take my advice and do nothing. Hook it. I believe you're innocent, or I shouldn't have given you this warning. But you wouldn't be able to prove your innocence to a jury. The gang you're in is the artfullest in London; they'd lay it all on you, and bring twenty witnesses to prove it. What witnesses to character have you got?'

'Why, plenty!' began George. Then suddenly he checked himself. He had been living under a false name. He had left his home in debt and difficulties after quarrelling with his father. How could he allow all this to be known to the world? How could he let his father and the people at home come to a police court, to find him in the dock with a gang of swindlers?

All these considerations flashed through the young man's brain with lightning rapidity. Then he thought of Bess, and became almost speechless with horror. His position was terrible.

'I don't know why you tell me this,' he gasped, seizing the dark man's arm; 'but for God's sake tell me what to do? I have a wife and an old father; for their sakes I would do anything rather than have my name dragged before the world in a case like this.'

'That's reasonable,' said the man. 'I'm sorry for you, and I believe in you. I ought to arrest you, but I shan't. I'm going to let you get clear away, and I'll give the missus the tip too, and she can follow at once. Where do you live?'

George never stopped to ask himself if this sudden interest in his affairs on the part of a stranger could be genuine. He saw the facts in their ghastly reality, and he clutched at this small offer of help as a drowning man clutches at the first thing he sees.

George pulled out a letter from his pocket, and scribbled his address on it in pencil. Underneath he wrote:

'Dear Bess, do what this gentleman tells you. Bring enough for a day or two's journey and come to me at once. Don't be frightened. It's only a matter of business.'

'Take this,' he said, giving it to his unknown friend; 'and tell me where to go.'

'Go to some railway station.'

'Waterloo?' said George. 'Will that do?'

'Capitally! Your wife shall be at Waterloo in a couple of hours. Say the booking-office. Main line. If you'll take my advice you'll leave the country till this affair is over. Mind, whatever happens, you must not blab about me giving you the tip. It would ruin me. Swear!'

'I give you my word of honour as a gentleman,' stammered the agonized man. 'I owe you more than I can ever repay.'

‘I’m satisfied,’ said the dark man. ‘I can see you are a gentleman, and your word is enough.’

With a parting admonition to George to ‘keep his pecker up and show a clean pair of heels,’ the mysterious friend turned on his heel and walked rapidly away, leaving the young man in a state of mind almost impossible to describe.

Mortification, rage, shame, all struggled for mastery in his breast, and all gave way before the horror with which he contemplated the consequences to the girl he had brought from her happy home and wedded in secret, should he be arrested and charged with being one of a gang of swindlers. He was innocent, he knew; but to prove it he would have to drag his honoured name through the mire; he would have to proclaim to the world the whole story of his debts and difficulties, his quarrels with his father, and his runaway marriage with a lodge-keeper’s daughter.

No, he couldn’t face that. It might be cowardly, but once he had Bess safe in his keeping again, he would take the detective’s advice and avoid scandal by timely flight.

The hue and cry for the missing George Smith might be raised, but what of that? Who would connect George Smith, the humble clerk who lodged at Duck’s, with George Heritage, Squire Heritage’s son and heir?

CHAPTER XXVI.
PECULIAR BEHAVIOUR OF MR. SETH PREENE.

Mr. Seth Preene, the amateur detective, hurrying along on his mission of love and mercy, chuckled to himself at the ease with which he had accomplished his purpose.

'He is a green un,' he said to himself; 'grass ain't in it with him. I wonder where old Brooks picked him up. He's a gentleman, though—genuine goods—hall marked. Nothing o' the Brummagem nine-carat there.'

Mr. Seth Preene had had a good deal of experience among 'swells,' both of the nine-carat Brummagem and of the eighteen-carat hall-marked, in the course of his adventurous career, and it hadn't taken him long to sum up George Heritage's character. 'Swell out o' luck, I should fancy,' he said, as he walked along.

Bess was sitting in the window, sewing, when a hansom cab rattled up to the door, and a tall dark gentleman, with a hook nose, ran up the steps and knocked.

'How awkward!' she exclaimed. 'Here's a visitor and Miss Duck's out. I shall have to open the door.'

Bess had all a country girl's fear of opening the door to London strangers. She had heard such tales and read such things in the newspapers about robberies and murders, that she saw a possible petty-larcenist in every tax-collector and a would-be assassin in every well-dressed person who came to inquire if Mr. Jones or Mr. Brown was an inmate of the house.

But not having heard or read of robbers and murderers dashing up in hansom cabs, with a ready-made witness in the driver, Bess summoned up courage to answer the door to this visitor.

Is Mrs. Smith within?' asked the gentleman politely.

Bess turned pale. Something had happened to George at the office, perhaps. Had he overworked himself and brought on a paralytic stroke?

'I am Mrs. Smith,' she stammered. 'Is it anything about my husband?'

'Don't alarm yourself, my dear madam,' answered the gentleman politely; 'I've only brought a message from him.'

Mr. Preene handed Mrs. Smith her husband's hastily scribbled note.

She read it with a vague feeling of alarm.

'What does it mean?' she stammered. 'Oh, you are not keeping anything from me? He is not ill?'

'You alarm yourself needlessly, I assure you. It is only a matter of business. If you will put on your things at once and keep the appointment, you will find it is all right.'

'Are you in his office, sir?' asked Bess, wondering what she should do with no one in the house.

Here was the opportunity Preene was waiting for.

'No,' he answered; 'I come from Grigg and Limpet's—Mr. Duck's employers. Smith and Co. have business with our firm, and that is where I met your husband. I was coming on to see Miss Duck, and he asked me to bring this note at the same time.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Bess, with a sigh of relief. 'Then perhaps you'll wait till Miss Duck comes home? I don't like to leave the house with no one in it,' she added apologetically.

'I must wait,' said Mr. Preene, 'so you are not putting me to any inconvenience.'

Bess was glad to hear it.

As the gentleman had come to see Miss Duck, and knew all about Grigg and Limpet, of course she could ask him in.

Mr. Preene stepped in, leaving his hansom waiting. He urged Mrs. Smith not to think about him, but to keep the appointment at once.

Bess needed no encouragement. She ran upstairs, put on her mantle and bonnet, gathered a few things together, just what George's travelling-bag would hold, and, reading her husband's letter over again, she hurried out. On the doorstep she turned, and once again begged the stranger to assure her that her husband was not ill, and that his hasty summons was not worded so as to conceal the worst from her.

Mr. Preene gave the required assurance, bowed her out, and closed the door behind her.

At another time Bess might have hesitated at leaving a stranger alone in the house, even though he professed such intimacy with the family. But, do what she would, she could not banish the idea that the message from George implied something unpleasant—something which might prove the first trouble of their short and hitherto unclouded married life.

This thought was uppermost in her mind, and banished all other considerations. So she hurried away to Waterloo Station, thinking only of George, and not troubling herself to consider how the unknown visitor might amuse himself in Mr. Duck's deserted residence.

If she could have witnessed Mr. Preene's behaviour it would have surprised her.

That estimable gentleman had no sooner closed the door carefully than he rushed upstairs and into all the rooms, in order to discover which were the apartments lately occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

A cursory inspection of the first floor satisfied him that he need go no further.

He had little time to lose, for Miss Duck might be back in a few minutes, Mrs. Smith had informed him, and Mr. Preene particularly wished to conclude his business, and retire without any tiresome explanations.

He looked about the room, then pulled a small parcel from his pocket, undid it, and proceeded to secrete the contents about the room.

Under the squab of the sofa he placed three of the blank cheques from the book so mysteriously lost by Limpet, junior. In a box in the bed-room, under some clothes, he hid a roll of sham bank-notes. In an old waistcoat of George's, hanging behind the door, he placed a rouleau of spurious sovereigns; and in the cupboard, hidden away behind some boots, he left a small brown-paper parcel containing a portion of the stock-in-trade of a professional forger.

Having paid the absent tenants these delicate attentions, he left a few more souvenirs of his visit and then hurried downstairs, and, pulling the front door gently to, walked rapidly away.

A quarter of an hour later, when Miss Duck returned and let herself in with the latchkey, the house was empty.

Miss Georgina had purchased a bargain at the linendraper's, and, Mrs. Smith being an authority on bargains, Georgina ran upstairs to display her purchase and ask Mrs. Smith's opinion.

She knocked at the door, and, receiving no answer, opened it, and stepped in.

The rooms were empty.

'Dear me!' said Miss Georgina; 'how strange! She never said anything about going out.'

The afternoon wore away, and Mrs. Smith did not return. Evening came and brought Jabez home to his tea, but it brought no Mrs. Smith, and, stranger still, it brought no Mr. Smith either.

'Whatever can have become of the Smiths, Jabez?' said Miss Georgina, when tea was cleared away, and the first floor was still empty.

'I don't know, my dear,' answered Mr. Dick. 'Perhaps they've bolted with the lead off the roof, or the washing out of the back garden.'

'Don't be a fool, Jabez. Can't you talk seriously for a moment?'

'What a fidget you are, Georgina! Let the Smiths alone, and they'll come home, and bring their tails behind them.'

'Keep your poetry for those who appreciate it,' exclaimed Miss Georgina, tossing her head. 'All I know is, if the Smiths don't come home soon I shall think something's wrong.'

There was something wrong indeed—how wrong, Miss Duck discovered later on, when a detective arrived from Scotland Yard 'in consequence of information received, 'and in Miss Dick's presence searched the rooms and found quite enough to prove that the late occupants were professional forgers and in league with a gang of robbers.

Miss Duck rushed off there and then and brought in Miss Jackson to stay with her till Jabez returned, declaring that she wasn't going to be murdered in her bed for anyone, and picturing in vivid colours what might have happened to a poor unprotected female left alone as she often had been with these monsters of iniquity.

At the idea of her friend being murdered in her bed, Miss Jackson raised a dismal howl, and wept on Georgina's bosom to such an extent that the latter must have been in imminent danger of rheumatics in the chest.

‘I always said they were no good,’ hissed Miss Dick, as she counted the cheap electro spoons and forks. ‘If Jabez had been a man he wouldn’t have allowed me to be mixed up with a pack of thieves. Why didn’t he let his apartments himself? I’ll never take another lodger as long as I live.’

‘I wouldn’t, dear,’ said Miss Jackson; ‘it isn’t genteel.’

‘What!’ shrieked Georgina, turning on Miss Jackson, ‘not genteel! Hoity-toity! I wonder you demean yourself by honouring us with your presence! Genteel, indeed! My brother is a professional man, madam, if he is a fool. Your family made their money in dust-carts and refuse-heaps. Genteel, indeed!’

Miss Jackson shrieked and gasped for mercy. She held her arms out and struck attitudes of despair. She would have torn her hair but that she knew it would come off directly.

‘Oh, Georgina!’ she cried, ‘don’t, don’t! If you spurn me I shall die! I didn’t mean it; indeed I didn’t!’

Here Miss Jackson went off into strong hysterics and shrieked so loudly that Georgina, fearing a crowd outside and further scandal, slapped her hands viciously and promised to forgive her. Whereupon Miss Jackson left off her hysterics, wiped away her tears, and, clasping Georgina to her heart, declared she was the best of women and the dearest of friends.

Then, locking up the house, and taking Miss Jackson with her, Miss Duck marched off at once to Grigg and Limpet’s, to inform Jabez of the affair and to give him a bit of her mind.

Mr. Jabez being engaged with the governors, they were shown into a little waiting-room, in which there was already an elderly-looking female deeply veiled.

Presently Jabez came in, and all three ladies rose to meet him.

He gave a sharp cry of mingled astonishment and horror, then turned deadly pale, and seemed as though he would fly.

The elderly female had thrown her veil up. Georgina and Miss Jackson had advanced towards him.

The unhappy Jabez was alone with Georgina, Miss Jackson, and Mrs. Turvey.

CHAPTER XXVII.
THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

With the limited means at their command, George and Bess were not able to wander far away.

George did not tell his young wife the nature of the trouble that had come upon him. He shrank from letting her knew the worst, that innocently even he had been mixed up with a gang of swindlers.

The blow was so cruel it almost stunned him; but by the time Bess, wondering and trembling, came to him at the railway station, he had recovered himself sufficiently to invent a fairly plausible tale.

He told her that he believed his father was in London looking for him, and he did not care to run the risk of being discovered living under an assumed name.

Bess wondered why such a discovery, which, after all, was nothing very terrible, should make her husband so white and ill and nervous; but she did not question him. She was in that sweet and comfortable stage of hero-worship when a young wife believes all her husband tells her and does exactly as she is told—a delightful condition of things, which, alas! rubs off as quickly as the gilt on the gingerbread sold at country fairs.

So she followed her husband in blind faith, and accepted his story as gospel.

They went a little way out first and put up at a small inn, living frugally, for their capital was small.

George was restless and could not stop in one place. In every footstep behind him he heard the tread of the law; in every stranger who looked at him he saw a possible detective.

Over and over again he thought the situation out to himself, and wondered whether it would not be better to make a clean breast of it to justice, say who he was, prove his innocence, and so know the worst.

But this could not be done secretly. He knew that he would be charged, under any circumstances, with uttering the forged cheque, and he remembered with horror that he had endorsed the name of Smith and Co. upon it. Then he had been living under a false name, and he had left home in debt and difficulties.

No, he would rather wander about and endure a hundred miseries as George Smith than stand forth as George Heritage, and let his private life be read by the hundred eyes of the vulgar, with sneers and jeers and contemptuous laughter.

He was terribly sensitive of ridicule, and he saw at once the ridiculous figure he should cut as the clerk, at £3 a week, to a gang of swindlers.

Once or twice he was inclined to take Bess into his confidence; but here again his sensitiveness stepped in.

He could not bear even for his wife to know that he had been fooled. Their short dream of happiness, their humble little home life, had been so real and earnest, it was with something like a shudder he contemplated shattering the past.

No, for the present he would leave her in blissful ignorance of his stupidity and failure. But as the funds grew shorter and a pinch came, he grew terribly uneasy, and his face began to wear a worn, worried look, which frightened his young wife.

They moved on now from place to place, never stopping more than a night in any one. George scarcely slept. All night in the little bed-room in the village inn where they stayed he would lie and turn from side to side, thinking and conjuring up a thousand fancied catastrophes.

When the original funds were quite gone, and the worst stared him in the face, George, still carefully concealing the real aspect of affairs from Bess, surreptitiously pawned his watch and chain and his ring.

As the future began to look blacker and blacker, he instinctively turned his footsteps towards home.

That must be the last resource.

The means of staving off the day of reckoning were diminishing rapidly, and a bold move was necessary, unless his poor Bess was to know the real horrors of poverty.

'Anything rather than that,' he thought to himself. 'I will go towards home, and then, if the worst comes, I must swallow my pride, throw myself on the old man's generosity, and get enough to leave the country till this affair blows over, or I can devise some means of setting myself right without a public exposure.'

So it came about that after wandering up and down the country, and living as frugally as possible, George found himself, at the end of a fortnight, without money and without shelter, but within a few miles of his father's estate.

The fierce winter had melted into the genial brightness of the early Spring, once the pleasantest part of the year, but now, alas! as uncommon in these islands as the dodo or the great auk. The first tender green leaves were peeping out shyly among the branches of the trees, as though they were half afraid that winter might not be quite gone, and the air was full of the sweet invigorating essence which lends elasticity to the step of the aged wayfarer, and tempts the young to pitch decorum to the winds and to scamper about and shout and laugh.

I pity the lad or the lass whose pulse does not beat quicker on a bright spring day, whose heart does not fill to overflowing with love for Nature as he gazes on the young earth quickening into life and beauty beneath the bright smile of the early spring sun.

It was on one of those spring days that Bess and George trod the old road towards the park for the first time since their marriage.

But George was nervous and ill, and Bess, oppressed with the idea that her husband had some secret trouble which he would not allow her to share, was profoundly miserable.

One idea alone consoled her. He had told her that morning, when further subterfuge was useless, and when he was bound to confess they were penniless, that he was going to see his father. Bess was delighted to hear it. She had not dared to say so, or to urge such a step, but she felt that anything was better than the wandering, miserable life they had led lately.

Besides, should she not see her own father?

Twice since she had left home she had written a short letter, giving no address and no clue to her whereabouts, saying she was well and happy, and that her father was to have faith in her and think the best he could.

And now she was going to see him and tell him all, for George was taking her back as his wife, and there would be no need for further concealment.

At any other time the idea of seeing her father would have made her supremely happy. She had looked forward to the day when she might put her arms round his neck and tell him all so eagerly; and now that the time had come she was miserable. Alas! it was the old story. How often the cherished dream of our life is accomplished amid surroundings which make it a hollow mockery, and only serve to intensify the bitter disappointment! We can look back upon yesterday with regret, and we can look forward to to-morrow with pleasure; but, alas! to-day is ever present, and to-day is generally a very dull affair.

George and Bess sauntered along the road, dusty, tired, and travel-stained. George's face was white and haggard, and he had let his beard grow during the fortnight, which did not add to the picturesqueness of his appearance. Bess, too, in the hurried journeyings and constant moving from pillar to post, had neglected her toilette somewhat, and had had to make shift as best she could; so that as they tramped along they might easily have been mistaken for something much lower in the social scale than the heir to the Heritage estates and his young wife.

'We must not get to the house till dusk, Bess,' said George, as they strolled along. 'I couldn't go in this sight in broad daylight.'

'No,' answered Bess; 'it will be best to wait till it's dusk, George dear; there'll be nobody about then. Old Dick will have gone home, and there'll only be father.'

'Ah!' exclaimed George eagerly, 'I'd forgotten that. You can go first and see your father, and I can come and slip into the lodge and wait about till the coast is clear, and then go up to the house.' Now that he was nearing his home his heart was beginning to fail him, and the old pride, which trouble had broken down for a while, was beginning to reassert itself.

Just outside the village in which Heritage Park stands there is a small wood. The high road skirts it, and it forms a tempting place for the dusty wayfarer to seek shelter in for a while.

Many a tramp on his road from workhouse to workhouse wanders into this wood, and, flinging himself down, enjoys a siesta, forgetting his troubles and dreaming such dreams as it pleases Nature to send him in the place of realities.

When George and Bess came to the wood, they determined to make it their halting-place for a while. It was only afternoon, and there were a

couple of good hours before it would be dark enough for them to enter the village safely.

They crept into the wood to a spot which had been a favourite one with them in their sweethearting days, and sat down.

The fresh air and the long walk had tired them, and after a while they fell asleep.

While the tired pilgrims rested, a pair of very different travellers passed leisurely along the high road.

They were an elderly clergyman and a young gentleman.

The clergyman was tall and burly, and wore his garb with a curious awkwardness, that would have impressed the critical observer with an idea that his living was a rural one.

The young gentleman, though dressed in the height of fashion, was a little gaudy about the necktie, and had a sharp, cunning look upon his face, and a decided squint in the deeply-set, eager, restless eyes, that seemed to take in the four points of the compass at once.

The clergyman and his son were staying at a local hostelry hard by for a day or two, and were enjoying the delightful walks in which the neighbourhood abounds.

They were remarkably quiet and uncommunicative at the old Lamb Inn, which had the honour of harbouring them; but evidently the fresh air had loosened their tongues.

For a clergyman and his son their style of conversation was, to say the least of it, peculiar.

‘We must do it to-night, Boss,’ said the elder; ‘soon after dusk. The swag’s all in jewels, and a grab’ll collar the lot.’

‘Right ye are, Josh,’ answered the young gentleman. ‘But I hope Jim’s give us the right tip.’

‘Trust Jim,’ said the Rev. gentleman; ‘he’s put up three jobs for me in cribs where he’s been, and I’ve always been able to put my hand on the swag jes’ as if I’d put it out for myself. There’s only the old man to tackle.’

‘No wierlence, I’ope, Josh, eh?—nothink as’ud disgrace the cloth?’

The Rev. gentleman laughed.

‘Wierlence? No. Don’t you be afeard, young un. This is only kid’s play, or I shouldn’t have brought you. The old cove ain’t likely to show fight—we shan’t give him the chance; and the servants’ll all be out of the way.’

‘Right,’ answered the young gentleman, glancing admiringly at his elegant suit. ‘I likes to do the thing like a gent, and wierlance is so doosid low nowadays.’

Perhaps if the landlord of the Lamb Inn had overheard this strange conversation between his highly respectable guests he would not have welcomed them back from their stroll with quite such a pleasant smile.

CHAPTER XXVIII.
SQUIRE HERITAGE MAKES A WILL.

Old Squire Heritage had aged very rapidly after the abrupt departure of his son from the hall.

Of a naturally gloomy and austere disposition, and strongly biased towards the cold and uncompromising religious views which a large section of the English people have had transmitted to them through many generations from the old Puritans, the squire believed the blow which had fallen upon him was dealt by a Divine hand.

He had, in his unsympathetic way, been very proud of his son George. The harshness that the young man so bitterly resented was only the result of a mistaken idea of parental duty.

When his son showed a taste not only for the frivolities but also for what the squire considered the vices of the age, he felt that stern repression was necessary. In the old days of parental despotism he would have flung his son into prison; in the enlightened times which forbade the head of a family to declare his domestic circle in a state of siege and proclaim military law, he contented himself by reprimanding the prodigal, treating him with icy displeasure, and eventually renouncing all ties of kinship with him.

By an ordinarily constituted father George's misdeeds would have been treated as youthful follies, and though the parental anger might have been fierce when the parental pocket was touched, it is probable far less drastic remedies would have been considered necessary.

When George, trembling with passion, left his father's presence vowing to see his face no more, Squire Heritage did not reproach himself for having goaded the young man to such a frame of mind.

When that night the old lodge-keeper came to him and told him that the young squire had ordered his things to be sent after him to London, his master simply said, 'Send them,' in a tone which prohibited any further discussion.

But when, a fortnight later, Bess Marks disappeared, leaving a note for her father which pointed to only one conclusion, and the squire heard of it, he went to the grief-stricken man and took him kindly by the hand and comforted him.

Never was there a greater contrast than between the two fathers—the plebeian and the patrician.

The lodge-keeper, a prey to violent grief and heartbroken at his child's conduct, never breathed a word of reproach against her. He only prayed that, however guilty she might be, no suffering might come near her, but that God would give her back again to his loving and protecting arms.

Squire Heritage spoke of his absent son coldly, almost cruelly. It was no secret among the people on the estate that Bess Marks had 'run away' with the young squire, and this added to the intensity of his father's indignation and shame.

He felt humiliated, as he stood in the presence of his faithful old retainer, to think that this foul wrong should have been done him by one who bore his name, and his anger against the absent scapegrace was fed by the discovery, as flame is fed with oil.

For the mental torture which he endured he sought refuge in the consolations of religion—of a religion which was founded on the fierce moral code of the Old Testament, and ignored the gentler teaching of the New.

He became almost a recluse, and passed his days in the old library, building up around the natural instincts of his heart a wall of bigotry, against which the erring son might throw himself in vain.

With nothing else to occupy his mind or divert his attention, with no society now but that of the fierce old theologians, his favourite authors, he became a prey to religious monomania, and an intellect long threatened was submerged by a flood of fanaticism.

He believed that God called upon him to show his faith as Abraham showed his. His conscience told him that he must cast the erring son off for ever, and that if he shrank from the utmost extremity of punishment he was a weak vessel, who preferred his human affection to his duty to God and man.

When once a lonely, narrow-minded man yields to this morbid view, there is no limit to the sway it has over him. Every natural instinct, every human feeling, becomes subservient to it, and the cruellest and most

heartless deeds, surrounded by a false religious glamour, seem to him but so many noble actions performed in the service of the Master.

It was not enough for Squire Heritage that he and his son had parted, and that he was in utter ignorance of the young man's whereabouts. Such conduct called for the severest punishment it was in his power to inflict. In the first days of their separation, though he had renounced him, he had hesitated at disinheriting him.

That was a vengeance that would survive when the grave had closed over him. While he lived he would never call him son again, but when he was dead—no, he would not make up his mind to carry his just indignation to such a point as that.

But when Bess Marks disappeared, and it was known that George had been seen frequently with her 'sweethearting,' as the gossips called it, and when inquiry left no doubt that the girl had gone, and at her young master's instigation, the old squire shattered his last scruple at a blow.

On the very day that he felt certain the old lodge-keeper's daughter had been lured from home by his son, he sent to his solicitor in hot haste, and prepared and executed a new will.

His first impulse had been to leave the whole of his estate to charity, but the pride of race was strong upon him.

Since the days when Cromwell rewarded his bravest followers with the lands of the Royalists, the Heritages had been lords of the old hall and the land about it. If he left all to charity the estates would have to be sold. After a long and anxious consideration the squire determined on leaving his property to preserve the name, and yet to leave his fortune where it would be well used.

He had never renewed his old friendship with John Adrian, which had been interrupted when they both fell in love with the gentle lady Heritage afterwards married.

John had not broken his heart when pretty Ruth Patmore gave the preference to the wealthy young country squire. He had taken the defeat like a sensible fellow, and later on had himself married and been comparatively happy. But that a remembrance of the old romance survived was evident when he named his little daughter Ruth.

Though the Heritages and the Adrians never met, they heard of each other from mutual friends, and after his wife's death the squire had once or twice inquired especially after Ruth.

He had heard that she had met with a disappointment in love, and also of her pure end noble life, her labours among the poor, and the extent to which she tried to do good with the means at her command.

There was something of sentiment in it, perhaps, but he could not help thinking how fortunate Adrian had been in his daughter and how unfortunate he had been in his son.

Brooding over the past, and comparing it with the present, it was not wonderful that the image of Ruth Adrian rose before him often as he thought of his ungrateful son.

When he was brooding over the scheme of the new will which he had determined to make, and had abandoned the idea of leaving his fortune to charitable institutions, again his mind reverted to Ruth Adrian.

Gradually a vague idea formed itself, which by degrees assumed a definite shape. There would be something of poetic justice in benefiting the daughter of his old rival, the girl who bore his dead wife's name. Had God granted him a daughter he would have named her Ruth too—Ruth Heritage. The name lingered in his mind, and the sweet memories flowed ones more over the grave ox the buried years.

Ruth Heritage!

Why was this gentle girl not his daughter? How fortunate Adrian had been. His wife lived still, and his daughter was the comfort of his age. He, the successful rival, had no wife and no child.

Ruth Heritage!

He sat in the window-seat of the library, looking across the quiet park to the lodge-gates, watching for his solicitor to come, and thinking over the will he was to make.

And when, an hour later, his man of business was with him in close conference, his scheme was complete. There was an element of romance in it. The harshness to his own son was toned down by the halo of tenderness which it cast over an old love-story.

The solicitor took his client's instructions with professional lack of emotion. Family solicitors assist in the disinheritance of sons, the revelation of delicate domestic secrets, and carefully calculated schemes

of a revenge which is to survive after death, with no more concern than the prompter feels as he watches the progress of a sensation drama.

To him the scheme which may bring happiness or misery to hundreds represents so many folios of writing at so much a folio, and so many hours of professional work at so much an hour.

Mr. Baggs, of the firm of Baggs & Carter, expressed no surprise at the fact that young George Heritage was to be disinherited, and did not even venture on a suggestion. He listened to his client's instructions, and took them away to put them in a legal form.

When the will was ready Squire Heritage signed it, sealed it, delivered it as his act and deed, and locked it up among his papers.

It was a very simple will. It gave and bequeathed to Ruth Adrian, the daughter of his old rival John Adrian, the whole of his property, subject to a few legacies to old servants. But it made this proviso: that the said Ruth Adrian should assume the name of Heritage; and that in the event of her being married when the will came into operation, her husband should assume the name of Heritage. By this means the old name would continue to be identified with the place.

Directly he had settled his worldly affairs, the squire relapsed once more into the gloomy inactivity from which he had only been aroused by the necessity of devising a scheme for the disposal of his property.

But in spite of himself he kept thinking of the will and then of his absent son. He found himself picturing the days that should be after he had passed away and had no power to revoke his decision.

When in his lonely walks round the estate he passed some wretched tramp on his way to the workhouse, he would fancy his son, reduced to such a position after a career of dissipation, perishing friendless and without hope.

Then he would shudder and ask himself if he were justified in thus ruining the worldly prospects of his only son for life, and giving his inheritance to a stranger.

But at night, with the Bible open before him, and the passionate Hebrew invective against the evildoer appealing to his narrowed vision, he cast these forebodings to the wind. Such thoughts were thoughts sent by the devil to weaken his determination. Were not all the servants of God tempted in like manner to swerve from the path of duty, and was it not always the natural impulses of the heart that were sought to be turned to their undoing? So the gloomy train of thought led him away, till he was prepared to listen to each chord of human sympathy which memory awoke in him as one struck by the tempter's fingers.

CHAPTER XXIX.
THE BURGLARY AT THE HALL.

Night had come upon the old hall, and the fresh spring wind, trying to whistle a tune for the young leaves to dance to, was the only thing that disturbed the perfect calm which had fallen upon the spot.

Up in his library at the hall the squire sat among his books and papers.

Beside him lay a packet of faded yellow letters—the letters his wife had written him during their happy married life There were not many of them, for they were seldom apart, and the opportunity for correspondence had rarely arisen.

He had found them to-night in a box to which he had gone for something else, and he had read them over.

All of them mentioned George. They had been written mostly when George was a little lad, one year that the squire had gone abroad for six weeks by himself. As the old man read the words of tender love and devotion, he thanked God that this fond heart, at least, had ceased to beat ere its idol could grow up to break it.

Then he wondered if things would have been different had she lived. Perhaps he had been too severe and expected too much.

He read the lines traced by the hand long cold in the grave, and a strange sense of uneasiness came over him.

It seemed as though the spirit of the dead woman was pleading with him for her boy.

The hereafter was a mystery. If the eyes of the saints look down upon earth, what would the mother in heaven think of the father who robbed his son of his inheritance and left him a beggar?

The old man was low and desponding, and his mind was none too vigorous now. Strange fancies came to him at times. He wrestled with the devil in spirit, and endeavoured to ascribe every trifling incident to the direct interposition of Providence.

He had been proud of his son, he said to himself, and made an earthly idol of him The worship had certainly been as cold and formal as some other worships which look down with considerable contempt on enthusiasm in religion, but he persuaded himself it had been there. So he was punished for his idolatry by the shattering of his idol. In olden times he would have worn a shirt of hair and washed the feet of beggars for his sins; now he strove to put himself right by mortifying not the flesh but the spirit—by trampling out his natural affections, and misinterpreting the will of heaven.

He read the letters of his dead wife, which spoke of George again and again. Once he cast them aside with a shudder. It was another wile of the Evil One to lure him into leniency for the transgressor. But gradually his heart softened as memory carried him back to the happiest days of his life, when his sweet Ruth tossed the laughing child upon her knee and held him up for his father’s kiss.

It was not long ago—it was to-day. He could see them. The gloomy room faded away, and it was the pleasant summer time. There with fresh-plucked roses in her hand, sat his wife, and George—little George—was clapping his baby hands with delight as ‘pretty mamma’ twined the beautiful buds in her hair.

He started up, and held his hands towards the vision, but it faded in an instant, and he was once more alone—a miserable, weak old man, wifeless and childless.

‘No, no!’ he cried, burying his facc in his hands. ‘My heart relents; I cannot do it. She would rise from her grave. Ruth—my poor Ruth—for your dear sake I will forgive him all!’

For a few minutes the old man, a prey to violent emotion, the tears streaming down his face, struggled with himself. The old love he had trampled beneath the heel of supposed duty was beating at his heart and striving to enter. The wall of faith was weak to-night—it gave way, and love marched in a conqueror.

With feverish hands he seized the pen, and, taking a sheet of paper, began to write.

His pen moved on rapidly—he wrote as though he feared a hand would seize his wrist and stop him.

Love had conquered. Squire Heritage wrote that night how, being of

sound mind, he did revoke the will made in favour of Ruth Adrian, and give and bequeath all his property to his beloved son George.

Then he rang the bell. He would have his signature witnessed at once, lock it up and put it away, lest he might repent at the last moment. He summoned the old butler and one of the servants, who came up wondering at their presence being required.

If the master had asked them to stand on their heads they could not have been more surprised than when the squire bade them watch him write his name on a piece of paper, and then write theirs underneath it. The butler felt as if he was committing a midnight crime; but he obeyed, so did the other servant.

Then the squire dismissed them wondering, and, folding up the paper, placed it among the letters of his dead wife. It seemed to him that it was an answer to them, and should be with them.

He put them back into the box he had taken them from. It was a small deed-box, and contained all Mrs. Heritage's jewellery.

Her wedding-ring he wore himself; but her diamonds, all her bracelets and trinkets, he had refused to part with. He had gathered them together, and put them in this box with her letters, and a few of the little treasures that had been dear to her in life. There was a small locket with a curl from baby George's head; there was the hair he cut with trembling fingers as he stooped to kiss the marble brow of his lost one for the last time.

When he had placed the letters and the paper in the box, he drew out the jewel-cases and opened them. He had not looked at them for years. To-night he was living in the past. He opened case after case, and gazed lovingly at the gleaming jewels within. But as the diamonds sparkled in the gaslight, and the rubies and the emeralds shot forth their coloured rays, as though eager to escape from the long darkness in which they had been imprisoned, the old squire thought not of their value and beauty, but of the loving bosom the necklace once lay upon, of the gentle wrists the bracelets once clasped.

As he laid them back in the box and closed it with a sigh, he fancied he heard a sound in the passage outside.

He hurried to see what it was.

The library door was slightly ajar and the gas was lit.

As he turned he heard, or fancied he heard, a rustle, as though some one who had been peering into the room had moved away.

There was no one about belonging to the house, he knew. The servants had gone to the servants' hall, and they never came near him except when he rang.

It was about nine o'clock, and they would be all at supper down below. Who was watching him?—who was spying on his movements?

He walked rapidly towards the door.

At the same moment he heard a noise behind him, and felt the wind blowing in from an open window.

He turned at the sound, and would have shouted for help, but a hand was thrust over his mouth and a cloth was thrown over his head.

A tall, burly man, with a crape mask on, had him in his grasp.

'It can't be helped; he'd have raised a hullabaloo in a minute,' cried the man. 'Quick with the stuff, while I hold him!'

Some one, who never spoke, and whom the squire could not see, was moving about the room.

'Now out with the gas and bolt!' cried the man who held the squire.

At the same time he gave the squire a violent push, that sent him full-length on the floor.

There was a noise at the window, a thud on the lawn below, and then all was still.

The force with which the squire had been hurled to the ground had only partially stunned him. In a few minutes he came round and dragged himself up. He was trembling and exhausted, and the place was quite dark.

He rushed to the door and called for help. Presently the terrified servants came running up.

When the lights were procured, the squire gasped out his story.

A glance round the room showed that the burglars had left by the window.

They had not left empty-handed.

When the squire looked towards the place where he had left the deed-

box, with his late wife’s letters, jewels, and valuables, it was gone.

CHAPTER XXX.
HOW FATHER AND SON MET AGAIN.

As the dusk set in, George Heritage and his young wife drew nearer and nearer to the home they had both quitted under such different circumstances.

For the last half hour of their walk George had been almost silent; but Bess, who was picturing in her mind the meeting with her father, hardly noticed it.

The determination he had made to throw himself upon his father's generosity, to return like the prodigal and crave forgiveness, was becoming weaker and weaker as the time came for it to be carried into effect.

But for Bess, he would have turned back now at the eleventh hour; yet the thought of the misery which his penniless condition would entail upon her forced him to go on.

He waited a little way off while Bess went on first and saw her father. He fancied there might be a scene, and he didn't like scenes. He was no longer George Smith, the unknown clerk. Here he was George Heritage, Marks's young master; and he felt that the position, till explained, would be awkward.

Had Bess risen from the dead, her father would not have been more astonished than he was when she crept into the little lodge and fell at his feet.

'Father!' she cried, 'don't you know me?'

For a moment the old lodge-keeper struggled for breath. Then his voice came, and with a big sob, he cried, 'Bess—my own darling! Thank God! Thank God!'

He flung his arms about her, raised her, and clasped her to his breast, the hot tears pouring down his wrinkled cheeks into the flushed, upturned face of his daughter.

Bess cried a little, laughed a little, and then cried again, and at last, when she could speak without doing either, she told her story in a few words.

The old lodge-keeper listened in silence.

'Ay, I knew it, my darling,' he said, when she had finished. 'I got your letters, and I trusted you. I guessed it was for the young master's sake you were silent.'

'Yes, father; I would never have kept it secret from you but for George.'

'No, my lass, I know that. I said to myself many a night, when I sat here alone, looking up at the bright stars, and thinking that might be up in the great city you were looking at them too—I said, "My little lass is an honest lass; she wouldn't shame her old father for the best gentleman in the land." I *knew* you were married to the young master, Bess, my darling. If I hadn't believed that, I don't think you would have found me here now.'

Little by little, Bess told her father how they had been living in London, and how good George had been; but how now, for some reason, it was necessary he should see his father and make his peace with him. 'Would her father let him come to the lodge and wait awhile, till he could go up to the hall and see the squire alone?'

Of course Marks would. 'Wasn't he the young master, and wasn't he Bess's husband? God bless him!'

Then Bess went out, and George came quietly in and sat down in the little room where no one could see him, and they closed the door and drew down the blind, and talked matters over.

Marks could not imagine himself the father-in-law of the young squire. He touched his hat to him and said, 'No, Master George,' and 'Yes, Master George,' and wouldn't sit down in the room where he was; and George began to feel very uncomfortable, and to wish he could see some way of escape even now without speaking to his father.

He must tell him of Mrs. George Heritage—that was a matter of course. Some day he had intended to do so under any circumstances; but some day had always been a very convenient day. *This* day was a most inconvenient one.

Still matters were desperate. At any time there might be a hue-and-cry after him. He must leave the country at once, unless he wished to run

the risk of taking a public trial and having the whole of his past life published in the papers. No; it was better to tell his father all, humiliating as it was, than to have the whole world knowing it.

Again, what was he to do with Bess? He couldn't drag her about from pillar to post. He could rough it himself, but she was a woman. Besides, he didn't want her to know everything. He had supposed he was really doing something very good and noble in making her his wife. As long as he could retain that idea, there was still some romance about the affair. But if he had to drag her about with him and let her see that he was a pauper and in terror of the law, she would owe him nothing. She might then be making a sacrifice for him. He didn't want a lodge-keeper's daughter to be a sort of benefactress to him.

He was a strange mixture of good and evil, this young Heritage. He was generous and mean, brave and cowardly, large-minded and small-minded, all at the same time. And his besetting sin was vacillation.

Even now, with the road smoothed for him, with everything to gain and nothing to lose, he hesitated at sacrificing his dignity by an *ad misericordiam* appeal to his father.

He had pictured something so very different. He had hoped for a time when his father, finding he was independent of him, would hold out his arms and beg his son to honour him again with his friendship.

Bess, supremely happy, once more in her father's presence, sat and chatted pleasantly. Never an idea crossed her mind that it was any serious trouble which had driven them from London. She believed that George, at first fearing his father had found out his address, had determined to leave the Ducks for awhile. Afterwards, when he determined to go to the hall, she thought he had made up his mind, after all, that it would be better to make a clean breast of it and trust to his father's generosity.

She believed, poor little woman, that George had taken the best course he could, and that happy days were in store for them.

As to the squire refusing to be reconciled to his son, or to receive the wanderer, such an idea never entered her head.

Who could refuse George anything?

Besides, if he had married her, she couldn't see that was such a very great crime. She looked in the glass and saw every excuse for a young man doing such a thing.

Her father was not a menial; he was an old and valued retainer, and had been the old squire's companion in many a long walk and in many an evening chat under the great wide-spreading trees of the park. She had been born on the estate, and the squire had always been kind to her and treated her like a lady. She had had quite as good an education as many of the gentry's children round about, for it had been a whim of the squire's lady to send her to school, and some day she had thought of going out for a governess. But her mother died, and, instead of going out into the great world, she stayed at home with her father and fell in love with Master George.

And now they were married. Well, perhaps the squire would have chosen some one higher in rank for his son, but his son might have done much worse. Bess had a spirit of her own and a fair amount of pride. She was quite sure the squire need not be very angry with George for marrying her.

George sat and listened to Bess's busy tongue, but he hardly heard a word she said. He was absorbed in his own thoughts, and they were not nearly so pleasant as Bess's.

Towards nine he drew Marks on one side.

'He's alone in the library about this time, isn't he?'

'Yes,' answered the old lodge-keeper; 'he sits there all the evening after dinner now, writing and reading and talking to himself.'

'How can I get in without the servants seeing me?'

'The outer hall-door is not closed; the inner door opens if you turn the handle. But, lor', Master George, as if you didn't know the ways of the house as well as me!'

'What about the dog? If he recognises me he'll bark and bring the servants up.'

'I'll go up and let him out, and take him for a run while you go in,' said Marks. 'But what can it matter if the servants do see you, Master George?'

'I don't want them to, Marks. You'd understand why if you were in my position.'

George and Marks had walked to the door talking. Before they went out George turned back suddenly into the inner room, where Bess was instinctively doing a little tidying up.

He went across to where she stood and took her hands in his.

‘Bess,’ he said, almost solemnly, ‘I love you very dearly, and you know it. What I am going to do to-night I am doing for your sake. If I fail, your love may have a rude shock. Wish me God speed.’

She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

‘God speed you, my darling,’ she murmured. ‘But happy days are coming now.’

‘Pray God you may be right!’ he cried. Then he clasped her to his breast for a moment and was gone.

Outside he took Marks by the arm.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘I am going on a desperate errand to-night, I can’t tell you everything, and Bess has no idea how much depends on this interview. If I fail, it will be necessary for me to get away for awhile. I can’t drag her through the perils I shall have to encounter.’

The young man’s manner was so solemn, that old Marks was alarmed.

‘Oh, Master George, what do you mean?’ he exclaimed nervously.

‘I can’t tell you. I only want you to promise me this. If I fail, I shall leave the place at once, for a time. I want you to guard my poor girl for a time, till I can make a home for her elsewhere. Promise me!’

‘I promise. But you are exaggerating, Master George. The squire won’t be cruel. I am sure he will forgive you.’

‘I don’t know; he may not. If he doesn’t, I am a penniless beggar. I can starve, but she can’t. You won’t turn her out?’

‘Turn her out? I’m her father, Master George.’

The young man pointed to the hall.

‘The man who lives there is mine, but he drove me out of my home.’

‘You went of your own accord.’

‘No, he drove me out, I tell you; and now I am coming back to him like a whipped cur to plead for mercy.’

The struggle between pride and necessity was raging in the young man’s breast.

‘Go and get the dog away, Marks,’ he exclaimed passionately, ‘and let me go, or I shall turn tail even now.’

Marks walked up to the hall, loosed the dog, and, holding him by the collar, led him away across the grounds some distance from the house. At the same moment there was a movement in the shrubbery on the other side of the house, and a big, burly man came creeping round in the shadow and stole noiselessly up the stairs.

At the same time another man, much thinner and shorter, came from the same place, and, keeping along by the walls of the house, went round to where a short garden ladder stood against the side of the house where & creeper was being trained.

It was immediately under the library window.

When Marks had been gone some little time, and George knew that the dog would be beyond hearing distance, he came up through the trees towards the house.

Marks was to lead the dog round and take him back to the lodge, and wait there with Bess till George returned.

The moment had arrived.

The young man’s idea in entering the house like a thief, and at night, was to avoid recognition by the servants. He wanted to see his father alone and unperceived—to go like the prodigal, and cast himself at his feet, and say, ‘Father, forgive me!’

He didn’t want a servant to go rushing up with, ‘Here’s Master George come back!’ and all that nonsense. He hated a fuss, and he had an idea that he was in a very humiliating position.

Besides, even if his father gave him what he wanted, it was better he should come and go unseen, except by Marks.

The fact remained that he had been connected with a gang of swindlers, and there was no knowing where or how he might be traced when once inquiry was set on foot.

The past, the present, and the future all flashed through his mind, as, with hesitating steps, he walked up towards the hall.

‘But for Bess,’ he thought, ‘I’d have had a desperate try to do without him. But for Bess——’

He stopped suddenly.

His great difficulty all along had been what to do with Bess. But for the present was not that fear removed? Was she not safe beneath her father's roof? Where better could she be than that?

Swiftly he reviewed the whole situation. Bess being at home might stay there a little while. That would give him time. He need not creep into his father's house like a thief. Might he not write to him first? He could say what he wanted to say so much better in a letter, and there would be less humiliation.

At that moment his fate trembled in the balance.

If he had gone on boldly and seen his father, all might have been well.

But he hesitated. He put off the doing that which he disliked, and he reaped the penalty.

Instead of going up to the hall, he turned back towards the lodge.

He walked rapidly away from the house.

Suddenly he heard a sound behind him as of heavy footsteps running.

Instantly the thought flashed upon him that he had been trapped; that the police had found out who he was, and, expecting he would come home, had lain in wait for him.

He did not stop to reason, or to think that if this was so he would have been captured at the lodge.

He only heard the rapidly advancing footsteps behind him, and made certain that he was the object of pursuit.

He must not be taken, at any rate, not there, where twenty people would recognize him. The scandal would be magnified tenfold. He ran rapidly in the direction of the lodge, fear lending swiftness to his limbs, weary with his wanderings.

As he darted past the lodge, Marks was at the door.

George shouted to him, 'Remember your promise!' and flew on like a madman.

The lodge-gates were closed, but he knew a weak spot in the hedge; he ran up the side, scrambled through, and he was in the roadway.

He paused for a second and listened.

He could hear no footsteps now. His pursuers had not come towards the lodge.

He had gained on them a little.

He ran on still, all along the roadway, as fast as he could, and then walked.

Presently he came to a quiet spot where the trees grew by the roadside.

He crept behind the trunk of one, and stood there to rest awhile, wondering whither he could turn his footsteps to escape the hue-and-cry which he felt sure was now raised.

As George Heritage rushed past him, Marks was so astonished that for the moment he did not move.

He was about to follow him, when suddenly a cry rang across the stillness of the night:

'Help! help! help!'

There were lights in the lower rooms up at the hall, and the servants were now hurrying about.

With a cry of terror, Marks ran, as well as his aged limbs would let him, up to the house.

A fearful suspicion flashed across his mind.

George had seen his father. There had been a quarrel, and——

He dared not shape his thoughts into words.

Terrified and trembling, he arrived at the hall.

'What is it?' he gasped to the old housekeeper, who was on the landing wringing her hands.

'Thieves and murder's the matter!' she screamed. 'Some villain's half murdered the master, and carried off all the jewellery and goodness knows what.'

The whole village was gradually aroused by the news of the burglary and the attack on the squire, and every part of the estate was searched for traces of the culprits.

Presently there was a great noise heard as of a crowd coming nearer and nearer.

The servants ran out to the gates, and returned with the news that one

of the burglars was caught.

Followed by a crowd came two constables, dragging a man with them. His clothes had been torn to shreds in the struggle, the dirt and dust of the roads were upon him, and the blood from a blow on his head had trickled down his face.

None of the crowd knew him. They thought he was a tramp, and in the dark night his face, disfigured as it was, was almost unrecognisable.

The crowd stopped outside while the constables led their charge into the hall to confront him with the squire.

The prisoner shuddered as he passed the lodge-gates, and looked fearfully at the doorway.

There was no one there.

Up the broad walk he went, preserving the same dogged silence which had been unbroken since his capture.

The officers led him into the library, where the squire sat, still trembling and exhausted from his recent encounter, Marks standing near him. They pushed him into the middle of the room, and then the man raised his eyes.

For a moment the squire looked at him wonderingly. Marks, who had turned white and trembled violently as the group entered, gave one agonized glance at the figure before him, and then, throwing up his hands, exclaimed in a tone of horror, ‘Master George!’

The squire’s eyes were fixed upon his son. He recognized him now through the dirt and the blood and the tatters. His lips shaped themselves to speak, he rose trembling from his chair, then, gasping out, ‘My son! It was my son!’ fell forward a huddled-up mass upon the floor.

In his terror Marks spoke at random; the officers heard him upbraid the young man for what he had done, for making him an accomplice, as it were.

Every word that the old servant gasped out over the senseless body of his master was a link in the chain of evidence against the son.

George made no answer.

He stood like a man in a dream, dazed, almost unconscious of what was going on around him.

They raised the squire and put him in his chair again, but his eyes wandered vacantly round the room, and he kept mumbling to himself, ‘My son! It was my son!’

The shock had unhinged his reason.

CHAPTER XXXI.
IS SLIGHTLY RETROSPECTIVE.

We left Mr. Jabez Duck, a few chapters back, in anything but a comfortable situation.

When he had recovered from his astonishment at the sight of his sister, Miss Jackson, and Mrs. Turvey, he endeavoured to stammer out that he'd be back in a moment, and made for the door.

But Georgina was too quick for him.

'I must speak to you at once,' she said, imperiously, 'on *private* business.' The accent on the word private was marked and intentional.

Mrs. Turvey took the hint.

'Which if I am in the way, Jabez, let me go into another room while this person tells you her business.'

Now Mrs. Turvey knew very well that Georgina was Jabez's sister, and Georgina was quite aware of Mrs. Turvey's identity, but it pleased them both to affect the most supreme ignorance.

'Jabez,' exclaimed Miss Duck indignantly, 'who is this female who addresses you so familiarly, and calls me a "person"?'

'Who am I?' gasped Mrs. Turvey, fairly roused by Georgina's manner, and coming bustling up close to her. 'I'll let you know who I am, madam. I'm not a female. I'm a respectable hard-working woman, as isn't going to be humbugged about any longer by your precious oily snake of a brother.'

'Ladies, ladies!' stammered Jabez, polishing his brow furiously, and bursting out into quite a watery shine with perspiration; 'Pray, pray compose yourselves! The firm will hear you. Pray remember where you are!'

Jabez might as well have asked the north wind not to blow as Georgina and Mrs. Turvey to be quiet. They were fairly started on a race for the last word. Besides, weeks of pent-up scorn and indignation had to be worked off. In vain Jabez implored them to be silent. In vain Miss Jackson shed tears and urged Georgina, for her sake, to be calm.

At last, when it was within an inch of a single-stick duel between Georgina's parasol and Mrs. Turvey's umbrella, Jabez fairly lost his temper, and, rushing between them in time to receive both umbrella and parasol on his own unprotected and shiny bald head, seized the first combatant he could catch hold of, and dragged her away.

It was Mrs. Turvey.

That estimable lady, flushed, excited, and prepared for desperate deeds, no sooner saw Jabez, as she presumed, espouse his sister's side, than with a terrific effort she became suddenly calm.

Smoothing her ruffled finery and assuming a delicately sarcastic tone, she thus delivered herself:

'I'll go, Mr. Duck—I don't want to be pushed out; but I shall call again—*not* to see you, sir. I shall instruct Messrs. Grigg and Limpet to commence two actions at once, one for breach of promise against you, Mr. Duck, and one for deformation of character against you, Miss Duck; which you, ma'am,' she added, turning to Miss Jackson, 'will be a witness as this person have said vile and ojus things about me.'

'Oh,' moaned Miss Jackson, 'don't make me a witness! Oh, I would rather cut my right hand off than let it go into a court of justice against my dearest friend!'

'Don't be a fool, Carry!' said Miss Duck curtly. 'Jabez, show that old woman out, or I'll go to the firm. I won't be insulted by a servant any longer.'

Jabez had adroitly got Mrs. Turvey out of earshot, so that Georgina's last arrow missed its mark.

He was some minutes before he returned. In the interests of peace he apologized to Mrs. Turvey, said his sister was to blame, and vowed on his honour to behave like a gentleman if Mrs. Turvey would only give him time.

Mrs. Turvey allowed herself to be mollified so far as Jabez was concerned, but departed vowing the fiercest vengeance against his 'stuck-up minx of a sister.'

Georgina, when she had given her brother a thorough setting down over the Turvey incident, informed him of the visit of the police and the discovery of the Smiths' real character.

Jabez for a time refused to believe it, but the evidence which his sister produced was circumstantial. Already his employers had discovered the forgery of which they had been the victims, and Jabez connected the two events.

When he got home that evening the same detective who had searched the rooms called to see him, and requested him to say nothing about the affair to any one for the present.

The reason he gave was that there was no knowing who belonged to the gang, and if it once got about that the police were on the track the others would keep out of the way.

In the hope of making a complete haul, the police for the present would take no steps to arrest the fugitive. If he was left alone, and not allowed to know that he was suspected, he would probably join some other members of the gang.

Jabez listened to this explanation and promised to hold his peace, and also to allow the things found in the room occupied by George to be taken to Scotland Yard.

The officer who had charge of the case was Sergeant Iveson, a well-favoured, middle-aged man, who looked like a country gentleman, and Jabez had every confidence in him. The officer also went to Grigg and Limpet, and received from them the forged cheque. They also agreed to take no steps which would clash with those arranged by Sergeant Iveson, who had sole charge of the case.

Late that evening Sergeant Iveson and Mr. Seth Preene met by accident, and what more natural than that they should have a little conversation?

‘Found out who he is yet?’ asked the sergeant.

‘No,’ said Preene; ‘but I’m sure he’s a swell, and he’s making quietly for his home, wherever it is. I suppose it’s sure to be pretty straight against him?’

‘I’ll take care of that,’ answered the sergeant. ‘But this case won’t pay, you know. There’s no reward. Won’t it be worth your governor’s while to pay a good one? You see if this chap’s convicted there’s an end to all inquiries about the forged cheques. You get him out of the way for a year or two and wipe the slate clean. I suppose the principal in the affair’s right, ain’t he?’

‘Right? I should think so,’ answered Mr. Preene. ‘Look here, governor, you nab this fellow, and make him safe for a year or two, and I’ll promise you a hundred on my own hook. Never mind about the woman; she’s never seen any of us, and can do no harm. She might complicate the case. I’ll say a hundred and fifty—there!’

With which magnificent offer Mr. Preene held out his hand to the sergeant, and shortly afterwards they parted.

Sergeant Iveson bided his time before he looked for the runaway, In the interests of the firm of Smith and Co., Mr. Preene desired him not to act too precipitately. Smith and Co. wished to remove all trace of their connection with certain city offices and financial transactions before that accomplished forger, Mr. George Smith, was put upon his trial.

Practically, for the present, the firm’s City business was dissolved. Brooks had gone down to Dover on an important matter, and Marston had followed him. Preene was in town, busy at his private residence over some mechanical operation in which he seemed to take a deep interest, and Josh Heckett had gone to a quiet little place in Surrey, for the benefit of his health.

It is singular that when he arrived with his travelling bag at a little inn some short distance from Heritage Park he wore the clerical garb. He was dressed in a suit of black, had on a white choker, and wore a clerical felt hat. He was accompanied by his son, a young gentleman, who treated his ‘governor’ in a most respectful manner. They didn’t talk much before the landlady, who waited on them, and they were very particular about their behaviour.

But when they went out for little strolls in the neighbourhood, the clergyman called his son ‘Boss,’ and garnished his conversation with strange, unclerical oaths. And Master Boss called his revered parent ‘Josh, ’and pattered to him in Mint slang, as though his education at the university had consisted of this very living language to the utter neglect of all the dead ones.

CHAPTER XXXII.
FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

Bess was saved from witnessing the terrible scene of her husband's degradation.

Old Marks, beside himself with grief and horror, yet had the presence of mind to keep her in the lodge.

He persuaded her that her husband's safety depended upon her not being seen, and she stopped indoors throughout all the riot and hubbub.

George had glanced anxiously among the crowd, fearing to see his wife's pale face and tears, but he was spared that blow.

When he was gone, old Marks went back to the lodge like a man in a dream, and broke the terrible news to his daughter.

Bess refused to believe it. She would have rushed out and gone to her husband there and then. She would have proclaimed herself his wife gladly, now trouble had come upon him, but her father reasoned with her and showed her how futile such a course would be.

'George does not want it known,' he told her, and Bess, remembering how secret George had kept their marriage, believed that her father was right.

'What can I do?' she moaned. 'I am his wife, and my place is by his side. He has got into all this trouble for my sake. But for me he could have gone away, and this horrible mistake would never have occurred.'

'Mistake!' said old Marks; 'don't you believe, then, that George is guilty?'

'Guilty! Listen, father. I know my George to be one of the bravest, noblest-hearted men in the world. How dare you insult him by suggesting that he is guilty?'

Gradually, as Bess now realised the position of affairs, she worked herself up into a state of excitement, and talked at random. She would do this, she would do that. She paced the little room, now weeping, now crying out that there was a plot against them, and that her father was in it.

The old man endeavoured to calm her, promising that he would go up to the hall again, and get all the information he could.

Marks himself fully believed the young squire guilty. A hundred little things recurred to his mind to strengthen his belief. George's mysterious arrival, travel-stained and penniless, his waiting till nightfall, and his desire to enter the hall unobserved when his father was alone, his hurried flight, and his mysterious instructions with regard to Bess—all these things pointed to the fact that the young man had attempted to rob his father, and in the struggle had injured him.

Old Squire Heritage himself said as much. It was true he seemed bewildered, but to all the questions put to him about the strange and terrible business he simply murmured, 'My son! my only son!' Marks felt as if he had been a traitor to his old master in the part he had played in the affair.

'How could he ha' done it? how could he ha' done it?' he muttered to himself as, pale and agitated, he listened to the little group of servants talking near the house.

No one doubted for a moment that the young squire was the guilty person. Had he not been caught red-handed? Who his companion in the crime was they could only conjecture. He had got clear away.

When Marks joined the group they turned on to him with a hundred questions. Had he let Master George in? Had he heard anything about his daughter?

No one knew that Bess was even then at the lodge. George had been so cautious that, except to Marks, their arrival was a secret.

The servants hazarded a hundred conjectures as to what could have led the young squire to commit such an awful deed. They had noticed his dusty clothing and his haggard look, and they had almost pitied him until they saw their old master's terrible condition, and remembered who was the cause of it.

Marks, nervous lest he should, in his agitation, betray how much he kuew, barely answered the questions addressed to him. He asked anxiously how the squire was, and learned that he was worse. Then he went back, heavy-hearted and red-eyed, to tell his poor girl as hopeful a tale as he might.

On the way he met a constable who had been searching the grounds.

The man stopped him.

'You are the gate-keeper?' he said.

'Yes,' stammered Marks, for the man was eyeing him keenly.

'Did you let young Heritage in through the gates or see him pass?'

'I let him in.'

'Was he alone?'

Marks went hot and cold. Was Bess to be dragged into this dreadful business? He had heard of the London lawyers and trials, and how all your life came out in court, and how they cross-examined you till your heart was laid bare. Was he going to be treated like this? He remembered that he had enticed the dog away, and his heart almost stood still. Why, in a court of justice he would seem to be in league with the accused! And Bess! They would make out, ten to one, that it was through her it all came about!

He stammered out something to the constable about not being quite himself.

'You're agitated now,' said the constable, 'and no wonder. It's a nasty affair for the family. You're an old servant, I believe? Well, I'll come and see you to-morrow, and take a note of your evidence. Did you have any conversation with the young man when he came in?'

'A little.'

'All right. Well, think it over to-night, and let me know tomorrow what it was. You'll be an important witness. Goodnight.'

Marks hardly knew how he got back to the lodge.

Once inside, he bolted the door, and fell into his old armchair a prey to the greatest agitation.

Bess came from the inner room, her eyes swollen with weeping.

'Bess, my lass,' said the old man, in a hollow voice, 'there's bad news. The old squire's worse, and everybody thinks as Master George is guilty. The police are working up evidence a ready, and they want me.'

'You will tell them, father, that it could not be George, won't you? You will tell them he came down here to ask his father's forgiveness, not to rob and injure him.'

'I'm afraid, my lass, that nothing I could say would do Master George much good. I fear it 'ud only do him a power o' harm. There's one thing we can do for him as I'm sure he'd be glad on.'

'What's that, father?' said Bess eagerly.

'Get away from here, both on us. He don't want you mixed up in it, I know, and I'd sooner cut my right hand off than go and speak agen him in court.'

At first Bess would not hear of flight, but gradually her father persuaded her that for George's sake it was the best thing possible.

Besides, what could she do if she remained?

She would be a marked woman; something for the curious to gaze at, and for the neighbours to talk about. When the trial was over, and George's innocence was proved, then she could show herself among her old companions without a blush. She had not her husband's permission even to call herself by his name.

She was still Mrs. Smith. She could not take advantage of his position to proclaim herself Mrs. Heritage. Her father was right.

It was best for all that they should get away from Heritage Hall at once. It was no home for her now, and her father declared he could never look the old squire in the face again.

'I shall feel like a thief, stealing away in the night,' he said; 'but, for Master George's sake, I must do it. If they got me before the lawyers, and made me speak what I know, it ud hang him.'

'Father!'

Bess had seized the old lodge-keeper by the arm, and her face was ashy-white.

'No! no! I don't mean that, my lass,' he said, trying to soothe lier. 'That's only a manner of speaking, like. Of course there ain't no murder in it. Squire'll be all right in a day or two.'

'And George will be free?'

'Ay, ay, my lass, o' course he will; and till then you and I will go up to London, and keep out o' the way o' curious folk, as wants to know more o' their neighbours' business than is good for 'em. We'll go up to London, and bide till we hear news o' the young master.'

In the silence of the night an old man and a young woman stole out of

the gates of Heritage Park.

The old man looked back with lingering glances at the old place which had been home to him for forty years.

He had his little store of money with him, and something that he prized beyond gold—his greatest earthly treasure—his Bess.

Miserable as were the circumstances that had reunited them, he yet felt his load of trouble lightened when he remembered that she was by to cheer him.

‘Cheer up, my girl!’ he said, as they passed into the darkness. ‘It was an evil day when the squire cast his son off, and it’s brought nothing but trouble; but, please God, all will come right yet.’

Bess made no reply.

She was thinking of how hopefully, a few short hours since, she had come back to the old place, and wondering how anybody could possibly believe her dear, kind, gentle husband guilty of the terrible crime of which he was accused.

CHAPTER XXXIII.
HUNTED DOWN.

The trial of George Heritage for breaking into his own father's house and, in conjunction with some person not in custody, carrying off jewellery and other articles of value, made an enormous sensation, and the accounts were eagerly perused by all classes of readers. They penetrated even to the society honoured by the presence of Mr. Boss Knivett, and that young gentleman took the liveliest interest in the proceedings, communicating all the facts with the greatest gusto to Mr. Josh Heckett who unfortunately was not able to read them for himself, having in early life been denied the inestimable blessings of education. Every romantic element that could heighten the interest of the story was present, even to the mysterious disappearance of witnesses.

Directly after the event the old lodge-keeper had disappeared, and it was supposed he had gone to join his daughter, a young woman who was reported to know a good deal about the accused.

It was suspected that Marks was keeping out of the way rather than give evidence against his young master, and every effort to trace his whereabouts was unsuccessful.

The old squire could not be called as a witness, for his brain was still affected. He recognized no one, and would sit all day staring into vacancy, and moaning, 'My son! my son!'

Young Heritage had been found near the scene of the crime, hiding and breathless, but none of the property had been found on him. That, of course, the confederate might have got away with, for there were evidently two persons concerned in the outrage.

The prisoner, who was described by the special reporters as a prepossessing young man, told a fairly plausible tale about his having returned to ask his father's forgiveness, but his whole conduct in running away and in hiding was opposed to such a solution. Why should he run away?

In the absence of all evidence that could lead to a conviction, the magistrates, after a few remands, decided that the prisoner must be discharged, and he was set at liberty.

Hardly had he left the dock, however, when he was arrested and conveyed to London, there to take his trial on a more serious charge. He had been recognized and sworn to in court as one who, under the *alias* of George Smith, had been engaged in extensive frauds.

In due course poor George found himself undergoing a preliminary examination in a London police court. The bolt had fallen; the warning of his mysterious friend had been justified; and he was charged with committing the forgeries which he had now no doubt had been the principal business of his respected employers. Messrs. Smith and Co. Mr. Jabez Duck's shiny head no sooner appeared in the box than George knew how tightly the meshes were being drawn around him.

During the interval preceding the trial Marks managed to obtain an interview with him in London. It was short and bitter, for the old lodge-keeper firmly believed that his young master had made him an innocent accomplice in a deed of violence. George, however, was glad to see him, for he made him understand how necessary it was that Bess should in no way be mixed up with this new charge, and that he was to keep her out of the way until the trial was over.

'Whatever happens, Marks,' he said gently, 'don't let me drag her down with me. My only consolation now is that I know she is safe with you.'

'Come what may, Master George,' answered the old man, his voice husky with emotion, 'my gal shall never know a moment's misery as I can help.'

Then they parted almost coldly, for George somewhat resented his father-in-law's implied doubts as to his innocence of the outrage at the hall. But George felt that he was acting lightly in extorting a promise from Bess's father to keep her out of the way, though he would have given the world to clasp her to his arms and cheer her up.

'I did not acknowledge her when I could hold my head high,' he said to himself; 'she shall not acknowledge me now I am a suspected felon.'

Amid all his misery, broken in spirit and broken in heart, the old pride struggled for mastery and won. He had an odd idea that he was doing the correct thing by the lodge-keeper's daughter he had married in not allowing her to see him or to acknowledge the tie that bound them now

he was in such an unfortunate and degraded position.

At the trial Mr. Jabez Duck told, with many embellishments and at least two poetical quotations, how this dreadful young man had been admitted to the bosom of his family under the name of Smith. Then the detective bobbed up in the box to produce the implements of forgery and the records of crime found at Mr. Smith's lodging. The clerks from the bank swore to him as the person who had presented the forged cheque of Grigg and Limpet's. Then an expert in handwriting proved that the endorsement, 'Smith and Co.,' tallied with certain writings admitted to be George's, found at his rooms and on his person. Link by link the chain of evidence was completed. Defence there was practically none, but a firm denial on the prisoner's part, and a cock-and-bull story of having been the victim of some vile plot, which had not even the merit of originality. It was just the sort of story clever rascals do invent as a last resource. Doubtless there were other people concerned in the matter, but they were his confederates, not his employers.

George stood and listened as the evidence grew blacker and blacker, and at last began to wonder if it could be true—if he had lived two lives and didn't know it.

When he saw that against such damning facts he could make no defence, he gave himself up to his fate. Bess, thank God, was with her father. The old man had saved money, and would provide for her. She, at least, need not share his shame. His marriage with her was a secret, and there was no one to prove she was the girl who had been known as Mrs. Smith at the little house at Dalston.

All he could do in support of his plea of 'Not guilty' would be to tell an explanatory story, which he knew his Bess, when she read it, would believe, whatever her father and the world did.

He put the whole plot against him down to Smith and Co. He believed in his own heart that he had been made a scapegoat purposely by them; that they had known who he was all along, and had had a hand in the burglary. It was a clever plot, and it had succeeded. He was ruined for life, but he had not anything on his conscience. He was deeply grieved at his father's condition, and felt partly responsible for it, but of the hideous guilt attributed to him in that respect he knew he was innocent.

His stoical calmness deserted him as the time grew near for the verdict. The trial had been a long one. The element of doubt in the case had at one time been strong, but the police evidence had turned everything against him.

He was found guilty by twelve intelligent fellow-countrymen, and a long sentence of penal servitude was pronounced against him by the judge, who went out of his way to point a moral on the evils of young men being extravagant, getting into debt, and keeping bad company.

When George heard the sentence and was removed, it seemed as though a high wall were suddenly built up about his life. The sense of injustice faded before the sudden feeling of intense loneliness which fell upon him like a chill. He hardly realized all it meant at first. He had only that strange sense of desolation which comes upon anyone left alone in a strange place as his friends and companions vanish from his view.

When the warder touched him on the arm to lead him below, and the eyes of the thronged court were fixed upon his face, he made a sudden effort to rouse himself from the lethargy into which he seemed to have fallen. He stepped to the front of the dock, and exclaimed in a loud, clear voice:

'As God is my witness, I am an innocent man!'

The famous trial was over, and the verdict was published in special editions. The public quite agreed with the judge's moral.

Messrs. Marston and Brooks read it and chuckled. The link was broken. The stories about Smith and Co. told by George were disbelieved, and, as George Heritage had been proved to be the author of the series of forgeries on the banks, there was an end to inquiry. The slate of Smith and Co. was wiped clean by the arrest and condemnation of their clerk, and they might begin again. Never was there such a stroke of luck as the burglary business. Without it George's story might have led to serious inquiries. As it was it would be unwise to start in business again on the same lines, thought Marston, and luckily there was no necessity, for a far more brilliant scheme was on the *tapis*, the success of which would enable Smith and Co. to dissolve, and trade with their capital in a less dangerous manner.

Josh Heckett heard the result through young Mr. Knivett, and the worthy pair drank George's health in a bumper.

'Reg'ler bad un he must be, Josh, for to break into his own father's

‘ouse, mustn’t he?’ said Mr. Boss.

‘Orful,’ answered Josh. ‘But there, it’s what them preaching coves sez about the sarpent and the ungrateful child. There’s my young un as is gone away and left her poor old grandfather, the jade! and I dunno where she is no more than the man in the moon.’

‘Is that why you’ve moved, and given up the animals, Josh?’

‘Yes, it is,’ answered Josh. ‘I couldn’t attend to that business myself, and, the starf of my old age bein’ broke, I had to retire into private life.’

‘Werry private, eh, Josh?’ said Mr. Boss, with a grin.

‘Wanted a breath o’ fresh air, didn’t ye, old man, and went into the country for to git it, and got it?’

Josh Heckett laughed, and told his young friend to ‘cheese his patter and sling his hook.’

Which Mr. Boss, translating as instructions to hold his tongue and go, proceeded to obey with alacrity.

Heckett didn’t allow any nonsense from his juniors, and he considered Boss much too flighty and flippant ever to make a sound man of business.

After Boss was gone, Heckett, who now occupied two rooms in a little house over the water, went out and walked down to his old place in Little Queer Street.

He still kept it on, locking the rooms and going there occasionally to look after it.

He had only taken enough of his furniture away to fill his rooms. There were still several old boxes and bundles and odds and ends left. And all these were piled in one room—the back one.

Pushing a box and a heap of rubbish away, Josh had brought a lantern from the inner room and lit it, stooped down, and lifted the trap in the flooring.

It was so well contrived, and the dust and dirt lay over it so thickly and well, that no one would suspect its presence unless accident, as in Gertie’s case, revealed it.

To lift the board Heckett had to insert the blade of his knife and force it up.

When it was open he stooped over, carefully holding the light, and lifted up something near the top.

It was only a small bundle of letters and some papers.

‘I wonder if they’re worth anything,’ he said to himself. ‘I wish I’d learned to read. Eddication ain’t a bad thing, even in our profession.’

The papers which he drew from their hiding-place were those which Squire Heritage had placed in his deed box the night of the robbery.

The rings and bracelets and the other valuables were not here. They had long ago been unset and disposed of in a market which has always been safe and still continues so. In fact, it is so safe that valuable jewels are almost as readily sold nowadays as they are easily stolen, and that is saying a great deal.

Josh Heckett looked over his store, lifting up now this and now that, examining everything carefully and putting it back again.

Taking up odds and ends haphazard, he drew out a little bundle carefully tied up, which had evidently not been disturbed for years.

The wrapper was yellow with age.

‘My poor girl’s things,’ he murmured. ‘Poor lass! it’s tea year since I gathered’em together and put’em here to be safe, and I ain’t set eyes on’em since.’

He opened the bundle and looked through it. He rubbed his great coarse hands carefully on his jacket before he touched the contents, then tenderly and reverently he lifted the dead girl’s treasures from the bundle.

There was the little locket she always wore when he took her out on Sundays; there was the bit of blue ribbon, the last that ever decked her hair; there were her thimble and her scissors; there was the faded old daguerreotype of Josh and his wife and Gertie when she was a baby. He looked at the faint, blurred picture now, and he remembered the day it had been taken, when he’d driven the missus down to some cockney haunt, and the travelling photographer had persuaded him to have his likeness taken. There was a queer watery look about the old reprobate’s eyes as he gazed at the coarsely framed and faded picture, and he gave a grunt that bore the nearest possible resemblance to a sigh which a man of his build and nature could accomplish.

He put down the picture, rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes, cleared his throat, and then drew out a big leather-bound book.

‘My poor gal’s Bible,’ he said. ‘She was mighty fond o’ readin’ it at times.’

Josh eyed the outside of the Bible curiously.

‘They say it’s a hinvallyable book,’ he muttered; ‘but it don’t look up to much. I should’a thought a hinvallyable book’ud a been bound in red or green and had a lot o’ gold about it. This here’s worth about fourpence, I should say. But she thought a lot on it, poor gal; and I ain’t going never to part with it for her sake.’

Josh put the took back again without opening it. He couldn’t have read what was in it if he had. And yet there Was that in his dead daughter’s Bible which, had he known it, Would have made his greedy eyes glisten and his evil heart beat quicker.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
A BUNCH OF VIOLETS.

Dr. Oliver Birnie, as the medical adviser of Mr. Gurth Egerton, called upon him now and then at his residence, and sometimes kept his brougham waiting outside while doctor and patient had a friendly chat.

It was on one of these now frequent occasions that Mr. Egerton revealed to his old friend an idea which, vague at first, had at last begun to assume definite proportions.

'Birnie,' said Mr. Egerton, one morning, flinging away his cigarette and looking straight in the doctor's face, 'I want something to do.'

'Do you? Well, I can't give you anything, I'm afraid. My present coachman suits me admirably, and my boy delivers the medicines without a mistake.'

'I'm serious, Birnie,' said Gurth, thrusting his hands deeply into his pockets and walking up and down the room. 'I'm sick of this humdrum existence. I've travelled and got tired of it, and now I want a change—I want something to do.'

'My dear fellow, of course you do,' answered the doctor, 'and with your energy you might do anything. Collect postage-stamps, coins, fossils, write stories for the magazines, join an amateur dramatic club, go in for athletics, learn the banjo. Why, my dear fellow, with your leisure and your money, there is no end of things you might find to do!'

Gurth turned almost savagely on his companion. The bantering tone displeased him.

'Drop it, Birnie!' he said. 'Don't you know when a man's in earnest? I'm sick of the useless life I lead, I tell you. I want something to engage my thoughts—something to call out the latent energy there is in me. I've got money, and I believe I've got brains, and yet I'm nobody. I don't mean to be nobody any longer.'

'Good gracious me, Gurth, you astonish me!' said the doctor, assuming a serious tone. 'I thought you shrank from publicity of any kind! I always fancied that you hated society, and that being nobody was your favourite *rôle*.'

'That's done with for ever! I'm a new man, Oliver Birnie! The Gurth Egerton you know was drowned in the *Bon Espoir*.'

Birnie went up to Gurth, and took his hand professionally to feel his pulse.

Gurth snatched his hand away. 'Don't be a fool, old man!' he exclaimed. 'I know what I'm saying. I'm going in for a new life, and I want you to help me. Sit down.'

Birnie sat down wondering what Gurth's new craze could be. He saw that banter was out of place, and that, whatever Gurth had got on his mind, it was evidently something which had been there a long time.

For a moment the two men sat opposite each other in silence. Then Gurth, with a slight tremor in his voice, began:

'I'm going to talk about a time, Birnie, which we had both rather forget; but I can't avoid it. Once in my life you did me a great service.'

Birnie said nothing. He nodded his head, as much as to say,

'I quite understand what you mean.'

'For that service I have shown my gratitude in every way I can. I don't want to refer to it more than I can help; but I think you have had no cause to charge me with a lack of appreciation.'

Birnie's head implied, 'Certainly not!'

'You not only rendered me that great service, but you have always guarded my interests during my long absences, and you have kept me from being annoyed by those who might have been very troublesome.'

Dr. Birnie spoke for the first time.

'My dear Gurth, don't give me too much credit. If I have kept Heckett from worrying you, I have done so by giving him what he asked for. When Marston turned up, I thought it best to accede to his request, and lend him five hundred pounds for you. I have paid your money away judiciously, my dear fellow, that is all—that is all.'

Birnie shook his head deprecatingly, as though to shake from it the praise which was being undeservedly bestowed upon him.

'I don't care what you say, Birnie; you've always been a good old chum to me, and that's why I don't want to take an important step without asking your advice.'

‘My advice, Gurth, is always at your service.’

‘Well, then, shortly and simply, I’ve made up my mind to two things—to marry, and to get into Parliament.’

Birnie received the intelligence without a movement; only the look of his eyes altered slightly, and they seemed to study Egerton’s face more keenly.

‘I congratulate you on both determinations, old fellow. Splendid things, both of them—matrimony and the legislature. Which do you woo first—the lady or the constituency?’

Gurth laughed.

‘I haven’t begun to look out the lady yet,’ he said, ‘or the constituency either. But don’t you really see any reason why I should marry and become a public man?’

‘None.’

Gurth gave a little sigh of relief.

Birnie rose to go. He shook hands with Gurth heartily.

‘I hope,’ he said, ‘that neither of your new ambitions will interrupt our old friendship, Gurth. We shall be always the same to each other as we have been, I trust?’

‘Always,’ answered Gurth with emphasis.

Dr. Birnie sat back in his carriage, as he was being whirled through the London streets, and thought.

He wasn’t quite sure what this new idea of Gurth’s meant, or what move on the board he ought to make in consequence of it. He was a man who never took any active steps if he saw a chance of events shaping themselves to suit his ends without his interference. Once or twice events had played into his hands so well that he was always inclined to give them a fair field.

At present Gurth Egerton was only a gold mine, in which he had dug now and then for an odd nugget or two, but he had always considered that the mine was there, and that no one could very well dig in it without his permission. With Birnie the knowledge of power was almost as great a pleasure as the enjoyment of it, and he was, moreover, endowed with that great gift of patience which enables a man to bide a lifetime waiting to strike home, rather than risk giving a weak blow by striking in a hurry.

Gurth Egerton believed that Birnie had given a false certificate of death in Ralph’s case out of friendship for him, and in his impulsive way he had there and then flung himself completely into Birnie’s hands, leaving him to live rent free, to manage his property, to pay all claims made upon him. Birnie was appointed executor to his will, and was in every way his confidential adviser.

But one thing Gurth had not told Birnie, or anyone else, and that was that Ralph was married to old Heckett’s daughter, and that consequently the child that cost Gertie her life, after the father’s death had cost her her reason, was really the legitimate owner of the wealth which he, Gurth, was now enjoying—that is, provided Ralph’s story was true, and not the brag of a vindictive drunkard.

Gurth consoled himself with the fact that, beyond Ralph’s statement to him, there was no proof of anything of the sort. The marriage certificate which Ralph had boasted of having in his possession had never been found, and Gurth was not likely to go searching registries and making inquiries in order to discover that which at present it was perfectly allowable for him to know nothing about.

From time to time he had heard of Heckett, generally by finding that gentleman’s name figuring against a sum of money which Birnie had paid on his account. He had never seen him since his return, for the same reason that he had never seen any of his old companions. He had shunned them one and all. He had heard, too, from Birnie the story of Gertie’s death and of the little Gertie who had grown up in Little Queer Street among the animals. He was pleased to hear she was a clean, tidy child, and that she seemed happy. Perhaps if he had heard of her being in rags and starving, it might have annoyed his conscience. As it was, he felt that Gertie was very well off; he knew that old Heckett’s dog-fancying and wretched surroundings were only covers for a very different occupation, and that there was no real poverty in the ease at all.

He supposed some day old Heckett would get into trouble or die, and then he would befriend Gertie, getting at her in a roundabout way, through Birnie, to avoid any suspicion of his having any interest in her but a philanthropic one.

Gurth Egerton always kept a mental box of salve handy for a smarting conscience, and, when any of his misdeeds troubled him, he had always a scheme ready which would put everything right without doing himself any harm.

But for his indecision of character, he might long ago have made his position far better than it was, but at the last moment he had generally abandoned his well thought-out scheme and 'gone away.'

Now, however, he was really determined to do something definite—to lead a new life and put his wealth to some use. So he made up his mind to marry and to go into Parliament.

The parliamentary career was a question of time. There was much to be done before he essayed that. He must get his name before the public a little first, make up his mind what his polities were going to be, and get about into society.

With regard to matrimony, he felt that the sooner he thought seriously about that the better. There is a certain formula to be gone through, even in the prosaic courtship which he intended his to be. He wanted a certain amount of beauty, a knowledge of the world, and an agreeable manner. He wanted to marry a head to his dinner-table, a hostess, a something to be agreeable to his guests, and to get him invited out. Wealth or rank he wasn't particular about; that would be harder to get, and he might have a lot of rivalry.

He stood in front of the glass and ran his fingers through his hair.

Yes, he was fairly good-looking, still young, wealthy, and a pleasant talker.

There was no reason why he should not secure just what he wanted if he kept his eyes open. He didn't want to fall in love; he had no idea of anything of that sort.

And yet he did.

His fate came to him as it comes to the most unromantic men. It came to him about a fortnight after his interview with Birnie.

In his first desire to get his name well connected with philanthropy for future benefit to himself, he gave twenty pounds to a bazaar in connection with some hospital for children, or something of the sort. He wasn't quite sure what it was, but he saw that the appeals were going all over the parish, and so he sent his twenty pounds, to beat his neighbours and get his first advertisement.

His donation brought him a letter of thanks from the vicar and a special request to be present.

He went to the bazaar, to see the vicar and to show himself—to make a start on his new war-path. He flung away a pound's worth of silver on shapeless pincushions and impossible penwipers, and walked through the place, jostled and bored. He had shaken hands with the vicar, and been introduced to a canon and to a rich old lady patroness, and was elbowing his way through a crowd of giggling girls and cane-sucking young men, when a little girl stopped him with a timid request for his patronage.

He looked down and saw a child whom he guessed to be about ten years old—pretty, pale-faced, with soft brown hair and big blue eyes. She held up to him a bunch of violets.

'Please to buy a bunch of sweet violets, sir.'

He put his hand in his pocket.

'I've got no silver,' he said.

He looked into the child's face as he spoke, expecting to hear her say that gold would do.

But the little one had not been trained to the brazen effrontery that leers and grimaces under the coquettishly worn mantilla of charity.

'Oh, please, if you come to our stall we'll give you change. Come this way.'

Gurth involuntarily followed the child to a stall in the corner, where a lady was selling flowers.

The lady smiled as the child brought her prize up to be dealt with.

Gurth thought it was the sweetest smile he had ever seen in his life. He forgot the child, forgot the flowers, and gazed in rapt admiration at the beautiful face before him.

A strange thrill went through him as he looked—a feeling of ecstasy, such as that which comes over some natures when, in world-famed galleries, they stand for the first time in the presence of some matchless work of art.

The young lady was too busy with her flowers and her change to notice

Gurth’s undisguised admiration. He almost started as she dropped the shillings into his hand, counting them one by one.

He took the violets which the child had given him, and held them in his hand.

Then he glanced at some which the lady had on her stall in front of her.

‘I think I must buy one of you, after giving you so much trouble,’ he said gently.

The lady picked up a bunch of violets and handed them to him with a smile.

He dropped the nineteen shillings change into the hands of the beautiful flower-girl, and, raising his hat, walked away.

As he did so, he heard the little girl cry out:

‘Oh, Miss Adrian, the gentleman’s left *my* violets behind him!’

‘Run after him, quick, and give them to him,’ answered the lady; and in a minute the child had caught Gurth up, and was holding the violets towards him.

‘Thank you, little one,’ he said, smiling; ‘you are very honest at your stall. What is the name, that I may recommend it to my friends?’

‘The lady is Miss Ruth Adrian,’ answered the child, taking the question seriously, ‘and I am Gertie Heckett.’

The violets dropped from Gurth Eggerton’s hand, and the colour left his face.

For a moment his lips moved, as though he would have spoken to the child, then suddenly he turned on his heel, and, forcing his way through the crowd, struggled out of the building and into the air.

CHAPTER XXXV.
MRS. ADRIAN'S CONVERSION.

Ruth had no necessity to find a home for Gertie, after all. Her mother, after having thoroughly aired her objections, and proved beyond a doubt that Gertie was endeavouring to turn her out of house and home, and that Ruth was endeavouring to bring her grey hairs with sorrow to the grave, had suddenly veered round, taken the child under her immediate protection, and insisted upon Ruth keeping her as long as ever she liked.

Ruth, who had grown sincerely attached to Gertie, was only too delighted to take advantage of this change of attitude, and from that moment Josh Heckett's grand-daughter was treated as one of the family.

Mrs. Adrian's conversion had been brought about in a very singular manner.

Ruth's great friend in all her troubles was her father. He would come from Patagonia or the South Sea Islands in a second if she asked him a question, and he had always the heartiest sympathy with all her little schemes.

Ruth asked her father's advice about Gertie. What was she to do? She couldn't send the child back. Of course, she intended that Heckett should know Gertie was safe, but she was determined, if possible, to keep her out of his clutches. She had hoped to be able to keep her for a little while until she could decide what to do, but her mother was so much against Gertie remaining.

Mr. Adrian laid down his book.

'Then you really wish to keep the child near you for a while?' he said.

'I do, indeed, father. I am in some measure responsible for her leaving home.'

Ruth blushed as she spoke, for she remembered it was her anxiety to hear about Marston which had brought Gertie's trouble upon her.

Mr. Adrian thought for a moment, then he rubbed his hands in evident glee. 'I have it, my dear,' he said. 'Your mother's objection to the child is the only thing we have to get over. Leave it to me to remove that.'

That evening, after Gertie had gone to bed, the usual little group sat in the dining-room.

Ruth was busy making nicknacks for a charity bazaar in which she was interested, Mrs. Adrian was knitting, and Mr. Adrian was deep in the adventures of a missionary who had gone out to Africa, and who for the first few hundred pages used his gun a good deal oftener than his Bible.

Mr. Adrian read a few choice passages aloud, and speedily aroused the indignation of his better half.

'Missionary!' exclaimed that good lady. 'Well, if he's a fair specimen of missionaries, I'm sorry for the heathen. Its a queer way of converting a black man to put a bullet through him.

'But, my dear,' urged Mr. Adrian, 'it was in self-defence.'

'Self-fiddlesticks! What business had the man there, poking his nose into their wigwams and interfering? How would you like a black man to walk in here and begin lecturing you? You'd try to turn him out, wouldn't you? And then because you did that he'd turn round and shoot you, and say it was self-defence. Bah! I haven't patience with all this mischief-making in outlandish parts.'

'But, my dear, much good is done. This missionary was a very famous man, and he converted them at last. Before he left, the natives used knives and forks instead of their fingers, and the king of one very ferocious tribe, of cannibal habits, had all his prisoners of war roasted on Saturday afternoon to avoid Sunday cooking. How would civilization be spread, my dear but for these explorers?'

'Civilization!' exclaimed Mrs. Adrian, dropping half-a-dozen stitches in her excitement. 'Don't you think there's room for a little more civilization at home before we begin to give it away to the blackamoors? Civilization ought to begin at home.'

'You are wrong, my dear,' said Mr. Adrian, closing his book and preparing for battle. 'What do you say, Ruth?'

'I think we ought to do a good deal more at home than we do,' said Ruth gently. 'I think sometimes the black heathen get a great deal more sympathy than the white.'

Mrs. Adrian declared Ruth was a sensible girl, and fired another volley

at the enemy. The discussion had grown slightly heated when Mr. Adrian introduced the subject of Gertie, suggesting that the sooner Ruth found a home for her the better.

Then Mrs. Adrian fired up. Of course he objected to Gertie because she was an English child; if she'd been a black or a brown child he would have given her the best room in the house; as she was white and English she was to be turned out at once.

The more Mr. Adrian opposed Gertie, the more Mrs. Adrian championed her, until at last, for the sake of peace and quietness, the master of the house gave way, and consented, 'to please his wife's fad,' that the child should stay as long as Ruth liked.

Thus were the heathen pressed into the service, and thus did Mr. Adrian win the battle by pretending to be beaten. It was not the first time he had won over his wife to his way of thinking by pretending to take an opposite view.

From that moment Gertie, in the eyes of Mrs. Adrian, was the outward and visible sign of a triumph gained over her *betes noires*, the foreign ladies and gentlemen of missionary books of travel. The child by her presence represented a great moral victory, and Mrs. Adrian was her devoted champion from that hour.

By her gentle nature and loving ways she rapidly endeared herself to all. Ruth was delighted, and her mind was relieved of a great burden. When Gertie had been with them a fortnight there was no one beneath the roof that would not have grieved sincerely and felt it a personal loss to be deprived of her sunshiny presence.

Her early days with the Adrians were uneventful. At her earnest request Ruth had not apprised Heckett of her whereabouts. The child pleaded so hard, and seemed so terrified, that Ruth contented herself with sending a message by a trustworthy person to the old dog-fancier that his grand-daughter was in a good home.

But the old man's attempt to find out where the home was situated, or who was at the bottom of the child's mysterious conduct, failed altogether. The message only reached him in roundabout way, being left with the person who kept the shop below his rooms, which Heckett only visited occasionally now.

The first great event in Gertie's new life was the charity bazaar, at which, to her intense delight, she was allowed to assist at Ruth's stall.

She came back full of it, and told Mr. and Mrs. Adrian at teatime all about the gentleman who had bought her violets, been so curious about Ruth's name, and had seemed so much astonished when she (Gertie) told him her own.

Mr. Adrian was much amused by Gertie's description of Egerton's admiration of Ruth and his eagerness to know her name.

He looked across the table, and said with a smile:

'Many a good match made through a charity bazaar, Ruth, my dear. Perhaps Gertie brought you a suitor.'

It was only a joke, but Ruth's cheeks went scarlet.

The words had touched a tender chord. She had been thinking of Edward Marston. Since Gertie had come to her, she never looked at the child without thinking of him, and how strangely her little *protégée* had brought them together again.

And now her father, speaking at random, suggested that Gertie had brought her a suitor.

The words fitted in so perfectly with the thought that was passing through her mind at the time, that the crimson blood rushed to her cheeks and suffused them.

Had Edward Marston seen that blush, he would have known that his forgiveness was nearer its accomplishment than Ruth had given him any reason to hope.

CHAPTER XXXVI.
RIVALS.

Mr. Gurth Egerton, as soon as he had recovered from the astonishment in which his strange meeting with Ralph's little daughter had flung him, became aware of the fact that the beautiful face of Ruth Adrian had made a considerable impression upon him.

By what strange coincidence, he wondered, did this child cross his path at the very moment that he was dreaming of a new life—a life from which all remembrance of the past and all fear of the future were to be banished?

This little Gertie Heckett, whom he had always avoided seeing, lest such conscience as he was burdened with might be troubled, had come upon him not in the den of Josh, not leading the miserable life which he had imagined she might one day be reduced to, but well dressed, hearty, and evidently well cared for.

His first thought was one of self-congratulation. He felt inclined to pat himself on the back and say, 'See, you have done no harm to the orphan. If you are enjoying that which may by chance belong to her, she does not suffer through your act.'

Having at last, by a process of reasoning, worked himself up into the actual benefactor of his cousin's child, he began to wonder what the connection between her and Ruth Adrian might be.

He had two motives for following up the adventure of the charity bazzar,—first, to find out something about Gertie, and secondly, if possible, to cultivate the acquaintance of Ruth Adrian. Where Miss Adrian lived, or who she was, he had not the slightest idea; but he imagined he could very soon get a link through the child.

The first idea was to look up Heckett and question him about Gertie; but he had a repugnance to renewing the acquaintance. He had studiously kept clear of Heckett, and he did not care to mix himself up again with that portion of the past. He determined to rely upon his usual diplomatist, and lay the case before Oliver Birnie.

But when he came to tell Birnie where he had met the child, the doctor was utterly astonished.

'I haven't seen Heckett since he was ill,' he said, 'and then Gertie was at Little Queer Street. If she's left him, he's either given up the crib and gone away, or Gertie has taken French leave. But I can soon find out, if you particularly wish to know.'

Birnie made his inquiries in his own way, and then all he had to tell Gurth was that Gertie had 'run away,' and that the old man had shut up the Little Queer Street establishment, and had not been seen for some little time in the neighbourhood.

This information brought Gurth no nearer to an introduction to Miss Adrian, so he had to set his wits to work again.

But before he could think of a plan, chance did away with the necessity.

Marston, who now studiously cultivated his acquaintance, was walking with him one day, when a big dog came round the corner.

Marston looked hard at it, and exclaimed, 'Hullo! Ruth isn't far off; here's Gertie Heckett's dog.'

Gurth clutched his arm.

'Ruth—Gertie Heckett!' he cried. 'Good gracious me, how could I have been so stupid? Why, of course you can tell me all about it. How comes the child away from Josh?'

Marston looked under his eyes at his companion.

'How should I know anything about Josh Heckett's domestic; affairs?' he said coldly.

'Why you see him, I suppose, now and then?'

'My dear fellow, I thought you knew that I had cut all that crew long ago. I know no more of him than you do.'

'Well, at any rate you know Gertie Heckett, for you mentioned her name.'

'Of course I know her,' answered Marston, speaking slowly and deliberately, 'but only through her protectress, Miss Adrian. Gertie has been "rescued"—I believe that is the correct expression—and the Adrians have adopted her. The Adrians are old friends of mine.'

Gurth said 'Oh,' and was silent.

He couldn't understand that beautiful creature being an old friend of dare-devil Ned Marston.

Lion had come on well ahead, and it was fully two minutes before Gertie and Ruth came out of a shop and found themselves face to face with Marston and Gurth.

Ruth coloured slightly as the two gentlemen lifted their hats, and Gertie, recognizing Gurth, exclaimed, 'Oh, it's the gentleman that bought the violets.'

Gertie did not seem at all astonished when Marston held out his hand to Ruth.

It was evident that this was not the first meeting between the old sweethearts at which she had assisted.

'Will you allow me to introduce my old friend, Mr. Gurth Egerton?' said Marston.

Gurth bowed again, and Ruth honoured him with a sweet smile. And presently the three were strolling along the street talking together, Gertie walking on a little way ahead with Lion.

But Ruth cut short the interview by saying that Gertie and she had some calls to make, and Marston, taking the hint, said 'Good-day,' and, taking Gurth's arm, left the ladies to finish their business by themselves.

'What do you think of her?' asked Marston, when they were out of ear-shot.

'Think of her?' said Gurth; 'why, that she's one of the most charming women I ever met in my life. I was awfully struck with her at the bazaar the other day.'

'Yes, my boy,' answered Marston; 'and she's as good as she is beautiful.'

'You know her very well, then?'

Marston looked at Gurth for a moment, and then said quietly, 'My dear fellow, I thought I told you we were old friends. I'm glad you like Ruth, for when we're married you can come and be our guest.'

Gurth started back as though Marston had struck him a blow.

'That lady—your wife?' he stammered.

'Yes, some day; why not?' said Marston. 'I'm doing well, I'm wealthy, and I shall soon command a good position. Why shouldn't I marry Ruth Adrian?'

'I don't know,' stammered Gurth, hardly knowing what he was saying. 'Why, I always looked upon you as a—as a——'

'Say it,' cried Marston fiercely; 'say it, Gurth Egerton. You always looked upon me as a scamp, as a penniless adventurer. Bah! Times have changed for both of us. You are a rich man now; you are ambitious, so am I. I have wiped out my old past as cleanly as you have yours. Let it be a race between us now if you like, Gurth Egerton—a race for wealth, a race for fame, for what you will. I shall beat you though you've had a ten years start of me.'

Gurth Egerton looked at his companion in wonder. His tone was one half of triumph, half of defiance.

'As you will, Marston,' he said quietly; 'but let us start fair. Is there any absolute engagement between you and this lady?'

'No,' said Marston; 'but she is perfectly aware of my feelings towards her. We were engaged before—well, before I went abroad.'

'Oh, I see; then you merely hope for a renewal of old ties?'

'That is what I have set my heart on, and I generally accomplish my ends.'

'Good, answered Gurth, lighting a cigarette, and offering one to his companion. 'We are both men of the world. Now listen. You say, let it be a race between us for wealth and fame. Well, wealth I have, and fame I can buy. Wealth you *say* you have, and Ï have no doubt if you haven't it at present you mean to have it. Let us make this race more exciting.'

What do you mean?'

'Merely this,' said Gurth, watching Marston keenly through the smoke, 'make Ruth Adrian's hand part of the stakes.' Marston's face flushed angrily.

'A bad joke, Egerton,' he said, 'and one you may be sorry for.

'No joke, Marston; I mean it. In my quiet way I have fallen in love with the lady, and I am in want of a wife. All's fair in love and war, and I don't think you have a chance. Therefore why spoil mine?'

Marston was on the point of giving a fierce reply but he suddenly checked himself. He could fence better if he kept his temper.

‘You were always a laboured joker, Gurth,’ he said, ‘but it won’t do. You have found it easy enough to get a fortune from Ralph, but I don’t think you’ll find it so easy to get a sweetheart from me, not even with Birnie’s assistance.’

Marston laughed an irritating little laugh, nodded his head and walked away, leaving Gurth with a flushed face and clenched hand.

It was half a threat, and Gurth felt it. In his own mind he believed that Marston was still an adventurer, and that his house of cards would soon come to grief. He had an idea that money could do anything, and he was quite prepared to find Marston throwing ont a hint that he would leave the field clear for a consideration.

The conversation of the morning had invested Ruth with new charms, and the sudden opposition which he had encountered in Marston had concentrated his designs.

Ruth Adrian now became the central figure in his future.

The idea of Marston daring to stop between him and the accomplishment of his project was too absurd. He would soon put that right.

‘Threaten me, do you!’ he muttered to himself, as he turned towards home. ‘Mr. Edward Marston, you must be looked after. Birds that want to fly over their neighbours’ walls must have their wings clipped.’

Pending an opportunity of becoming better acquainted with Ruth Adrian, Gurth occupied himself by developing his bump of curiosity. He was particularly anxious to discover the history of Mr. Edward Marston from the time he went to America, a broken-down adventurer, to the period of his recognition of Dr. Birnie, and his sudden blooming into the possessor of a suburban villa, a boundless ambition, and a remarkably handsome and agreeable sweetheart.

Was she his sweetheart? On mature consideration, Gurth Egerton decided that he had been taken in by Marston’s brag. The idea of his really being a man of wealth and engaged to a lady like Ruth was too absurd.

‘Marston’s a clever fellow,’ he said to himself, ‘and as unscrupulous as any man I ever knew; but I don’t think I need trouble myself much about his opposition. He always was a braggart, and I dare say he’s only trying to impose on me for some purpose of his own.’

A week later Gurth Egerton had managed to render Ruth a service, and to become a welcome guest at the house.

He had heard a portion of Gertie’s story from Ruth, and had undertaken to see Heckett and secure from him an undertaking to leave the child unmolested in the care of her new friends.

Ruth was very grateful for this service; she had hesitated to ask Marston, and she had not dared herself to open negotiations, as that would have at once revealed the child’s whereabouts.

Gurth had gone himself to Heckett, to the only address he knew, the Little Queer Street one, and had found the place shut up. He inquired of Birnie, but that gentleman could tell him nothing. For some reason or other Mr. Heckett had cut all his old acquaintances.

Gurth was determined to know if possible, so he ascertained Marston’s address and went round to him.

He was struck with the comfort and taste of Eden Villa, and he began to think that perhaps, after all, Marston had had a windfall.

He was received with easy courtesy, and Marston rather enjoyed the astonishment under which his visitor was evidently labouring.

‘By Jove, Ned, I’d no idea you were such a swell as this!’ said Gurth, looking about him.

‘It isn’t a bad crib,’ answered Marston quietly; ‘but I’m looking about for an estate in the country; I’m tired of town life. I want to get among the county families, you know, and run for the House as a Tory squire.’

Gurth stared first, and then he burst out laughing.

‘What a chap you are, Ned,’ he exclaimed; ‘why you talk as if you were a millionaire.’

‘All right, my boy,’ answered Marston, rising, and standing with his back to the fireplace; ‘chaff away. You’ve seen me at the bottom of the tree, I know, but if you live long enough you’ll see me at the top.’

Something in Marston’s manner checked the smile that came to Gurth’s lip.

‘I hope so,’ he said. ‘I’m sure I shall be very glad, for the sake of old times. But while you are climbing up your tree, perhaps you wouldn’t mind doing me a service.’

‘Name it.’

‘Well, I particularly want Josh Heckett’s present address.’

‘How should I know? I saw him once after I returned, that’s all.’

‘He’s left Little Queer Street.’

‘Has he, indeed?’ said Marston quite unconcernedly. ‘Why are you so anxious to find him? Do you want to make him a present, or to chat over old times?’

‘Neither; I want to see him about the child.’

‘Ah,’ said Marston, ‘pricking of conscience, eh? I always thought, considering all things, you might have done something for Gertie’s young un.’

‘What do you mean by “considering all things “?’

‘As if you didn’t know that Gertie is Ralph’s child!’

Gurth’s face went suddenly pale, and his lips trembled as he stammered out some unintelligible words.

Marston was utterly astonished at the effect his remark had produced, and he instantly suspected there was some secret connected with Gertie the discovery of which Gurth had reason to dread. Perhaps Ralph had left her something in his will But whatever Marston thought, he was too good a diplomatist to say anything. He waited till Gurth had recovered his composure and pretended not to notice his confusion.

‘That’s all nonsense,’ said Gurth, with an effort. ‘I’m quite sure you’re wrong.’

‘Very likely,’ answered Marston. ‘It was only an idea of mine—a passing fancy. What is it you want to know about the child, now?’

Gurth hesitated. He was inclined to believe that Marston’s story about Ruth was a pure fabrication. Still he hardly liked to say that he wanted to see Heckett on behalf of Gertie’s new friend.

‘What do I want to know about the child?’ he said, after a pause. ‘Oh, nothing much. I only wanted to see if I could do anything for her. She struck me as being a very intelligent little thing.’

‘Very,’ answered Marston; ‘but she in very good hands now. Ruth is as good as a mother to her.’

The familiar use of the Christian name grated on Gurth’s ears.

‘Yes; but I presume Miss Adrian does not propose to keep her always, and I thought——’

‘You need not trouble yourself about Gertie Heckett, my dear fellow,’ answered Marston, lighting a cigar. ‘I shall look after her. Her story’s a very sad one, and I like to do good when I can. I’m going in for being a friend to the orphan, and I shall begin with Gertie Heckett.’

‘You don’t mean it?’

‘I do, my boy, seriously. If you want a field for your benevolence you must look elsewhere. I object to your adopting Gertie—or Ruth. You’ll excuse me now, won’t you? I’m going out of town by the afternoon train.’

Gurth Egerton took the hint and his departure, more than ever unable to make his old comrade out.

Marston went down, by the afternoon train to Dover, where he had an important appointment; and on the journey he began to think about Gurth.

‘He’s sweet on Ruth, evidently,’ he thought. ‘If this job comes off right, I must go in and win at once. With a wife like that it will be my own fault if I don’t go ahead. Fancy Gurth trying to cut me out there! How strangely things come about!’

From Gurth and Ruth, Marston’s thoughts wandered to Gertie. He was morally certain she was Ralph’s child. But of course Gurth was not responsible for that, and there was no proof. Why was Garth so upset by what he said? He had at any rate found out a weak point in his rival’s armour, and he was not the man to lose sight of the fact if it ever came to fighting.

CHAPTER XXXVII.
SMITH AND CO. START IN A NEW LINE.

Mr. Edward Marston was taking the air at Dover. He had left town for the benefit of his health. One morning, walking upon the pier, whom should he meet but Mr. Brooks, formerly the manager of Smith and Co.

'Ah, how do you do?' said Mr. Marston. 'Staying here?'

'Yes, for a little while,' answered Mr. Brooks.

It was quite an accidental meeting, you see; but, having met, what more natural than that they should take a stroll together.

They strolled down towards the harbour and hired a rowing boat.

'Want a man?' asked the boatman.

'No, thanks,' answered Mr. Marston. 'I'll row myself.'

Mr. Brooks sat in the stern of the boat. Mr. Marston took the sculls and rowed a little way out.

The sea was calm, and when they were some little distance from the shore, and the small craft moving about, Marston ceased rowing, let the boat float, and commenced to converse with his companion.

'The box was sent off yesterday,' he said; 'so that it will be at the parcels office this afternoon. You had better apply for it at once.'

'All right; let me thoroughly understand what I have to do.'

'It's as simple as A B C,' answered Marston. 'Preene has bought for me five hundred pounds worth of bar gold and sent it down here by rail to be kept till called for. All bullion comes in special safes, and this must come that way. When you apply for the box it will be locked up in the safe and the clerk must get the key. Watch where he gets the key from.'

'Yes, that's all easy enough. What else?'

'What else? Well, I'm a key-collector, I am, and I've a great faney to have a key the exact pattern of those that open the safes in which the bullion travels.'

'You want an impression?'

'Exactly.'

Mr. Brooks nodded; he quite understood his instructions so far. But he wanted to know a little more still.

'And suppose we get an impression and file a key, where are we then?' he asked, leaning over the boat and paddling with his hand in the water. 'There are always people about at the office, and the safes are always well watched at the stations.'

'Brooks, you are delightfully innocent. How I envy you that romantic freshness which becomes you so well!'

'Stow it, guv'nor,' said Mr. Brooks, a little nettled. 'We can't all be such swells at the game as you are. I don't see anything particularly innocent in what I've said.'

'Don't be cross, old man; it's only my chaff. Of course I can't expect you to know everything. This is my idea. I've invested five hundred in it, so you may be sure I think it's a good one. We don't want to open the safes at the station. We shall open them in transit.'

Mr. Brooks opened his eyes.

'How on earth will you do that? Why the safes are carried in the guard's van, and they're locked with patent keys, and they're weighed at start and finish.'

'Oh, you know all about it then?'

'Of course I do! Lots of us have had an idea of getting at the bullion; but when we found out the precautions taken, we saw it was impossible.'

'Impossible to you, said Marston, quietly, 'but not to me. You do as I tell you, and leave the rest in my hands. I want your help—that's why I told you to meet me here. We did the cheque business well enough together, and we've come out of it safe and sound, with a fair balance, and the George Smith business was managed A 1.'

'Wasn't it prime?' said Mr. Brooks, with a chuckle. 'Upon my word, when I read the evidence, I feel convinced myself that he must be guilty. Preene did it first class. Is he on this job?'

'I think he must be,' answered Marston. 'His connection with the police is invaluable. He can always put them on a wrong scent till all's safe. Who else will be in it?'

‘Only Heckett and Turvey the guard.’

‘Oh, you’ve got the guard, then?’

‘Yes, he was indispensable. The chance of a cool thousand settled him. Heckett we can’t do without. None but a professional could do the job with the safes and the boxes clean enough. Barker, one of the clerks in the traffic office, is a little bit in the swim. He knows nothing, but Preene knows something about him, and he’s got orders to do certain things this afternoon.’

Mr. Brooks was very much interested, and wanted more information, but Marston told him it would be time enough for further details when the first stage had been accomplished.

‘It’s no good telling you any more,’ he said, ‘until we’ve got the keys. Then you shall have the whole plan.’

‘Just one thing more,’ urged Mr. Brooks. ‘What will the job be worth’

‘Unless I can make it a big figure I shan’t touch it,’ answered Marston. ‘Its my last business transaction previous to retiring into private life; so I want it to be a profitable one. I shan’t think of making the attempt till I know that at least £20,000 is going down the line. That’s a sum that often goes from London to the Continent, and it is by the Continental mail we shall have to travel whenever the coup comes off.’

Brooks looked at Marston with such an admiring glance that the latter couldn’t help laughing.

‘We’d better get ashore,’ he said, presently. ‘You must take plenty of time, and have everything ready when you apply this afternoon for a box of bullion as Mr. John Dawson.’

Marston rowed towards the shore, giving his companion a few parting instructions, and, having landed, they separated. Marston went to the Lord Warden, where he was staying in first-class style, and Mr. Brooks walked quietly to his less pretentious but equally comfortable hotel, the Dover Castle.

All that afternoon Mr. Barker, a clerk in the traffic superintendent’s office at Dover, rather neglected his business. He had too sharp an eye on the parcels office to be thinking of anything else.

About three o’clock a train was due in. Just before it arrived an elderly gentleman stepped into the parcels office and asked if a box of bullion, forwarded from London to John Dawson, Dover, had arrived.

‘Yes, it has,’ said the clerk.

‘I am Mr. Dawson,’ said the gentleman, handing in a letter from the sender, advising its despatch to him. ‘I’ll take it, please.’

The clerk went to where the safe stood securely locked. The box of bullion was inside it.

Keys of these safes are kept at each end. They are locked in London and unlocked at their destination. The keys themselves are always kept locked up. Mr. Dawson’s eyes followed the parcels clerk closely as he went to get the keys.

He opened a small cupboard in the corner of the room and took down the keys that hung inside it. There were two separate locks to the safe, for increased security.

He put the two keys into the safe, unlocked it, and withdrew the box of bullion, and handed Mr. Dawson a receipt to sign.

At that moment, Mr. Barker, the clerk from the traffic superintendent’s office, called across the station to the parcels clerk, the train came in, and for a few minutes there was considerable confusion.

Barker had called the clerk out to show him something in the station. The excuse was prearranged and plausible. In two minutes he was back again.

Mr. Dawson had signed the receipt. He handed it to the clerk and took away his box of bullion. He also took away an impression in wax of the two keys that unlocked the safes which travelled up and down the line with thousands of pounds worth of gold in them.

Late that evening he had a moonlight stroll along the cliffs and met Mr. Edward Marston.

‘They were double keys, guv’nor,’ said Mr. Brooks, ‘and it was jolly sharp work, I can tell you!’

‘And good work,’ answered Marston, approvingly, offering his companion a cigar. ‘We will go up to town to-morrow and set to work on the keys. If this comes off right, I think Smith and Co. can divide the profits and dissolve partnership—eh, Brooks?’

‘You won’t turn the game up for a few thousand, guv’nor—not you!’

‘My dear fellow,’ answered Marston, ‘you forget I am only an amateur. I simply do this to acquire a modest competency in return for the expenditure of a little time and considerable talent. If I can put ten thousand pounds at my banker’s over this affair, I shall marry and settle down into a quiet, church-going, turnip-growing country gentleman.’

Brooks laughed at the idea, but Mr. Marston was never more serious in his life.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.
RUTH ANSWERS A LETTER.

Mr. Gurth Egerton's interest in Gertie Heckett was something wonderful. It took him often to the residence of the Adrians. There he was now a welcome guest, for he had soon found out Mr. Adrian's weak side and opened fire upon it.

In his travels he had been among some of the interesting people Mr. Adrian delighted to honour, and his conversation was almost as interesting as the books. Marvellous stories had Gurth to tell of foreign lands, and especially of those lands where the natives were of the barbarous type dear to Ruth's father.

Either Egerton had seen a great deal, or he was a good romancer. But, whether he dealt in fact or in fiction, his wares were attractive enough to command old Adrian's custom, and Gurth never called and stayed 'just to have a cup of tea' without being invited again and pressed to come early.

Gurth's account of his bachelor loneliness had not been lost upon Mrs. Adrian, and as he never contradicted her, but set himself studiously to please her, he gradually won his way into the old lady's good graces.

Ruth was grateful to Gurth for the interest he took in Gertie. She knew he was rich, and she had heard he was a charitable gentleman. He entered into all her philanthropic schemes, begged that she would be his almoner and let him know of any deserving cases she came upon in her visits to the sick and poor. Altogether Gurth Egerton proved himself a most desirable acquisition to the Adrian family circle, and was highly approved of by everyone but Lion.

Lion always growled at him, and nothing would induce him to be friendly.

Gertie apologized for her favourite's behaviour, and Gurth turned off the unpleasant effect of the dog's determined hostility with a joke.

Mrs. Adrian, when Lion had, on the second or third occasion of his rudeness to her visitor, been turned out of the room, suggested that the dog had been brought up among low people, and had low people's natural antipathy to gentlefolks.

Ruth did not take up the challenge on Gertie's behalf. She knew that her mother had really grown fond of the child, and that she could no more help saying spiteful things occasionally than Lion could help growling. In both cases 'it was their nature to.'

Gurth played his cards so well and grew so rapidly in favour with the Adrians that he soon felt emboldened to allow his feelings for Ruth to become gradually apparent.

Ruth was the last person to perceive the impression she had made, and it was forced upon her by a little conversation which is worth repeating.

One evening, when the Adrians were alone, and after Gertie had gone to bed, something brought up Gurth's name, and then Marston's.

'They're not to be named in the same breath,' said Mrs. Adrian, looking Ruth full in the face. 'Mr. Egerton's a man that any girl might be glad to marry. I wonder he hasn't been snapped up long ago.'

'Lion would have snapped him up once or twice if we had let him,' said Mr. Adrian with a smile.

'Don't be ridiculous, John; you know what I mean. Look how he sits on his chair. Like a gentleman. As to Mr. Marston, I never see him tilting the dining-room chairs back but I expect to see the legs come off. He'd ruin the furniture in a decent house in a month.'

Ruth laughed, Marston had offended her mother mortally by his habit of sitting with his chair tilted.

'You may laugh, Ruth,' continued the old lady; 'but if ever you have a house of your own you'll know what it is to see your dining-room suite going to pieces before your very eyes. People that can't sit in chairs like a Christian oughtn't to come into respectable houses. I'm sure I expect to see him sit on the table and put his legs up the chimney some day.'

'You're very hard on Mr. Marston, mother,' said Ruth; 'he's lived in America many years, and you know they do very curious things there.'

'Very, my dear. Oh, I know that. And I dare say Mr. Marston's done a good many curious things there. Of course, my dear, I haven't forgotten what was between you once, but I hope that'll never happen again.'

Ruth coloured and bit her lip.

Mr. Adrian noticed it, and tried to turn the conversation by talking about the weather, but Mrs. Adrian was not be so easily turned from her

course.

'It's no good looking at me like that, John,' she exclaimed. 'I know what you mean. Isn't Ruth my daughter as much as she is yours? I say I should like to see her well married; and if I was a young girl Mr. Gurth Egerton shouldn't ask me twice—there now!'

'But, my dear Mary,' urged Mr. Adrian, 'Egerton hasn't asked Ruth once yet.'

'Of course not. But, if I know anything, he will before very long. What do you think he comes here for?—to chatter to you about the Ojibbeways, or to hold my worsted for me? Nonsense! He comes here after Ruth—and you must all be blind if you can't see it.'

Ruth let her mother finish. It was not quite a revelation to her, this view of Egerton's continual visits, but it had never come home to her so thoroughly before. Her mother was quite right. She saw it all now. She must act decisively and at once.

'Mother,' she said, after a pause, 'I hope you are not right. Mr. Egerton has been a very kind friend to me, and I like him as a friend and acquaintance very much. I could never look upon him in any other light.'

Ruth gathered up her work and went up to her own room. It was a habit of hers to do so when any little thing put her out.

'There, John,' said Mrs. Adrian, as the door closed behind her; 'you see—I'm sure I'm right. There goes her head, turned by that fellow again. I was afraid what it would be when you let him come dangling about here again.'

'How could I refuse him, my dear? He is an old friend of the family. He and Ruth knew each other as children. He has lived down the first rashness of his neglected youth, and is now a gentleman of means, honoured and respected. Surely I could not close my doors against a man who, heavily handicapped as young Marston has been, has yet won his way to a respectable position.'

'Ah, well,' exclaimed Mrs. Adrian, 'I never did believe in him, and I never shall; and if I thought Ruth was going to fling herself away on him after all, I'd have swept him off the front door-step with a besom before ever he should have darkened these doors again.'

'You are prejudiced, Mary. I like Mr. Egerton, and he would give Ruth a splendid establishment; but if she still loves Edward Marston, I should be the last person in the world to attempt to turn her against him.'

While Mr. and Mrs. Adrian were arranging Ruth's future, the heroine of their conversation sat upstairs in her own little room reading a letter which she had taken from her pocket.

It had come some time ago, and she had read it again and again, but had hesitated to answer it.

It was dated from Dover, and was in the bold, dashing hand of Edward Marston:

'Dear Ruth,

'Do you know that to-day is the anniversary of the fatal day on which we parted long years ago? I cannot resist the temptation of writing to you; of asking you to think of the past and of all I have gone through. To-day I can offer you once more the heart you rejected then. You cannot deceive me. Your love for me has survived, as mine for you. Why should you condemn yourself and me to a lifelong mistake? Bid me hope. Only say that I may strive with some chance of winning you, and I care not to what ordeal you put my love. Send me one little line, to tell me I am not, now that fortune has smiled upon me and a brilliant future lies before me, to lose the one hope which has nerved me to the struggle, which has been the bright star at the end of the dark, rough road I have trodden for years. Ruth, my future is in your hands. Say "Hope" or "Despair." With a fervent prayer that Heaven will guide your heart aright in a choice with which our future lives are bound up, believe me, my dear Ruth, your old, unchanged, and unchangeable sweetheart,

'Edward Marston.'

Again and again Ruth read this letter, which woke old memories and touched many a tender chord. She honestly believed all that her lover said—that he had abandoned his old reckless life and attained the position he held by hard, honest work and the legitimate exercise of his talents. He had explained to her his early visit to Heckett's, and he had offered to satisfy her father of his circumstances if she would only give him the right to broach the subject.

Ruth had steadily resisted every effort to break down the barrier she had erected between the past and the present, but at each assault the defence became weaker.

Her mother’s words to-night, and the full revelation to her of the object of Gurth Egerton’s constant visits, brought her face to face with the fact that her answer would have to be given some day to this new wooer.

The very appearance of another suitor seemed to warm her heart towards Marston. She almost resented the idea that any one should dare to think of her while he was still unmarried.

Gurth Egerton, in this instance, proved Marston’s best ally instead of his rival. The idea that he was in love with her so worked upon Ruth that that night she recognized more fully than ever how just were Marston’s claims. A rival disputed the field with him, and, like a true woman, she resented it.

That night she wrote a letter and addressed it to Edward Marston.

It contained only two words.

And those two words were—‘Hope. Ruth’

CHAPTER XXXIX.
THE GOLD ROBBERY.

Day after day, at four o'clock in the afternoon, three gentlemen came separately into London Bridge Station and strolled about.

They never spoke to each other in the station; they looked at the advertisements, perused the time-tables, and made themselves as little in the way as possible.

One evening, about five, Mr. Turvey, the guard of the Continental mail, came out of one of the offices and went across the road to a public-house.

One of the gentlemen had preceded him. He was a dark gentleman with a hook nose. He found himself accidentally standing by Turvey at the bar.

'Fine afternoon, sir,' said the guard.

'Very,' answered the gentleman.

They looked about them cautiously, to see that no one was listening to them or observing them, and then the guard whispered hurriedly:

'We carry twenty thousand to-night.'

The dark man nodded his head. Two glasses of ale on the counter were rapidly emptied, the guard went back to the station, and the gentleman strolled across the bridge.

Singularly enough, the other two gentlemen had previously crossed the water.

The dark gentleman passed right between them, and muttered, 'Twenty thousand pounds to-night.'

The ways of the three gentlemen evidently lay in opposite directions. They separated without remark. Their plans had long since been complete, and they had waited patiently until the stake was worth the hazard.

Their patience had been rewarded.

To-night the Continental mail would carry £20,000 worth of bullion, addressed to bankers in Paris.

Rushing along through the night, the swift train would bear a fortune down to the sea—a sum for which many a man would gladly slave and toil all his days.

This vast sum would travel safely, guarded by vigilant eyes, enclosed in massive safes, and secured by every precaution. Twice on the journey the safes would be weighed—at Folkestone and at Boulogne—so that the slightest difference in the weight of the precious packages would be detected.

Yet, if Messrs. Smith and Co., financial agents of London, could get their way, the gold would never reach its destination.

The three gentlemen who separated on London Bridge were, for the time, members of the firm in question.

The gentleman with the hook nose went off in the direction of the west; the other two were a pleasant-looking elderly gentleman, who hailed a cab and told the driver to take him to Camden Road, and a big, burly, grey-haired fellow, who went back to his lodgings in Southwark, and was greeted with some very bad language by a depraved parrot.

Messrs. Seth Preene, Brooks, and Josh Heckett had only a few hours to prepare for a railway journey which they proposed to take that evening.

It wants a few minutes to the departure of the Continental mail.

The station is a scene of bustle. Porters are rushing hither and thither with piles of heavy travelling trunks. Little groups of travellers dot the platform, affectionate farewells are being taken, and many an anxious eye is looking down the line where the lights gleam, and wondering what sort of weather it is out at sea.

The stolid English traveller, who, having bought half-a-dozen newspapers, and taken his seat in an empty carriage, considers he has done an act which entitles him to the whole of the compartment; the English lady, arrayed for travel in garments which are calculated to amaze the foreigner; the Frenchman, who raises his hat every time he passes a fellow-traveller, and spits on the floor of the carriage without apology; the Belgian, with his hideous black travelling-cap and funereal suit; the German, the Italian, and the Russian, speaking now in English

now in their native language, all are here.

The train is a light one, and there is plenty of room for travellers who wish to be exclusive.

A few shillings to the guard on a slack night will generally reserve a compartment as far as Dover.

Two gentlemen evidently think privacy worth purchasing, for the guard has closed the door of a first-class compartment on them and is slipping a bright half-crown into his pocket.

They have handed their carpet-bags to a porter to put in the guard's van.

The bell is ringing and the train is about to start.

There are a few people still bidding adieu to their friends.

Just at the last moment two gentlemen, who have not taken their seats, step into the guard's van and crouch down behind the luggage.

A sharp whistle, a volume of steam, and the train glides out into the night.

Turvey, the guard, breathes freely. He has fulfilled his portion of the contract, and is entitled to his share.

Brooks and Heckett are alone with the massive safes of bullion, and everything now depends upon the use they make of the opportunity.

They are the workmen who are to carry out the scheme devised by the talented head of the firm of Smith and Co.

Slowly at first, but increasing in speed at every moment, the long train rushes like a fiery serpent through London out into the open country.

Directly the train is clear of the station Brooks and Heckett commence operations. The rehearsal has been perfect, the performance seems likely to go off without a hitch.

Brooks has the keys prepared with so much skill and labour, and the safe opens in a moment. Then Heckett with a hammer and chisel wrenches off the iron clasps from the first box, and, forcing the lid up carefully, reveals the treasure that lies within.

Never did a miner's eyes gleam more brightly as he came upon the priceless nugget than did Heckett's as he saw the bars of gold at his mercy. Quick as thought the box was emptied and filled with shot from the carpet bags in the van.

This shot had all been carefully weighed and prepared in parcels, so that it would represent the exact weight of the abstracted gold.

To light some wax with a taper, reseal the box with a seal brought for the purpose, refasten the iron clasps and drive the nails in again was the work of a very short time, and when the train stopped at Redhill half the stupendous task was completed.

Here Preene, who was travelling with Marston, managed to alight and take a full bag of gold from Brooks, then he slipped it into the carriage where Marston was, and got back again in time to jump into the guard's van as the train started.

Directly the train was in motion again the other boxes were attacked, and now Brooks, Preene, and Heckett filled their carpet bags with gold, and also large courier bags which they wore across their shoulders, and which were quite concealed by their heavy travelling cloaks.

When the train stopped at Folkestone the work was done. The boxes had been reclosed and filled with shot of the exact weight of the abstracted gold, the safes were relocked, and there was nothing to tell that the guard's van had been the scene of a daring and gigantic robbery. At Folkestone the three accomplices slipped out of the van and entered the nearest carriages, carrying their spoil with them, its great weight, however, rendering it anything but an easy task.

Here the safes were carefully taken out and handed to the authorities for shipment to Boulogne, and the train sped on its way to Dover.

It was with intense relief that Marston put his head out of window as the train rattled out of Folkestone station, and saw the safes on the platform, zealously guarded by the porters, who little imagined that they were keeping watch over a quantity of shot while the gold was divided among four first-class passengers comfortably seated in the fast-vanishing train.

At Dover the conspirators alighted, each carrying his own bag, and politely declining the offers of the porters, who were anxious to assist them.

Making their way to one of the hotels in the neighbourhood they succeeded in getting refreshments served in a private room, and here, putting their heavy bags under the table, they discussed the return

journey.

To avoid the suspicion which such a short stay might have aroused, they had provided themselves with return tickets from Ostend, and it was by the Ostend mail, which leaves Dover shortly after two, that they proposed to return to town with their precious burden.

Paying their bill they got outside. There was an uneasy feeling on them all the time they were within four walls. Even the fact that the waiter remained out of the room some time before he returned with the change filled them with alarm.

They had every hope that the weight had been so accurately replaced that the exchange of shot for precious metal would not be discovered until the safes were opened in Paris, but there was the chance that something might have happened at Folkestone before they were shipped.

Once outside they separated, but all made for the pier. Marston stood and looked out over the sea, watching for the lights of the Ostend packet.

The night was not very dark, and the water was comparatively still. As he looked out over the wide expanse of waters, dotted here and there with the light of a fishing vessel at anchor his thoughts wandered away over the past.

As he stood there, clutching his bag of gold, he thought of each succeeding step he had taken in crime, until he had come to look upon a robbery such as he had just been the prime mover in in much the same light as a merchant looks upon a successful speculation on ‘Change.’

Thinking of his wild life, and glancing almost unconcernedly at the panorama of his evil deeds which unfolded itself at the bidding of the great showman Memory, something seemed to come suddenly between him and the canvas. The gentle face of a beautiful girl rose up before him; her eyes looked pleadingly into his. Suddenly it vanished, and the panorama was unrolled swiftly. Scene alter scene he saw, where all was wickedness and he was the central figure.

‘Bah!’ he exclaimed, as he caught himself sighing. ‘What the deuce is the matter with me to-night?’

He lit a cigar and moved away from the pier side, strolling up towards the head. He looked around for his companions. A feeling of loneliness had come upon him, and he wanted some one to speak to.

But it bad been agreed that they should not rejoin each other until the packet was in sight, so Marston buttoned his overcoat up found his throat, and whistled a tune to relieve his feelings.

He could not shake them off. In a few minutes he found himself musing again. What should he do now if this *coup* came off with complete success?

Once safe back in town he could snap his fingers at detection. He would have ample opportunity of destroying the scent if the hounds of the law ever got on it. He knew that he would have an early intimation if there was any necessity for him to take precautions. His companions might peach, but it was almost impossible. It wouldn’t pay them. They were as deep in the mud as he was in the mire, and he had the whip hand of them all.

Still he felt uncomfortable, almost for the first time in his life, he kept thinking of Ruth Adrian, and that upset him. The old love, fanned into a flame, was burning brightly in his breast once more, and it seemed to unnerve him. The wealth which was his now would open the gates of fortune to him. He knew it. He knew that, with the capital soon to be at his command, he could make money legitimately and without risk. That was his intention. He had no vulgar ambition to be a criminal. His desire was, having secured the foundation of a fortune, to live cleanly and respectably for the future. But in all the dreams in which he indulged, Ruth Adrian was always his wife.

Apart from his really sincere regard for her, he had the gambler’s idea that she would bring him luck. She was to be one means to an end, as the precious metal in his bag was to be another.

But the more he thought of her, the more he pictured a happy home in which she reigned as a sort of good fairy and guardian angel, the more he felt a strange, undefined sense of fear in connexion with this evening’s adventure.

It was such a daring and gigantic deed that it was bound to cause a sensation. It would be in every man’s mouth by-and-by. He would hear of it everywhere. The efforts made to discover the perpetrators would be superhuman. Would he not, as the days went on, and he settled down into the happy life he pictured for himself with Ruth, be constantly

reminded of the perils which he ran? He flung his half-smoked cigar away pettishly. He was annoyed with himself for worrying about the future at all.

'Only let me get safe out of this,' he thought to himself, and I'll make a fresh start. This is the last little business Smith and Co. will transact so far as I am concerned. Preene and Brooks and Heckett can take their share and do as they like; Turvey is squared, and daren't speak for his own sake; and the old Ned Marston will disappear for ever. The phoenix that will rise from his ashes will be a very different person indeed.'

Standing at the pier-head, Edward Marston looked far away over the waves into his future life.

His dreams were interrupted by a voice at his elbow.

'Stand aside there!'

Marston looked up with a start.

The harbour officials were busy with ropes and landing-stages. The Ostend packet had crept up and he had not even seen it.

In a moment it was alongside. A stream of passengers flowed up the gangways on to the pier, and trickled gently towards the station.

Four gentlemen, carrying heavy bags, dropped into the crowd at different points and went up with it, as though they had just come from the boat.

In the early morning the Belgian mail from Dover steamed into London and discharged her sleepy freight at the terminus.

There the four fellow-travellers separated, each going his own way.

Marston was not afraid to trust his companions with the share of the plunder they carried. Without him they would not be able to dispose of it. In its present shape it could only be put on to the market by a capitalist with machinery for its distribution at his command.

The distribution and realization of £20,000 of stolen bullion was to be the last official act of the eminent firm of Smith and Co., of which Mr. Edward Marston was the directing genius.

In the grey light of the morning Marston let himself into Eden Villa with his latch-key. He went upstairs quietly into his room and disposed of his precious burden, and then crept down again to the dining-room to get some brandy from the chiffonier, for he was tired and faint. In the room on the table he found the letters which had arrived during his absence.

He sat down in the easy-chair, opened them and read them.

About half-past seven Cherry Ribbons, the housemaid came banging about with brooms, blacklead-brushes, and dust-pans.

She came bustling into the dining room and then stopped suddenly as though she had seen a ghost.

Her master had fallen off to sleep in the easy-chair. He was smiling in his sleep, and in his hand he held an open letter.

Cherry Ribbons, who was not behind the door when the bump of curiosity was served out, crept gently up behind him and read its contents over his shoulder.

Two words only were written on the fair white sheet, and they were in a lady's hand:

"*Hope*. Ruth."

CHAPTER XL.
THE ADRIANS GO OUT TO TEA.

Mr. Gurth Egerton was a pretty constant visitor at the Adrians', and he stood high in favour with both the master and the mistress of the house. 'A most agreeable genileman,' said Mrs. Adrian. 'A great traveller, and full of aneedote,' said Mr. Adrian. Ruth said nothing in particular. She quite agreed that Mr. Egerton was all her parents proclaimed him, and she confessed that he had made himself particularly agreeable to her. But she was not blind, and she soon began to perceive that Gurth was taking great pains to please her, and that when he spoke to her he threw a certain tone into his voice which no woman, from the days of Eve, has been able to misinterpret, unless she did so wilfully.

Ruth was shrewd enough to know that Mr. Gurth Egerton was not so domesticated as to come over to the house three or four times a week for the purpose of holding Mrs. Adrians wool and discussing the relative merits of homoeopathy and allopathy with her, and she was equally certain that, much as he might have travelled, he was not so smitten with the savages as to desire constantly to discuss their habits and customs with her father.

But, whatever Gurth's motive might be, he had certainly won the friendship of the Adrians. He had even induced them to accept his hospitality, and come and take tea with him.

He had so artfully worked up a description of a Patagonia; dinner-service and a North American Indian war-costume, that he had forced Mr. Adrian to exclaim, 'Ah, I should like to see that!'

'Nothing easier,' was Gurth's quick reply. 'Bring the ladies, and come over one afternoon to my house, and you can see the whole collection.'

Mrs. Adrian at once gave John a look which informed him he might accept. Mrs. Adrian had not been blind any more than Ruth, and recognized in the wealthy bachelor a most eligible *parti* for her daughter.

So it was arranged that Mr. and Mrs. Adrian and Ruth and Gertie should all go over to Gurth's house one evening and take tea.

They came on the appointed day, and Gurth conducted them over the house, showing them all the curiosities he had brought from foreign parts. Mr. Adrian was delighted with the scalps, and the spears, and the various relics of barbarism, Mrs. Adrian tried the easy-chairs, and having found a particularly comfortable one, entered into conversation with Mrs. Turvey, who had been sent for to keep her company while Ruth and Gertie and Mr. Adrian wandered over the great house. Mrs. Turvey was very agreeable, and allowed herself to be pumped just as much as she chose and no more until the exploring party returned.

Then tea was served. It was a good old-fashioned tea, which reflected the greatest credit on Mrs. Turvey and drew forth the warmest encomiums of Mrs. Adrian. There were potato cakes and dripping cakes, and all the substantial and appetizing delicacies which have disappeared from the table, slain by the dyspeptic and unsociable monster known as 'late dinner.'

Of course Ruth was voted to the chair, and very pretty she looked at the head of Gurth's table, blushing just a little as she lifted the bright silver teapot and asked the host if he took sugar and milk.

Gurth was so lost in admiration of the unusual spectacle that he hardly heard the question, and it had to be repeated by Mrs. Adrian. Gurth stammered out 'Both, please,' and apologized for his inattention.

Mrs. Adrian watched his admiring glance with satisfaction, but Ruth, keeping her eyes carefully fixed on her teacups, avoided meeting it. Mrs. Adrian built up a little romance directly. She was quite sure that, having once seen Ruth at the head of his table, the wealthy proprietor of this eligible mansion could not fail to desire a repetition of the scene.

Gurth was surprised himself at the transformation which the gloomy room had undergone, and he was more than ever persuaded that the future mistress of Mrs. Turvey's domain must be the young lady now presiding at his tea-table.

Gertie was very quiet. Child as she was, she recognized the position of dependence in which she was placed, and though the Adrians treated her with the greatest kindness, she could not forget that she was dependent on their charity for all the happiness and comfort she now

enjoyed.

Gurth did not feel quite comfortable, once or twice as Gertie moved about the place, asking now and then a childish question about something that attracted her attention. He had a vague feeling that it was a daring thing to have let her come; he had a strange, undefined sense of uneasiness, as they went from room to room, that the child might suddenly happen upon a discovery—upon some trifle which would establish the link he had been all these years endeavouring to hide.

But gradually he got over the feeling, and grew more at his ease. He consoled himself by thinking that when he had won and married Ruth he would let her always have Gertie with her, and then the child would be really enjoying her father's property, just as much as though it had come to her in the first instance.

It was an odd kind of morality; but Gurth Egerton's ideas of right and wrong had always been of a peculiar sort.

While the tea-party was being held above, Mrs. Turvey had a small entertainment of her own going on in the room below. Now that Mr. Egerton remained permanently at home another servant had been engaged, and she waited on the company, so that Mrs. Turvey only had to see that the things went up nice and hot and generally to superintend.

This gave her time to attend to her own guest, who was no other than Mr. Jabez. The good lady knew that he had a weakness for her hot cakes, and she had taken this opportunity of inviting him to tea. By making an extra quantity, both Jabez and the ladies and gentlemen upstairs could be baked for in the same oven.

Jabez required a good deal of keeping up to the mark. He had never plucked up courage to defy his beloved Susan to do her worst; but the wooing had not advanced. He still kept up an outward appearance of devotion, but he required considerable temptation, in the shape of substantial teas, to lure him iuto Susan's little parlour after he left business.

He was always making excuses. Now he was kept late at the office; now he was obliged to go straight home because Georgina was ill. The trial of his lodger for forgery was for a long time a plea for the fact of his visits being like those of the oft-quoted angels—few and far between. Every now and then, however, in the interests of diplomacy, he felt compelled to put a good face on the matter and 'come up smiling' in response to Susan's pressing invitations. The letters were still in her possession; his poems were still held *in terrorem* over him.

On the occasion of the Adrians' visit he had consented to take tea in Mrs. Turvey's little parlour and try her famous hot cakes.

Love had not injured his appetite, and he was far more assiduous in his attention to the cakes than he was in his attentions to the lady whose light hand had turned them out so successfully.

'Jabez,' said Mrs. Turvey, 'I don't think it will be long before I leave here.'

'Leave here—why?' exclaimed Jabez.

'Well, there's a young lady upstairs pouring out the master's tea.'

'So you told me before,' said Jahez, taking a bite.

'Where shall I go when I leave here, Jabez?'

Jahez swallowed a mouthful hurriedly.

'I'm sure I don't know, Susan.'

'Then you ought to, that's all I've got to say. How much longer do you think I'm going to stand your indifference? I tell you what it is, Jahez, I shall give you till I get notice to leave here, and I shan't give you a moment longer.'

Jahez, whose eyes had been cast down, looked up hurriedly.

'That's a bargain!' he said. 'I'll agree to it. Let's draw it up in writing. I agree to marry you directly you get notice to leave.'

Mrs. Turvey tossed her head.

'Dror it up in writing? Oh dear no, Mr. Jabez. It's droved up in quite enough writing already for me. I suppose you fancy as there's nothing in it upstairs. Perhaps you've been a-pryin' into the master's private affairs, and know something. Dror it up, indeed! Not with them there poems o' yours in my workbox upstairs. You must think me a cake!'

Whether Mr. Jabez did think his Susan a cake, I can't say, but he certainly seized one and munched it viciously.

The little tiff, however, soon blew over. Jabez had not studied the art of dissembling in vain. So long as he could drive off the evil day until the letters, which were the only legal proofs of 'promise,' came into his

possession, or until something turned up to give him a loophole of escape, he was satisfied.

He made it up, shone on Mrs. Turvey as brightly as he could, and presently, having finished the cakes and emptied the teapot, took his departure.

While this scene was transacting itself below, the little tea-party upstairs was progressing under far more favourable circumstances.

Gurth, absorbed in his desire to make himself agreeable to the Adrians, succeeded in making them spend a really pleasant evening. Mr. Adrian was so delighted with his conversation, and Mrs. Adrian felt so comfortable in his easy-chair, that both were loth to leave, and had to be reminded twice by Ruth of the lateness of the hour before they prepared to go.

A few days after the tea-party at Egerton's house, Mr. John Adrian sat alone in his dining-room.

The latest book of travels lay on the table before him, but he took no notice of it. He was evidently lost in thought.

A few minutes before a visitor had departed—a visitor who had requested a private interview, and, having obtained it had told Mr. Adrian something which had completely put the Patagonians' noses out of joint and driven the Central Africans from the field.

The visitor was no other than Mr. Gurth Egerton, who, in a few plain words, had requested Mr. Adrian's permission to pay his addresses to his daughter.

Mr. Adrian had listened to his visitor politely, and had gone so far as to confess that such a match would be by no means disagreeable to himself, but with regard to his daughter's feelings he was not in a position to speak.

'My dear sir,' answered Gurth gaily, 'if I have your consent, that is all I ask at present. I by no means wish you to advocate my cause with the young lady, or to say anything to her about this interview. I merely wish to know, before I urge my suit with her, that I have your free consent to do so. I don't want to come here sailing under false colours.'

Mr. Adrian was charmed with his visitor's frankness, and let him go away assured that, though he would in no way attempt to influence Ruth in her choice of a husband, he should only be too glad if it fell upon so prosperous and agreeable a gentleman as Gurth Egerton.

For some little time after Gurth's departure, Mr. Adrian sat wrapt in thought. It would be a splendid match for Ruth, and he felt it was time she was settled in life. Mrs. Adrian, he knew, would offer no opposition—in fact, over and over again she had urged him to do all in his power to foster such a match. There was nothing in the way of its accomplishment but Rath herself.

I wonder,' said Mr. Adrian, 'if she has quite got over that old business with Ned Marston! Sometimes I fancy there is a soft spot in her heart for him still.'

Could Mr. Adrian have seen Ruth, as she sat in in her own room that afternoon, he would have had grave doubts as to the success of Gurth Egerton's wooing.

Ruth was amusing herself for a moment or two at her writing-desk, and scribbling, as young ladies will sometimes when their thoughts are wandering, on a piece of blotting-paper.

She was writing her name over and over again:

'Ruth Adrian
'Ruth Adrian.'

She scribbled it half-a-dozen times, and then her pen, perhaps obedient to her thought, paused at the 'Ruth' and wrote a fresh name after it.

Ruth blushed a vivid scarlet when she saw what she had done. There, on the blotting-paper in bold relief she had written, in place of her usual signature:

'Ruth Marston.'

CHAPTER XLI.
AN AFTERNOON CALL.

Gurth Egerton was delighted at the cordial reception he had received at the hands of Mr. Adrian. He had, at any rate, in that interview ascertained that, so far as Ruth's parents were concerned, nothing was known of Marston's pretensions.

He was more than ever convinced that it was only braggadocio on that gentleman's part, and that he had nothing to fear from his old companion. The more he thought of it, the more absurd it seemed to him that he should ever have attached any importance to Marston's assertion. Ruth certainly was polite to him, and when he had seen them meet they met as old friends. He quite understood that. Years ago, before Marston went wrong, he had been acquainted with the family, and Ruth and he had been sweethearts as boy and girl. But things were very different now. Marston, in spite of his assumption of independence, was only an adventurer. He felt convinced that his respectability was a whited sepulchre, and that there was something very rotten underneath it.

But the undoubted fact remained that Marston was now on visiting terms with the Adrians, and that Ruth was not particularly cold to him.

It would be safer, at any rate, to clinch the matter at once, and bowl Mr. Edward Marston out before he had a chance of scoring.

Gurth followed up his declaration to Mr. Adrian at once. He managed to find himself pretty constantly in Ruth's society, and he flattered himself that he was on the straight road to conquest.

But he was determined not to be too precipitate, and by overhaste court an answer which might render his position a difficult one.

One day when he called he was annoyed to find Marston at the house, but he shook hands with him cordially, and barely allowed his annoyance to be perceptible.

It was Marston's first visit to the Adrians for some time. He had been engaged on 'important business,' but he had not allowed Ruth's little note to remain unanswered.

He had written, telling her that he had been successful in a great undertaking, and that now he was in a position to offer her a home and devote himself solely to making her happy.

He had met Ruth, too, and the old romance of their lives had been reopened at a second volume.

It is in the third volume that everybody is generally made happy, and it was to the third volume which Marston was now anxious to turn.

He had conquered the fortress once more. It had been but weakly defended. One by one, the barriers had gone down before the weapons which Marston brought to bear upon it. The old love had never died out—it had but languished awhile; and now that Ruth believed Marston to be leading a new life, and to be the brave, honest-hearted, good fellow she once prayed that he might become, she was thankful he had never met that good woman she had once prayed might be flung in his path.

Who can explain the workings of a woman's heart? Who can dissect it, and show the complex machinery which governs its marvellous performances? To attempt such a task would be to court ignominious failure. I only know that Ruth Adrian, pure, good, and noble as she was, loved Edward Marston, and trusted him as blindly and devotedly as ever, in spite of the rude shock her faith had once received, in spite of the many doubts with which her heart had been beset since his reappearance on the horizon that bounded her little world. Her love was strengthened and confirmed by the very fact that once he had led an evil life, that once she had been compelled to snap the link, and bid him go his way and leave her to go hers.

She found herself now hungering for a word from him, waiting about where he was to pass, meeting him under all the romantic circumstances of a first courtship. At twenty-eight her heart beat as quickly when he came as it had done when she was eighteen. It seemed to her that their separation and the long ordeal through which they had both passed had but purified and intensified their love.

Even the element of secrecy which, as much for her own sake as for his, Marston imported into the romance was not without its harm. Ruth knew now that both her mother and father would be opposed to her match. She saw that Gurth Egerton was in high favour, and, so far as they were concerned, would be a formidable rival to her poor Ned. But she was her own mistress now, and could decide for herself. Gurth

Egerton was a very pleasant gentleman, but he came too late. She had no heart left to give. Marston had won it long ago, and now he had the right to claim it.

When Marston called, he did so by Ruth's advice. She didn't want Gurth Egerton to have the field entirely to himself. She was sure Marston was quite as agreeable as he was.

Of course she had told Marston about Gurth—about the tea-party and his constant visits. Of the interview with her father she herself knew nothing. Marston was seriously alarmed. He remembered his interview with Gurth, and he felt that it would not do to despise such a foe too much.

Acting on Ruth's hint he determined to ingratiate himself with the Adrians as much as he could, and, if possible, cut Gurth out on his own ground.

He knew that so far as Ruth was concerned he had nothing to fear, but for her sake he was anxious that she should marry him with the full and free approbation of her parents.

He felt that she would never really be happy under any other circumstances, and, strange as it may seem, Ruth's happiness was with him now a primary consideration. He had gradually come to love his old sweetheart again with an affection as pure and disinterested as that she felt for him.

She seemed to him, like an angel of light, to banish the darkness of the past. He never really knew how vile and wicked he had been till he looked into Ruth's sweet eyes, and thought that one day she would bear his name.

He shuddered sometimes now as he thought of what an awful past was linked with that name. Now that Ruth had assured him of her love, now that the bright pages were open once more in his book of life, he recognized, for the first time, the depth to which he had fallen. There was much in the past about which he hesitated to think; there were secrets buried away in the bygone years of poverty and scheming which once he could remember with a smile, but which now made him tremble to think that some day they might be dragged into the glaring light of day.

'What a different man I might have been had such a woman's love been mine years ago!' he thought; but never for a moment did he blame Ruth for the part she had played when his future hung in the balance.

He was innocence itself then in comparison with what he had been when he plunged, reckless and despairing, into the black abyss of crime.

Even the deed which had given him fortune, the well-planned and cleverly executed robbery which had astonished the world and left him independent of crime for the future, terrified him now.

Without it he would still have been an adventurer—he dared not have offered Ruth his hand. It was this vilely won wealth which he believed would give him all the happiness he was ever to know in the future; it was this which was to enable him to break with all his old associates and live cleanly; it was this which was to be the foundation of a genuine business career in which he might win wealth and honour legitimately; and yet he never parted with Ruth after one of those frequent interviews without wishing he had gone penniless to the grave rather than have launched out into such a crime with her image in his heart, and her sweet self the beacon that shone at the end of the long dark path and lured him on.

It seemed a treachery to her now to have linked her with such villany.

The transition state of Mr. Edward Marston's conscience was a condition of things which would form a splendid study for the moralist and the philosopher. The novelist must not pause by the way to dilate upon it, tempting though the opportunity may be. He has already left the Adrians and their visitors much longer than courtesy and the rules of fiction allow.

Marston and Egerton left together. The conversation had been confined to platitudes. Mr. Adrian was ill at ease, for he feared danger from the Marston quarter now more than ever. When he did bring his eyes from Patagonia to things nearer home, they generally saw pretty clearly. Mrs. Adrian was so rude to Marston that Ruth was really distressed. The good lady begged that he would not kick the chair legs, as they had just been repolished; she requested him kindly to move his chair a little way from the wall, as it was nibbing the paper; and when he drew up to the table at last, in a tone of icy politeness she called his attention to the fact that he was drumming with his fingers on the said piece of furniture, a practice which, in her delicate state of health,

always gave her the headache.

Marston laughed good-humouredly, but the laugh was forced. Gurth was ill at ease, for he saw that a storm was brewing, and when Marston rose to leave he went with him.

He knew that, sooner or later, he and Marston would have to have a few words, and he felt that it might as well be now.

He was hardly prepared, however, for the coolness which his rival displayed.

‘Which way are you going, Gurth?’ said Marston, as they closed the Adrians’ gate.

‘Home,’ answered Gurth. ‘Come with me and have a cigar.’

‘That’s just what will suit me best. I want to talk with you about one or two things.’

The two men exchanged very few words on their way to Gurth’s house. Both were busy with their thoughts. Both were bracing themselves up for the conflict to come.

As they passed through one of the main thoroughfares the afternoon papers were being sold, and there was a crowd round the placards.

Gurth went up and peered over to read the contents bill that was exciting so much attention.

‘What is it?’ asked Marston. ‘A murder or a robbery?’

‘It will turn out both, I dare say,’ said Egerton. ‘The Great Blankshire Bank has stopped payment.’

‘Oh!’ said Marston; ‘I don’t know much about commercial matters. Is there anything special about the circumstances?’

‘No! only it is unlimited, and the shareholders will be beggars. The liabilities are immense.’

‘Poor devils!’ exclaimed Marston. ‘I’m sorry for ‘em; but, as I’m not a shareholder, it doesn’t interest me.’

Edward Marston spoke as he believed. He little knew that the failure of the Great Blankshire Bank was to interest him very much indeed.

CHAPTER XLII.
A DUEL OF WORDS.

Gurth Egerton and Edward Marston sat opposite each other in the same room where a few days previously, Gurth had entertained the Adrians.

Ruth had told Marston of the visit, and as he glanced round the cosily furnished apartment he fancied he could see her at the head of the table, and Gurth smiling complacently to himself at the victory he imagined he was gaining over an absent rival.

The thought irritated him, and when Egerton handed him his cigar-case, he pushed it away from him with a contemptuous gesture.

'A truce to this tomfoolery, Egerton!' he exclaimed, jumping up from his chair and striding across the room in his excitement. 'You can guess what I've come here to talk about.'

'Well, suppose I can?' answered Gurth, quietly helping himself from the rejected case.

'You will spare me the trouble of any introductory remarks. I may as well be plain, Gurth. In the old days we didn't choose our phrases, and we needn't now. You are paying a good deal too much attention to Ruth Adrian, and I strongly object to it.'

'I have no doubt you do,' answered Gurth; 'but the young lady may not.'

'Tush, man! we are not rehearsing a comedy. Drop your repartee. Ruth does object to your visits very much.'

'I am sorry to hear it; but I visit her parents' house at her parents' invitation.'

'Good. Then you'll remain away in future at my invitation.'

'What the deuce do you mean, Mr. Marston?'

'What I say. If it isn't clear to you, I'll put it plainer. I request you to keep away from the Adrians' while Ruth remains with them.'

'Hoity-toity! *You* request me?'

'Yes; or rather I command you. Come, Mr. Gurth Egerton, you are not the only beggar who can sit a horse. I can be up in the stirrups too.'

Gurth Egerton looked at Marston for a moment, but the face of the latter betrayed nothing.

'Look here, Ned Marston,' he said, after a pause; 'I don't want to quarrel with you, but you are adopting a tone which doesn't suit you at all. It's out of place, my dear fellow. Who are you!'

'You know well enough.'

'Perhaps I do. As you evidently forget yourself, let me remind you. Some time ago a ragged, half-starved fellow turned up in London, after a long absence from the scenes of his youth, and came cadging to a friend of mine. My friend, acting on my behalf, gave him five hundred pounds for old acquaintance sake.'

Marston interrupted.

'So Birnie let you in for that five hundred, did he?' he exclaimed with a laugh. 'What a chap he is!'

'I paid the five hundred you drew of Birnie. Certainly I did!' continued Gurth. 'I was very glad to do it for a poor devil out of luck whom I had known in former times. I could afford it, you know——-'

'Of course you could, having Ralph's money to spend.'

'Ralph's money was left to me legally, Mr. Marston, and no one can dispute my right to it! You got that five hundred, and you seem to have made a good use of it. You have managed to worm your way into respectable society, established a certain amount of credit, and now you have the confounded impudence to interfere in my private affairs—to aspire to the hand of a lady I intend to make my wife. Take my advice, Mr. Marston; be satisfied with your present success, and leave well alone.'

'If I don't?'

'If you don't I shall take care that your true character is known. I have no doubt if the police are once put on the right track they could furnish me with some interesting details of your past career.'

Marston laughed.

'What a rum chap you are, Egerton!' he said. 'Do you think if I had anything to fear I should have acted in the way I have? You are on the wrong line this time, old fellow.'

‘You interfere between Ruth Adrian and me, and it will be bad for you!’ exclaimed Gurth, angrily.

Marston, who had been standing by the window, came across the room to the mantel-shelf, and stood with his back to the fireplace.

‘Listen to me, Gurth Egerton,’ he said. ‘I told you once before that it was no use your crossing my path in this quarter, and you despised my warning. It is necessary now that I should let you know the consequences to you if you persist in your folly.’

‘You threaten?’

‘Certainly. Haven’t you threatened me? But I shall not be so foolish as you. You have shown your hand to no purpose. I fancy when you see my cards you will fling the game up.’

Marston’s manner was cold, and his voice stern. He spoke with such an air of conscious power that Gurth’s anxiety betrayed itself in the expression of his face.

Marston noticed the effect, and hastened to follow it up.

‘I love Ruth Adrian honestly and devotedly!’ he continued. ‘With her for my wife, I am about to lead a new life—a life which you will not be able to understand, perhaps. If you, by word or deed, attempt to thwart my purpose, woe betide you, Gurth Egerton. You had better try to rob a lion of its whelp than step between me and the fulfilment of my dream.’

Gurth roused himself with an effort. ‘Talk, my dear fellow!’ he exclaimed, banteringly. ‘Mere talk! What could you—an adventurer, a runaway from America, a penniless schemer—say or do that would injure a man of my wealth and position? Come, what do you want? A thousand—two thousand? Name your figure, take a cheque, and disappear. You are good at disappearing, you know.’

Marston had controlled himself with difficulty for some time, but when, in stinging tones of contempt, Gurth offered him money—offered to buy Ruth of him, as it were—his calmness forsook him. With a flushed face and flashing eyes he sprang forward and seized Gurth by the shoulders.

‘You cur!’ he exclaimed, passionately. ‘Do you think to buy me with your dirty money?—*your* money!—bah, with the money that you have got by fraud—for all I know, by murder!’

It was a shot at random, but it went home.

Gurth, white as a ghost, shook himself free from Marston’s clutch.

‘What do you mean?’ he exclaimed. ‘How dare you say such things?’

‘Look at your white face in the glass,’ cried Marston, with an exulting cry. ‘I’ve unmasked you at last, then. Ah, my fine fellow, I fancy I know the weak spot now. You’ll sweep me out of your path, will you? We’ll see. Now, listen to this, Mr. Gurth Egerton. The first time you cross the Adrians’ threshold you seal your own fate. I’ll risk what will happen, and I’ll risk proving my words, but I’ll publicly denounce you as the murderer of Ralph Egerton!’

‘You fool!’ gasped Egerton, in a husky voice. ‘You know it isn’t true. You know he was killed in a drunken row. You were there. Besides, his death was duly certified——’

‘By Birnie!’ answered Marston. ‘A pretty certificate!’

‘Good enough, at any rate, to silence such an accusation as you make,’ answered Gurth, more calmly.

He was beginning to recover his composure. He was shrewd enough to see that there was nothing in Marston’s threat after all, and that he dare hardly use such a weapon lest he should injure himself.

A moment’s reflection showed Marston that the threat was an empty one. He would try another arrow in the dark.

‘You are prepared to meet that accusation, are you?’ he said, speaking slowly and deliberately, and watching the effect of his words. ‘Very well, then, to make sure I’ll back it with another. Let me find you at Adrians’—let me hear that you have shown your false face there again, or spoken to Ruth one single word wherever you may chance to meet her—and I’ll sweep the fortune you have done so much to gain from your clutch at a blow.’

This time Gurth laughed bravely. He began to have an idea that Marston was merely shooting at random in the hope of hitting once.

‘What will you do?’ he asked. ‘Charge me with attempted regicide, or with plotting the destruction of the British Museum?’

‘I shall charge you with nothing,’ answered Marston, quietly. ‘I shall set up another claimant to the property.’

Without stopping to explain—without waiting to watch the effect on Gurth—Marston turned on his heel, and went out of the door.

He had played a card at hazard. He had no real idea that he could do what he said, but he knew that Gurth was concealing something—that there was something in the background which Gurth feared being known.

He had no real idea that Ralph had left any heir but Gurth, but he fancied there was a screw loose—that if all had been fair, square, and above-board, Gurth would not be so mysterious in his movements, nor so much in the power of Birnie as he evidently was. He had always had his suspicions of foul play with regard to Gurth and Ralph, and had a vague idea that some scheme had been concocted which had given Gurth the dead man's property. The will might be a forgery, or a codicil might have been suppressed. The idea was a vague one merely, and it was suggested more by Gurth's manner than by anything else.

He had shot his arrow in the dark, but it had hit the mark.

As the door closed behind Marston, Gurth sprang up and shook his fist at the place where his rival had been.

'I'll be even with you yet, Ned Marston!' he exclaimed. 'You know more than you ought to. You've been prying and ferreting about, and you've found out something, and now you think you've got me in your power. Wait a while, my fine fellow, and I'll turn the tables on you, and shut your mouth tight enough, or my name's not Gurth Egerton!'

What did Marston mean? Egerton wondered. A hundred things suggested themselves. Had he learned the secret of Gertie Heckett's parentage? He could not say. He might even have found out where the marriage had taken place. Gurth had no doubt in his own mind there had been a marriage. There was just the chance that Ralph's boast was that of a drunkard, but it was a very faint one. Still it was singular the certificate had never turned up. It wasn't among Ralph s papers—of that he was sure. It couldn't have been among the dead girl's, or old Heckett would have been down on the property at once.

It was all a mystery; but, do what he would, he could not separate Marston's threat from Gertie Heckett. He felt sure that Marston knew something about her birth, and that she was the claimant he referred to.

Why had he never said anything before?

Pacing the room, and thinking, he found himself presently at the window. It was an old habit of his to pause when he was deep in thought, and look out into the street at nothing.

As he looked out who should pass by on the other side but Ruth Adrian and Gertie.

Close behind them came Lion, trotting along with his tail in the air, and his nose in close contact with the pavement.

Something in the appearance of Gertie and the dog struck Egerton, and suddenly he remembered he had seen them pass his house once before, when he had no idea how closely they were connected with his career.

The last time he saw them go by was when he was planning out his brilliant future.

It was more than a coincidence that on the very day when the first part of his scheme had been frustrated by a despised rival, Gertie Heckett and her dog should once more come between him and the shadow-land that he was gazing into.

Marston's threat had done its work. Mr. Gurth Egerton decided that for the present he would not intrude on the domestic circle of the Adrians. The next day his house was once more masterless.

But this time he was bound on no purposeless journey. He had a goal in view—a goal to reach which men and women have ere now sacrificed the best years of their life—a goal whose attainment is to some natures a glorious reward for superhuman effort and unexampled endurance.

That goal was revenge! Mr. Gurth Egerton had gone to America.

CHAPTER XLIII.
THE GREAT BLANKSHIRE BANK.

The news of the failure of the Great Blankshire Bank spread rapidly, and the terrible line on the contents bill of the evening papers had a dread significance for hundreds. To many a home it was the herald of ruin and despair.

The Great Blankshire Bank had been established for years, and was looked upon as a model of stability and sound finance.

It was one of those old-fashioned banks, in which the liability is unlimited, but its shares were reckoned as good as Bank of England notes. People would as soon have expected to hear of Rothschild pawning his watch to get a dinner as that the Great Blankshire Bank had come to grief.

The liabilities were enormous; but the first thought was for the unhappy shareholders. The depositors were safe. They would be paid to the uttermost farthing. The loss would strip the shareholders to the skin, and their garments would be divided among the creditors.

No wonder the unhappy people on whom the blow fell reeled beneath the force of it. It was so sudden, so crushing, that it wrung something like a cry of agony from the victims.

Men, who in the morning were prosperous citizens, sought their couches that night with bankruptcy staring them in the face.

Well-to-do tradesmen, whose business gave them no uneasiness, and who believed themselves safe from all commercial disasters, found themselves suddenly called upon to part with the whole of their capital and trade as best they could on an empty exchequer.

On all classes of the community the blow fell heavily, but most cruelly, perhaps, on men who had, after a long and laborious career, retired with the fruits of their honest industry, hoping to spend the remainder of their days in ease and comfort.

It was after tea on the fatal evening, and Mr. Adrian was deep in his favourite volumes, his wife and daughter and little Gertie sitting in their accustomed places.

A man passed along the quiet street shouting something.

All they heard at first was:

‘Speshul’dition.’

‘What are they crying the papers for to-night, I wonder?’ said Mrs. Adrian, lifting her head from her work and listening.

‘Some catchpenny, I suppose,’ answered her husband. ‘A fearful murder in America, I expect, or a great earthquake in Van Diemen’s Land. Listen!’

The man was coming nearer and nearer. Presently he seemed to be opposite their door. They could almost hear the words shouted in the harsh broken voice of the London street hawker:

‘Speshul’dition! Bank city! Failer Great Blankshur Bank!’

John Adrian doubted his ears. He had not caught the slurred words aright.

He started up from his chair, his face pale and his limbs trembling, and almost ran to the front door.

The man was passing. He hailed him and took a paper. He handed him the first coin in his pocket. It was a shilling. In his excitement he clutched the paper and closed the door, never waiting for his change.

With trembling hands he unfolded the paper, and scanned the contents in the flickering light of the hall lamp.

There was no need to look far.

There it was in huge letters—letters of flame that seared his heart:

‘TERRIBLE COMMERCIAL DISASTER.

FAILURE OF THE GREAT BLANKSHIRE BANK.

ENORMOUS LIABILITIES.’

John Adrian read the fatal words. The heading was enough. He had no need to read the details that followed.

The letters swam before his eyes; a faint, sick feeling seized him, and with a groan he reeled forward.

'Father!'

Ruth had noticed her father's strange look as he left the sitting-room, and had followed him.

She ran forward and caught him in her arms, or he would have fallen.

'Father, you are ill? she eried. 'What is it? Let me send for a doctor!'

John Adrian had recovered the first shook, and had steadied himself.

'A doctor's no good. My poor Ruth!' he groaned. He held the paper towards his daughter, and she knew the worst.

Her father was a shareholder in the ruined bank!

'It's ruin, child!' he groaned. 'Ruin! The saving of a lifetime swept away! We are beggars!'

'Oh, father, don't despair!' whispered Ruth, trembling. 'It may not be so bad as you think.'

'It's ruin, I tell you!' he cried, almost savagely. 'We shall be houseless beggars! Oh, my God! my God!'

'Poor mother!' sighed Ruth. 'It will break her heart!'

John Adrian started.

'Hush!' he said, seizing Ruth's arm. 'Keep it from her as long as we can.'

The room door was closed.

While they spoke it opened and Mrs. Adrian came out.

'What ever are you two doing in the hall?' she asked, snappishly. 'What's in the paper, after all?'

'Didn't you hear what the man said, mother?' asked Ruth, eagerly.

'No; I can't hear anything for my cold. What was it?—a murder?'

'Yes, my dear,' answered John Adrian, keeping his white face turned away. 'A murder—an awful murder!'

'Where?'

'In Patagonia.'

John Adrian tried to give a little laugh, but it was a ghastly failure, and ended in a groan.

'I thought it was a catchpenny. And the idea of your going rushing out catching your death to buy that rubbish! Murder in Patagonia, indeed! The Patagonians'll be the death of *you* before you're done.'

Mrs. Adrian went back to her chair. Mr. Adrian made some excuse and went upstairs to his room, bidding Ruth go in and talk to her mother.

When he came down he was still pale, and his face had a look of agony upon it which he could not well banish. But he complained of sudden toothache, and Mrs. Adrian went to sleep that night in happy ignorance of the awful misfortune which had fallen upon them.

Ere she went to rest Ruth wrote a note to Marston, and sent the servant with it to the post.

'Let me see you at once. A great trouble has come upon us.' That was all she wrote. Her heart was too full, her mind too disturbed, to write down in black and white the ghastly truth that her father was ruined, and that they were beggared by the failure of the Great Blankshire Bank.

CHAPTER XLIV.
A JOURNEY'S END.

In the back parlour of a little house at Camberwell a young woman lies, wan and white-faced, upon an antiquated and uncomfortable sofa of the lodging-house pattern. In a chair by the side of her, holding her hand in a professional manner, sits a pale, smooth-faced gentleman, dressed in black. Standing near, his eyes fixed eagerly upon the pale gentleman's face, is an old man, whose garb and manner speak eloquently of the country.

The invalid is Bess, the old man is her father, and the professional gentleman is Mr. Goff, the surgeon, who, having a large family and a small practice, and living in a neighbourhood where half-crown fees are commoner than guinea ones, is fain to unite the business of a chemist with the profession of a surgeon. But though Mr. Goff is not above retailing tooth-brushes, acid drops, scented soap, and lemonade, as well as leeches, rhubarb, magnesia, and drugs of all descriptions, he has the reputation of being a very clever man, and of having effected some marvellous cures; and when Marks, terrified at his daughter's appearance, asked Mrs. Ketley, the landlady, if she knew of a good medical man, Mrs. Ketley immediately suggested Mr. Goff, round the corner.

Mr. Goff was plain-spoken and curt. The half-guinea-a-minute small talk and the fashionable-physician smirk were not part and parcel of his business. 'Visit, medicine included, two-and-six,' left but small margin for those little courtesies which are so necessary to the success of a West-End doctor.

Mr. Goff would feel a pulse, look at a tongue, prescribe, and be down the front door-steps before the smiling creature, all shirt-front and white teeth, who basks in the favour of fashionable indisposition, would have arranged his hat and cane in the hall, and put on his sympathetic smirk preparatory to being shown into the presence of his patient.

But Mr. Goff, in spite of his tremendous hurry, his bluff speech, his rough hair, and his ill-fitting black clothes, loved his work and took real interest in his patients. He was particularly interested in the white-faced trembling girl, by whose side he sat while her old father watched his face so eagerly.

'Shock to system, eh? Something upset her?'

This with an inquiring glance at Marks.

'Yes, sir,' answered the old man; 'she's seen a sight o' trouble lately.'

Where's her husband?'

A flush of shame spread itself over the old gamekeeper's withered old face.

'Ah, I see—family trouble. Guessed so. Been fretting.'

He bent down kindly over Bess.

'Come, you must cheer up, Mrs. Smith,' he said. 'Get to the window—look out—read—work—do something.'

He rose to go.

Marks went with him to the door.

'Can't you give her anything, sir?' he said. 'She's changing dreadful. She's breaking her heart.'

'My good sir,' answered the doctor, 'I don't keep any plaister that can heal that. She doesn't want medicine. She wants change and fresh air. Get her away from London—seaside—bracing air. Talk to her—keep her from thinking.'

That was Mr. Goff's advice on the first day, but, just to please old Marks and to make a show for his fee, he sent a tonic for Bess to take.

He called again and again, and each time he was more desirous that Bess should be got away.

He told her father plainly what was the matter. Her great trouble, whatever it was, had completely shattered her strength, and there was a danger that if she brooded on it much more her mind might suffer.

There was a look in her eyes that frightened him.

One day Marks told the doctor their history. It was necessary he should know it, for Bess's condition was becoming alarming.

The terrible sentence pronounced on her husband, the thought of his awful fate, and the long, weary years of separation, had crushed her gentle, loving heart. It seemed as though the thread of her life had been suddenly snapped. She was like the sweet meadowland flower, which,

crushed in its beauty by the heel of some passing hind, never lifts its head to the sun again, but slowly withers and dies.

It was after one of his short visits that Mr. Goff put the case plainly to Marks.

'Look here, my good fellow,' he said; 'I'm not coming here to rob you any more. Take her away from London at once. Get to the sea, and let her have the air as much as you can. If you can't afford it, or won't do it, the end isn't far off.'

'You don't think she will die?' asked Marks, in an agonized tone, clutching the doctor's arm.

'If she's got a good constitution she will not die. The mind will go before the body. It's seaside or lunatic asylum—which you like.'

The doctor was quite right. A hundred little things bore out his opinion. Bess would sit for hours staring into vacancy and talking to herself. She did not cry. She sat with tearless, lacklustre eyes, repeating to herself the sad story of her later life. There was no emotion, no passionate outbreak, only the monotonous misery. Marks made up his mind to obey the doctor's instructions at once.

Bess offered no opposition. She seemed to have lost all power of will, all care or thought for herself. She expressed no surprise when her father told her they were going on a journey. She was still feeble and weak, but she could get about, and she obeyed him as the tired child obeys its nurse—mechanically.

Somehow or other, his daughter's illness seemed to have obliterated all other thoughts from the old man's mind. In that great trouble he lost sight of the disgrace of the young squire and the sufferings of the old one. He seldom thought of either.

It seemed to him that something very dreadful had happened a long time ago, but that was all over now, and he had nothing to do with it.

He had but one thing left to him now—his daughter. He knew that the prison-gates had closed upon her husband for years—that he was walled up in a living tomb, and might as well be dead. He knew that the old master he had served so faithfully, and whose service he had quitted stealthily and like a thief in the night, was lying paralyzed in his lonely mansion, body and mind alike wrecked by the blow which, as he thought, his own son had dealt him.

He had read in the papers the whole terrible history, for they had not been loth to comment on it, and his own name had been seized upon by the sensation-mongers and artfully interwoven With a narrative more fiction than fact.

To shun publicity and avoid inquiry, he had hidden his real name when he took the little London lodgings. All his desire was to forget the horrible past and devote himself to the poor girl cast back to his loving arms once more by the cruel waves of misfortune.

He accepted the doctor's warning, and acted upon it at once. He had still enough money left to last them some months with care, and when Bess's health was re-established he supposed they must set to and work, and, if Bess was too weak, why, he must work for the two.

He went down to the seaside with his invalid daughter and nursed her day and night. He painted the future to her brightly, talked of setting the lawyers to work to prove George's innocence yet, and so bouyed her with hope that at last he saw a faint color coaxed into the white cheeks again and the dull eyes grow bright with tears.

As tenderly as he had watched and cherished her when she was a babe did the old father watch and cherish her now.

And just as he was rejoicing over the cure which time and the fresh sea-breezes had effected, a new trouble presented itself.

The expenses of the trip and the long period of idleness had absorbed all his savings, and he saw the time approaching when the luxuries he had indulged his sick daughter in would be unobtainable, and the bare necessities of life would have to be earned with the sweat of his wrinkled brow and the labours of his old arms.

He thought about it night and day. What could he do?

The mystery was solved for him. It was destined that after the long labour of his years he should toil no more.

One morning he did not come to his daughter's room as was his wont. He had waited on her hand and foot. He had risen first and done the menial work of the little rooms they rented in a side street. He had pottered about in his old-fashioned Country way, and put things ship-shape, and then gone up to the invalid's room with a gentle step, carrying her a cup of tea made with his own hand.

One morning Bess woke and heard the clock strike.

It was an hour later than her father's usual time to stand by her bedside.

Alarmed, she rose and dressed herself hurriedly, taxing her new-found strength.

She went across to his room, knocked, and received no answer.

She pushed the door open and ran to the bedside.

'Father,' she cried, 'are you ill? Speak, father, speak!'

The face—the dear old face that had never frowned on her—lay on the pillow still, though the sun was high. There was a sweet smile on it, sueh as she had often seen there in the days before their troubles came. It was a calm, happy face that Bess gazed upon that morning, and well it might be, for all the old lodge-keeper's troubles were over at last. The poverty he had dreaded would never come upon him now. The labour he had nerved himself for he would never be called upon to do. God had willed it otherwise, and had called him home to rest.

Who shall say that that night in his dreams fancy had not touched his eyelids with her fairy fingers and bidden him see the old happy home-life once again?

He had died in his sleep with a smile upon his honest face.

And the woman who clasped the cold hand, and knelt by the little bed and sobbed, was henceforth alone in the world.

CHAPTER XLV.
A FRIEND IN NEED.

Mrs. Adrian never read the newspaper herself. Her eyes ‘were not what they used to be,’ and she declined to avail herself of the artificial aid of glasses. She had tried spectacles at first, but she had always been laying them down and losing them, or treading on them and breaking them.

Mrs. Adrian’s spectacles had been a fearful source of trouble to the whole family. If she lost them, Ruth was started all over the house on a tour of exploration, and Mrs. Adrian was always quite sure that she had put them in sueh and such a place, and somebody must have moved them. As a rule, they were found in close proximity to the owner. She usually hid them in her lap under her work, or shut in the book she had been reading. One night the entire household were kept up till two in the morning. Mrs. Adrian without her spectacles and her temper at the same time vowed she would not go to bed till the glasses were found. Under the circumstances, Ruth and Mr. Adrian felt bound to share her vigil, and they joined the servants in a room-to-room and corner-to-corner visitation. Mrs. Adrian sat in her easy-chair, and resolutely refused to budge till her spectacles were found. She wouldn’t lose them for the world. It was fortunate that she did move at last, for she had been sitting on the spectacles all the time.

When they were broken and sent to be repaired, they always came back with glasses that didn’t suit—at least Mrs. Adrian always declared so. At last, one day, after breaking a pair, which had been lost for nearly a week and had eventually turned up in the flour-barrel, where Mrs. Adrian had dropped them while on a tour of inspection through the larder, the good lady vowed and declared that she’d never wear another pair as long as she lived, and she did there and then incontinently fling the damaged pair out of the window in a temper, much to the astonishment of the vicar of the parish, who was passing at the time, and who, bowing politely to the mistress of the house, received the ejected spectacles in the hollow of his hat.

Mrs. Adrian kept her word, and without much sacrifice on her part, for her eyesight was still fairly good, and she could do her knitting and her darning without glasses.

But she declared she couldn’t read, and so, for her edification, Ruth was requested to read the morning paper aloud—that is, such portions of it as she thought would be interesting to her mother.

Under these circumstances the concealment of the failure of the Great Blankshire Bank for a time was not so difficult a task as it would otherwise have been.

Mr. Adrian was loth to let the blow fall upon his wife. He knew that eventually she would have to know it, but he could not summon up courage to break it yet.

With all her peculiarities, she had been a loyal and a devoted partner to him, and, looking back upon their long years of happiness and comfort, it broke his heart to think that now, in her old age—now, when infirmity had come upon her—the remaining years of her life might have to be passed in discomfort and poverty.

He hoped that there might be better news, that the report was exaggerated, and that the affairs of the bank might not be so hopelessly involved.

Ruth read the morning paper to her mother, but it was a terrible task. Over and over again her mind wandered, and her thoughts got mixed up with the matter she was reading aloud.

Her mother noticed her peculiar manner, and Ruth explained that she had a bad headache and wasn’t well, and Mr. Adrian also put his haggard looks down to a sleepless night with the toothache.

It was not a happy little party that sat round the breakfast-table that morning, for father and daughter had the burden of a terrible secret to bear, and were denied that greatest of all reliefs in trouble, open lamentation.

Ruth, like her father, had great hopes that the worst had been made of the affair. She was anxious to see Marston, and get him to ascertain for her all particulars.

She was also terribly troubled about Gertie. What could she do with the child now? If this sudden and complete poverty were coming on them, how could she burden their straitened resources with another mouth to feed?

A week passed away—a week of terrible anxiety. Every paper teemed with details of the great bank failure, and harrowing stories of the force with which the blow would fall upon the unhappy shareholders.

During the week Marston called once or twice, but Gurth never came near.

Marston heard from Ruth what had happened, but refrained from mentioning it in the presence of Mrs. Adrian, and he had no opportunity of seeing the old gentleman alone.

Mr. Adrian noticed the fact that Gurth, who had once been a constant visitor, now never came near the place.

He imagined that his connection with the collapsed bank was known, and that the wealthy Mr. Egerton, whose attentions to Ruth had been once so marked, was afraid to continue the acquaintance, lest he might be asked for assistance.

It stung the old man's pride to think that perhaps some such idea was in the mind of Ruth's admirer.

He felt really grateful to Marston, whose conduct was in striking contrast to that of his rival.

From looking forward to his visits, and finding relief in his company, he began to regard him as a friend in need. He longed for some one to whom he could unburden himself about the terrible calamity which had come upon him, some one whose advice he could ask, and whose assistance he could claim.

One evening Marston and he were left alone. Mrs. Adrian was not very well, and Ruth had gone upstairs to see if she wanted for anything.

Mrs. Adrian, out of sorts generally, wanted a great many things, but most of all she needed some one to grumble at, and when she got Ruth upstairs she was loth to let her go while there was a fault to be found or a lament to be uttered.

Left alone with Marston, half hesitatingly at first, he introduced the subject, but, gathering courage as he went on from the sympathetic attitude of his listener, he gradually poured out the whole story of his misfortunes, and asked Marston, as a man of business and a man of the world, what he ought to do under the circumstances.

Marston was delighted at the confidence reposed in him. It showed conclusively that he had won the esteem of Ruth's father—that the object for which he had so patiently toiled was not far distant now.

In anticipation of some such confession, Marston had studied the subject, and armed himself to the teeth with figures. He was enabled to present the most hopeful view possible to the old gentleman, and almost to persuade him that if the worst came to the worst there would still be something left from the wreck of his estate.

Gradually, beneath his cheery influence John Adrian gathered heart.

'Ah,' he said, 'it does me good to hear you talk like that. If I were young I believe I could struggle through; but I am old, and my energy is gone. I have no one to look to for counsel or help. I have no son, no one but two weak women who look to me for protection.'

Marston shaped his lips for a reply and hesitated.

For the first time in his life his self-possession deserted him.

On the way in which the words he was about to utter were received depended his whole future destiny.

He recovered himself with an effort, and then, with a slight tremor in his voice at first, he commenced to plead the cause he had nearest at heart.

With powerful eloquence and genuine feeling he besought the old man's attention while he, too, made a confession. Rapidly he told the narrative of his adventurous life, painting it in soft colours to attract the sympathy of his listener. He had led a wild youth, but that was past. A sober and laborious manhood had atoned for the errors of those old times. He had struggled on, with one object in view. In the midst of a thousand temptations he had stood firm, sustained by the thought of the reward which might be his, and he came to the end of the narrow path with unstained honour.

He confessed his long love for Ruth. He told how he had determined after his first repulse to win her yet, for her sake to undo the past and return to fling himself at her feet, worthy of her at last.

He pleaded so eloquently—he painted his hopes and fears with such genuine pathos—that the tears came into John Adrian's eyes more than once; but he held his peace and let Marston continue his appeal.

Gradually Marston came from the past to the present. With delicacy

and tact he alluded to the present position of Ruth's father. He would do his best to extricate him from it. He a friend in need, would not Mr. Adrian give him the right to act on his behalf as one of the family?

He, Marston, was wealthy; he had a home to offer not only to Ruth, but, if the worst came, to Ruth's father and mother. He might not have spoken so soon had not this calamity occurred. Now it was the duty of those who loved them to rally round them. Let the first friend to stretch out a helping hand to Ruth's father and mother be the man who loved their daughter as his own life.

Mr. Adrian held out his hand to Marston as he uttered the last words of his impassioned appeal.

'Ned,' he said—'let me call you by the old name—if the answer to your prayer rested with me you should have it at once. But there is Ruth to be consulted. Whatever suitor comes for her—be he rich or be he poor—he must ask her for her heart ere he comes to me for her hand.'

Marston, his generally emotionless face bright with a new expression of hope, took John Adrian's hand and clasped it.

'Let me go now,' he said, 'and leave you to think of what I have said. Ask Ruth if I have her heart. If her answer be "No," let me be still your friend. If her answer be "Yes," then let me be your son-in-law.'

He smiled a pleasant smile, shook bands with his host, and went out hurriedly.

He wanted air.

A sensation most terrible had come upon him. In the midst of his joy at winning the consent of Ruth's father so easily—just when his heart was beating quicker at the thought of Ruth's love, which was to hallow his manhood after all—the whole tissue of lies he wrapped about his life was torn away. Hideous, monstrous, and appalling, the story seared itself in letters of flame upon his brain. What had he done? He had asked honest old John Adrian for his daughter's hand. And when this hand was his, and they stood at God's altar, the name of Adrian would be hers no more.

Whose would she bear in its place?

That of Edward Marston—liar, hypocrite, swindler, forger, thief.

'Great heavens!' he cried aloud, as he paced the street at a rapid rate in his excitement; 'why have I never known this before? Why have I never seen how vile and loathsome sin was till now—now, when the greatest stake I ever played for in my life is all but won?'

Answer him, ye moralists—ye who have pried into man's little life below with the microscope of your philosophy—ye mental dissectors, who have laid bare man's heart and traced each separate agony to its great first cause. Tell him that the way of transgressors is hard; that it is in the prize we try most fiercely for, in the treasure we plot and plan to gain, sacrificing in the mad race for it all that is best and noblest in life, that we often find our bitterest punishment.

Marston had won Ruth Adrian's love; it was in the knowledge of possessing that which he looked upon as the crowning glory of his life that his chastisement commenced.

And even while he strode through the quiet streets, his brain aflame with remorse and fear, Ruth lay, happy and blushing, with her sweet face upon her old father's shoulder, and confessed her love in a few artless, womanly words.

'God bless you, Ruth, my darling!' said the old man tenderly, as he raised her face, and bent his lips to hers. 'God bless you both!'

Can you hear it, Edward Marston? Up to the throne of the Most High, from the lips of Ruth's father, there has gone a prayer that God will bless you both.

Is it not blasphemy to link those names together in a prayer?

Edward Marston and Ruth Adrian!

You have won her. She is yours for better for worse; she is yours, and will bear your name; her fate is linked with yours, her life bound up in you, until one of you shall kiss the cold lips of the other for the last time.

And between you for ever there must hang a veil—a veil that must hide from the sight of all men, and from her, the ghastly skeletons that lie in the grave of your sinful past.

Pray God now, as you never prayed before, then, that this grave may not give up its dead—that no spectre may arise to cry, 'Thou art the man!' and drag you down to shame and degradation in the sunniest hours of your first pure happiness.

From the moment Ruth Adrian links her life with yours you cannot fall alone.

CHAPTER XLVI.
SMITH AND CO. DISSOLVE PARTNERSHIP.

Edward Marston was engaged to Ruth Adrian, and was received by her parents as her accepted suitor. Mrs. Adrian, when the news of Marston's offer was communicated to her, was first indignant and then tearful. She prophesied the most terrible disasters; she charged Ruth with wishing to disgrace the family, and vowed that she would never be civil to him—never! She declared that the day Ruth married him she would cast her off for ever, and finally relieved her feelings by turning upon her husband and denouncing him as a monster in human shape, for ever giving his sanction to such an arrangement. She declared that Mr. Adrian would have given Ruth to a Red Indian, if that noble savage had only asked him; and she indulged in a half-sarcastic sketch of her poor daughter being united with Red Indian ceremonies to a bridegroom dressed principally in a necklace of scalps, and suggested that if the marriage feast had consisted of cold boiled missionaries, no doubt Mr. Adrian would have accepted an invitation, and expected her to do the same.

'My dear Mary,' exclaimed Mr. Adrian, half amused and half annoyed, 'what on earth has Ned Marston to do with Red Indians and their marriage ceremonies? He isn't a Red Indian.'

'No!' groaned the lady; 'I'd sooner he was. He's worse. I always disliked him, and I always shall. What do you know about him? What is he but an adventurer? And what are you going to say to Mr. Egerton, I should like to know?'

'You needn't trouble yourself about Mr. Egerton, my dear; he has left the country.'

'What?'

'Yes. I have ascertained at his house that he has gone on a voyage to America, and no one knows when he will be back.'

'Well, I'm sure!' exclaimed Mrs. Adrian; 'and never so much as to call on us to say "Good-bye "!'

'It was not polite, was it?'

'Polite! But there, I never liked the man. He couldn't look at you straight in the face.'

Mr. Adrian was too good a diplomatist, having once got his wife into a spirit antagonistic to the deposed favourite, to let the matter rest. He declared he could see no rudeness in it; that a gentleman in Egerton's position couldn't be expected to take them into his confidence, etc.; and so skilfully did he play his cards, that at last Mrs. Adrian declared, with genuine indignation, that she believed he would lay himself down and let people trample on him.

'But I won't, I can assure you,' she exclaimed. 'We're as good as Mr. Gurth Egerton, every bit, and Ruth's a wife any prince of the land might be proud of. And to think she should want to throw herself away on this Marston! There, I haven't patience to talk about it!'

Gradually, however, Mrs. Adrian moderated the rancour of her tongue. Marston was not the man, when he had set his heart on anything, to fail for lack of courage or ability. He was determined to conquer Mrs. Adrian's apathy, and he succeeded to a limited extent. He was so pleasant, so polite, he yielded so readily in argument, and was so unobtrusive in his visits and so considerate in his attentions to the old lady, that at last she was good enough to acknowledge that really he had changed for the better, and that after all Ruth might have chosen a less presentable and less agreeable sweetheart.

But while Marston was winning his way into the good graces of Ruth's mother, he was not neglecting the serious aspect of her father's affairs. He went into the business with a thoroughness which quite astonished Mr. Adrian, and arrived at the result in a very short space of time.

It was not an agreeable result.

No amount of skill and no amount of juggling could solve the arithmetical problem in any way but one.

Taking the estimated amount of the call to be made on each shareholder in the unfortunate Blankshire Bank as correct, nearly the whole of the capital on the interest of which the Adrians lived would be swept away.

It was not a large fortune that Mr. Adrian had retired on, but it was one which he had always considered would be ample for himself and his

wife with their inexpensive tastes, and for his daughter when they were gone.

Marston did not attempt to hide the result for a moment. He put it plainly before his future father-in-law. Mr. Adrian must make up his mind to live for the remainder of his days upon the wreck of his little fortune, and that, calculated generously, would yield him about £150 to £200 a year.

'We must give up this house at once,' said Mr. Adrian, with a sigh. 'I feel as if every penny I spend now I am defrauding the creditors of.'

'Yes, you must give the house up. You cannot keep it on,' said Marston. He didn't feign the slightest sorrow. Why should he? He was only too delighted to think that at last he was going to get some pleasure out of the money he had risked so much to get. Roughly estimated, he had cleared by his share in the transactions of Smith and Co. some £25,000. Some of the 'hauls,' as they are technically called, had been enormous. He could employ his £25,000 legitimately now; and he was certain that with this capital and his talents he could speculate as successfully in honesty as he had formerly done in crime.

'Yes, you must give up your house,' he repeated; 'and the sooner the better.'

'It is a terrible blow,' exclaimed the old man, the tears coming into his eyes, 'to break up the home where we've been so happy all these years. Poor mother—how ever shall I break it to her!'

'I have a plan,' said Marston, eagerly, taking the old gentleman's hand, and watching his face anxiously. 'Let this marriage take place as soon as possible. Ruth does not wish to be separated from you. Come and live with us. That can be your excuse to Mrs. Adrian for selling off.'

For a moment the old man doubted if he heard aright. Then, smiling through the big drops that trickled down his cheek, he pressed the young man's hand exclaiming:

'God bless you, Ned Marston; you are a good fellow!'

So in due time it was all arranged. The marriage was to take place in a short time; there was no need for a long engagement now, for had not the sweethearts been as good as engaged over ten years ago? Mrs. Adrian, of course, protested against the idea that she should give up her home and go to Ruth's; but she yielded at last—yielded suddenly and decisively when Mr. Adrian began to oppose the idea, pretending that he had thought better of it.

At the Adrians' Marston passed now the happiest hours he had ever known. He had grown to both admire and reverence his future father-in-law. The nobility of the old man's character was brought iuto full relief by the blow which had fallen on him so unexpectedly; and often Marston would watch him as he sat with Ruth's hind in his, and wondered what his own old age would be like. He shuddered even as he thought of it.

Yet when he could keep his thoughts from the past and lose his dread of the future, he was supremely happy. Ruth's love seemed to have flung a cloak of purity about him that shielded and protected him. It seemed to him that he had passed from purgatory to paradise; that loving Ruth, and being beloved by her, he was lifted to a purer atmosphere, where nothing that was evil could follow him.

This was the bright side of his life during the days of courtship—during the time that must pass before he could call Ruth his wife.

The gold-robbery, in which he had been the leading spirit, had created an enormous sensation. Not only England but the Continent rang with the story of the daring and mysterious theft.

It was impossible for the authorities to say where it had taken place. The English company repudiated all liability, declaring that it had been committed on the French line; and the French company were equally confident that the gold had been abstracted in England. Then both parties met on mutual ground, and argued that it might have been done on the steamer. The loss was not discovered until the safes were opened in Paris, so that in the lawsuits which followed there really was no proof to offer as to where the responsibility really lay. The matter was eventually compromised, but no clue was obtained to the thieves, though the detective departments of both countries went into the matter *con amore*, in hope of elucidating the international mystery.

In the meantime the thieves had had to proceed with the utmost caution in realizing their booty, and many an anxious moment had Marston to pass before he could consider himself the master of the little fortune his railway journey had resulted in.

Some of the bullion was disposed of through trustworthy channels,

where no trace would be left, but a large quantity of it had to be melted down before it could be conveniently got rid of.

During all this time Marston had to meet and consult with his companions in crime. These meetings distressed and annoyed him. He shrank almost with horror from the familiar salutations of Heckett, Brooks, and Preene. He felt degraded and contaminated by them. It seemed to him that he was outraging Ruth by going into her presence after he had quitted the society of his accomplices.

They began to notice his altered manner and they became suspicious of him. Was it possible he was going to turn traitor? His face sometimes wore the nervous, anxious look which the professional Judas cannot always banish. But, consulting together, Heckett, Brooks, and Preene dismissed the notion as absurd. How could he play them false? It was to his interest not to. Besides, he had the reputation of being a chief among swindlers—a master-mind. It is not from such men there is danger to be feared. It is generally some outsider, who hasn't the talent to make a rogue, who proves a traitor, and, lacking pluck, turns his cowardice to some account.

Marston saw that his manner was attracting notice, and he controlled himself directly. He hurried on the settlement, however, and even agreed to accept less than his original share in order to get out of the business.

When, in due course, everything had been safely done and the traces removed, the four men met for the last time in a lonely house which they had taken near Kilburn, and where the melting operations had been conducted.

It had been agreed between them that, once their joint property realized and the division fairly made, they should separate for good. Marston had long ago announced his intention to 'turn the game up;' Brooks had determined to get out of the country for a bit in case of accidents; Preene had not said what he was going to do, and Heckett had been equally silent. He had never been very communicative, and as he was only an extra hand, laid on for this special job, none of them troubled much about him.

When the night came, however, for them to separate, and they left the house, Heckett, who had walked on by himself, found that Marston was coming quickly after him.

'Well, Josh,' he said, in his cheeriest tones, 'I don't think you've done badly, have you?'

'I ain't done as well as you,' answered Mr. Heckett, surlily; 'but then I ain't a swell.'

'What are you going to do now Josh? Going into the animal line again?'

'No, I ain't got no animals now, savin' that there parrot, as cusses wus nor ever. I carn't have no business now the gal's gorn. She was my right hand like, and I ain't been the same since she went.'

'Oh,' said Marston, looking at Heckett quite innocently, 'then she's never come back?'

'Come back? no. I've heerd on her twice as she's safe and 'appy, but I ain't been able to find out where she is. In a re-formeratury or something, I s'pose.'

'Very likely,' answered Marston.

'I thought oncet as somebody had got 'old on her for to get her to blab about the crib; but I don't think that, cus they'd a sent her back directly they found out as she know'd nothink. Still it's a rum go, her hookin' it like that. I shall come across her some day, I guess,' added the old dog-fancier, shaking his fist at an imaginary Gertie, 'and then I'll make it warm for her, the jade.'

They had reached the end of the Kilburn Road, and were getting to Maida Vale.

'I'm going off here, Josh,' said Marston. 'If we don't meet again, good-night.'

'If we don't meet again!' exclaimed Heckett, with surprise. 'What, are you a-goin' to furren parts?'

'Perhaps.'

'That's ockard,' growled Heckett. 'Suppose I might want to see you on business?'

'I've finished with business.'

Heckett contracted his features into something that was meant for a smile.

'Going to retire, eh? Made your fortin. Well, you have had a good haul out of this affair, and no mistake. Come, gov'nor, don't you think you

ought to stand me another thou.?'

'No, I don't,' answered Marston decidedly. 'A bargain's a bargain, and you've had your share.'

'All right, gov'nor; only, of course, the more I get now the less likely I should be to get hard up and 'ave pr'aps to come a ferretin' out old friends and a borrerin' of 'em.'

Marston looked at his companion sharply. He understood the implied threat.

'When that misfortune happens, Josh, it will be time enough to talk about it. Good night.'

Without stopping to bear Heckett's reply, Marston turned away from him, crossed the road, and turned down a side street. He was anxious to cut the conversation short, for it annoyed him.

Heckett's half-veiled threat had seriously alarmed him. He had so much need now to bury the past, and he didn't at all relish the idea of Josh Heckett pursuing him into the happy future which he hoped and believed awaited him.

CHAPTER XLVII.
MR. JABEZ MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Her master having once again departed on his travels, Mrs. Turvey had plenty of leisure to attend to her own business, and the most important business she had on hand was Jabez.

If the elderly clerk of Messrs. Grigg and Limpet had some reason to complain of Mr. Gurth Egerton coming home in the unexpected manner which has been fully related in the earlier chapters of this veracious narrative, he had also cause to complain of his equally abrupt departure, for it left him completely at the housekeeper's mercy.

She gave him no peace. She pursued him, to use one of his own poetic images, like the hunter pursues the deer; and really, in the way Jabez endeavoured to evade the Nimrod in petticoats, he was uncommonly like that timid quadruped.

If he saw her at the top of the street he dodged round a corner and ran. If she called at the office, he hid and sent word he was out. Perhaps this latter practice is hardly in keeping with the habits of the deer, and therefore the simile breaks down. Jabez broke down at last. He gave in, as a weak-minded man always does if he is only resolutely hunted by a plucky sportswoman.

He found it better to hark back to his old tactics and dissemble; and thus it came about that during Mr. Egerton's absence he was a frequent patron of Mr. Egerton's tea and Mr. Egerton's toast.

Now, upon several occasions there was a third party to these little festive gatherings, and Jabez was by no means sorry for it, though when he was introduced to the party aforesaid, and found him a railway guard and brother to his lady-love, he had a strong opinion that his presence was part of a deep-laid plot.

'He's to be a witness, 'thought Jabez to himself. 'Susan's to draw me out, and he is to hear what I say. Jabez, my boy, be on your guard—your railway guard.'

Jabez giggled at his own little joke, and he would doubtless have shone, but Mrs. Turvey had taken the shine out of him. His friends had long remarked the disappearance of his shininess. They declared him to have become remarkably dull.

One evening, when Jabez arrived by appointment, he found Mr. and Mrs. Turvey in earnest conversation. After tea Mrs. Turvey asked him, with a pleasant smile, if he would do her a favour. She particularly wanted to go out with her brother for half an lour, and she did not wish to leave the house empty.

The servant had gone out for her monthly holiday. Would Jabez kindly remain and smoke his pipe and make himself comfortable by the fire until Mrs. Turvey returned?

Mr. Turvey joined his requests to those of his sister. It was his last night in London. He had left his old employment as a railway guard, and was going into business in the north of England. His sister was just going to help him pack up his traps, etc., for he'd lost his right hand, Miss Topsey having gone out to service as a nursemaid.

Jabez was quite willing to oblige without such a long explanation.

In fact, an idea had suddenly occurred to Mr. Duck which rendered him personally anxious to be left alone in Gurth Egerton's house.

When the brother and sister were gone, not without sundry injunctions from the lady to Jabez to be careful and not to be frightened of noises and ghosts, etc., that gentleman, instead of lighting his pipe and sitting down to a comfortable smoke, hunted about, found a candle, lit it, and stood still, in an attitude of deep consideration.

'I'll search the house from top to bottom but I'll find'em, if they ain't locked up,' he said. 'At any rate I can read'em, and see how far I have committed myself.'

Having first carefully examined the sitting-room, looked in all the cupboards, boxes, and chimney ornaments, Jabez proceeded, candle in hand, to find out where Mrs. Turvey's other apartments were situated.

It was a very improper proceeding on his part—a mean and despicable trick, which should have caused him to blush, and which will, I am sure, gentle reader, cause you to blush for him. I will not attempt to palliate his offence. It was shocking, but he did it; and we are compelled, in our position of faithful chronicler and attentive reader, to look on. But we have recorded our protest, and done our duty so far. Jabez soon found

the room dedicated to the slumbers of his Susan.

It was full of little boxes and baskets, all of which Jabez deliberately rummaged in his search for something which he had set his heart on finding.

But his diligence was not rewarded.

The time passed on, and his search grew hurried. He did not know how much longer he would be undisturbed. Susan had a latch-key, and could let herself in at any minute.

He would put up the chain at the front door. He could easily say he was nervous.

The idea was no sooner conceived than it was carried out. Now, he was secure from surprise. Now, he could continue his investigations without alarm.

Routing about, Jabez dragged some boxes out of a corner. One was a trunk—one of those old-fashioned mottled-paper covered trunks, which servants used when their dresses were made without flounces and could be folded small.

Holding the candle, and peering down, he was astonished to find a key in the lock. It was one of a bunch: there were a dozen on the ring.

'Hum!' exclaimed Jabez; 'here's a bit of luck. Now if I only knew where those precious letters are, I could get them as easy as anything.'

Inside the trunk there was something which excited Jabez's curiosity directly. It was a cash-box, and it was locked.

'There!' he muttered; 'that's where she keeps her savings. I wonder what she's got. Perhaps the letters are there.' He rattled the box, but there was no responding chink.

He took the keys and tried them one after the other.

The last one fitted.

He turned it, and the secrets of Mrs. Turvey's cash-box were at his mercy.

He lifted the lid and examined the contents. At first a look of astonishment overspread his features, and then the long-absent shine came back to his face once more. It broadened and spread over his bald head—it deepened and wrapped him in one vast smile of joy.

He drew a long breath, closed the box, put it carefully away, and then executed a small war-dance all to himself, knocking over two chairs and causing the toilet-table to rock in response to his elephantine gambols.

'Hang the letters!' he exclaimed; 'I don't want'em now. Who'd a thought it? Who'd a thought it?'

Who, indeed, Mr. Jabez?

Who could have imagined that hidden away in her cash-box Mrs. Turvey had the savings of a lifetime, all invested in substantial securities, with interest-bearing coupons payable to bearer, and amounting to the good round sum of one thousand pounds?

'Oh, she's a deep un!' exclaimed Jabez, mopping his shiny brow; 'she isn't artful at all! Oh no; certainly not. Ah, Susan, my dear, if you'd only have told me this, what a lot of trouble you would have saved yourself and me. A thousand pounds! It's yours, Jabez, my boy. It's in your pocket. I can feel it there.'

Jabez gave his pocket an anticipatory pat of approval. Then he put everything tidy, blew out the candle, took the chain down from the front-door, and seated himself by the parlour fire, the prettiest picture of innocence and contentment imaginable.

In about an hour Susan returned. She was loud in her apologies, but Jabez silenced her at once. In his most winning manner he assisted her off with her shawl. He was so agreeable Mrs. Turvey looked round to see if he'd found the whisky bottle.

'Sit down, Susan, my love; I have something to say to you,' he whispered, leading Mrs. Turvey to a seat.

Then he poured out his affections. Then, with all the poetry he was capable of without referring to his Complete Edition of the Poets at home, he told the astonished spinster how his cold and cruel conduct had been a cloak under which he disguised his real sentiments! How he had deceived her in order to test the reality of her affection for him!

Mrs. Turvey was completely nonplussed. It was so unexpected. But she was too wise a woman to play the prude now. She had angled too long for her fish to hesitate about bringing it to the bank when it had bitten.

There and then Jabez received the assurance of complete forgiveness, there and then all differences were cleared up, the happy day more than

hinted at, and the contract sealed with a solid and substantial kiss, that sounded through the great house and echoed along the untrodden corridors.

Singing to himself and shining on everyone, Jabez trotted home that evening in the seventh heaven of delight. A great trouble—the fear of an action for breach and publicity for his poetic effusions—had vanished, and he had found his hitherto repugnant lady-love an heiress blessed with a thousand golden charms.

Jabez was so polite and agreeable that evening at home that Georgina was quite astonished. She also noticed the sudden reappearance of his long-lost shininess.

She teased him; but it was no good—he shone. She contra-dieted him—he shone. She gave him a piece of dry cheese and some flat beer left from dinner for his supper—he shone. She turned the gas off at the meter and went to bed early, leaving him alone with the candle in the parlour, but still he shone. And after Georgina had retired, he pulled the guttering scrap of candle allowed him nearer to his elbow, produced a lead-pencil and a piece of paper, and commenced to compose an advertisement:

MR. JABEZ DUCK, for many years CONFIDENTIAL CLERK with Messrs. GRIGG & LIMPET, begs to inform the Nobility and Gentry he has OPENED a PRIVATE INQUIRY OFFICE. Investigations conducted with the Greatest Secrecy and Dispatch.’

To start a private inquiry office, have secrets poured into his ear, and to revel in an atmosphere of mystery, was the dream of his life.

Susan and her thousand would enable him to turn his dream into an absolute reality.

CHAPTER XLVIII.
MR. SETH PREENE EXECUTES A LITTLE COMMISSION.

Marston was supremely happy when he was with Ruth, but when he was alone he was perpetually haunted by fears and misgivings. Twenty times over he would have cast his share of the gold robbery away, if with it he could have got rid of Heckett. He had no fear of the others. Preene and Brooks were honourable men in the sense in which the word is understood by fine-art criminals. They were no more likely, even if their self-interest did not protect them, to round upon an accomplice, than the merchants and city magnates who meet together and float schemes for swindling the public are likely to denounce their co-conspirators. With these two worthies fraud was as much a business as account-cooking, secret promotion money, and lying prospectuses were to certain speculators whose dinners were once eaten by bankers and merchant-princes, and whose society was courted by the aristocracy. They had their code of morality. They swindled, but the nature of their business led them to swindle those who could generally afford to lose. Mr. Brooks was loud in his denunciation of the respectable gentlemen who preyed upon the poor, and who held out alluring baits for the small incomes of widows, curates, and retired officers.

Marston knew that so far as Brooks was concerned there was no fear, and Preene was too friendly to him ever to do him an injury. Besides, Preene could not betray him without injuring himself. His position was delicate in the extreme. He was secretly connected with the detective department, and it was his business always to be hand-and-glove with rogues. Marston had secured him long ago, struck his bargain, paid his price, and made him safe. Marston held the man’s fate in his hands. He alone of all the band knew Preene’s real position. A word from him would have cleared up the mystery of many a sudden arrest, of many a well-laid scheme which had been nipped in the bud.

Preene was a modern Jonathan Wild, but his double game was never suspected. The authorities had no idea that he ran with the hare, and the hare had not the slightest suspicion that he hunted with the hounds.

But though Marston was sure of Preene and Brooks, he felt supremely uncomfortable. Josh Heckett had been necessary to him, and he had used him at a time when he had no idea of a career in which Josh Heckett would be a thorn in his side.

He had always held the old dog-fancier safe; but now that he was about to marry and settle down into respectability, he foresaw occasions when Josh Heckett might be very objectionable.

He would no longer be at liberty to adopt aliases and disguises, to keep up connections with friends at Scotland Yard, to rush about the country and lead the life of a vagabond.

He was about to take a position in society—to be a fixture, as it were—to create ties which would bind him to a life of respectability. He would have to stand boldly before the world. There could be no hide-and-seek, no mystery. He was a rogue and a vagabond no longer. He was to be Edward Marston, Esquire, with a wife, a town house, servants, friends, and followers. He must be ‘get-at-able’ by visitors, tradespeople, postmen, and all sorts and conditions of men. How could he hold his head high and let all men see him, and yet avoid Josh Heckett?

He regretted now that he had ever had anything to do with Heckett. The idea that some day, just when he least expected him, this man would come prowling about, would discover his fear and prey upon it, and perhaps embitter his life for years, preyed upon him. At last he thought of nothing else. Ruth’s image at times was banished by the figure of the burly old ruffian in whose company he had committed his first folly, and that which he fully intended should be his last crime.

He worked himself up into a nervous state, and Ruth noticed it.

What was worrying him? Could he have any secrets from her now?

Mr. Adrian noticed it, and so did Mrs. Adrian. Marston grew alarmed. Was he already beginning to carry his heart on his sleeve? Was he so thoroughly afraid of Josh Heckett—an ignorant ruffian, a mere tool—he, Edward Marston, whose daring and skill had carried him safely through ten years of open defiance of all laws, human and divine?

He attempted to laugh the idea away, and failed. Then he grow furious. He paced his room, and cursed this man who came between him and his

happiness at the very threshold of his new life. He brooded over it, and grew desperate. Slowly and deliberately he set himself to conquer the difficulty. It was no time for hesitation.

'I will wed Ruth a free man,' he cried fiercely. 'I will sweep this trouble from my path now, when I can—while it is in my power to do it!'

The resolve once taken, Marston determined to lose no time, lest he should repent.

But he, who in the old time had entered on many a scheme of villainy with a light heart, actually hesitated and grew nervous about such a trifle as putting a dangerous foe out of the Way.

'Is my punishment already beginning?' he cried, later on, as he looked at his pale face in the glass.. 'Am I never to be free from the hideous nightmare of the past?'

He paced the room, not with his old bold, firm stride, but with rapid, uncertain steps. He kept glancing at the clock nervously, and listening, as though he expected a visitor.

It was just on eight o'clock, and the gas was alight in the dining-room of Eden Villa. A mass of papers was on the table before him. He had been going into his future plans, making calculations and directing letters. But the papers were all confusion. He had been unable to settle down; an hour ago he had pushed his work aside and begun to pace the room. That was seven o'clock, and he did not anticipate a visitor till eight, yet he was in a fever of expectation.

As the clock struck there was a knock at the door. Marston hurried out into the hall and opened it himself. He returned with a gentleman whose complexion was dark, and whose nose was of the kind known as 'hook.'

For an hour Mr. Preene sat and conversed with the master of Eden Villa. They talked in a low tone. Marston's voice trembled and his face was stern and white.

'For both our sakes you must do it, Preene. I assure you my information's right.'

'I can't think it,' answered Preene. 'How the deuce could he blow on us without letting himself in?'

'The reward is big, and it's payable to any person not being the actual perpetrator.'

'But that's just what he was. He broke the safes open. Why, he was the principal. You're wrong, Marston; I'm sure there's no fear from any one. Turvey's resigned and gone north out of the way, Brooks is as safe as a house, and Heckett daren't open his mouth. Why, he could be lagged for half a dozen burglaries if I only held up my finger. You're wrong, I'm sure.'

'Perhaps I am. Let us put it another way. Suppose you were offered a thousand pounds to get Heckett out of the way, could you do it?'

'Get him lagged, do you mean?'

'No; once in custody he might round, with an idea of turning Queen's evidence and getting off.'

'Of course. What do you want me to do, then? You don't want me to have him——'

Preene hesitated for a word.

Marston held up his hand deprecatingly.

'No, not that. God forbid that I should have any man's blood upon my head! But surely you can get him away—force him out of the country? A thousand if you do. Come!' Preene sat for a moment or two in deep thought.

'I'll try it,' he said presently; 'but it will be bad for us if I fail. If he gets an idea we're playing him false he'll never leave us.'

'But you must not fail!' cried Marston hoarsely. 'Come to me and say, "Josh Heckett's gone, he'll trouble us no more," and I'll give you a thousand pounds.'

Preene rose to go.

'I accept the terms,' he said, 'and I'll do my best. There's only one way to do it.'

'When shall I know the result?'

'By this time to-morrow.'

'So soon?'

'Yes. I must strike at once; and when I strike, the blow will either settle Josh or us.'

More than that Preene would not say. He declined to enter into any explanation of his plans.

All that night Marston never closed his eyes; Preene's words rang in his ears. If he failed! Bah! he wouldn't fail! He would get rid of Heckett. He would start a false hue and cry after him. He guessed his plan to frighten him out of the country under the idea that the truth was known and he must escape.

He passed the day in an agony of suspense.

He had an appointment with Ruth; he sent the servant round with a note to say important business detained him.

He dared not see her. He could not have concealed his anxiety and his trouble from her.

As the hours wore on and the time drew near when he would know the result of Preene's attempt, he was like a madman. A feeling such as he had never known before came upon him. The room was too small for him. He flung the windows open, and still the big drops of perspiration came upon his face.

Gradually the excitement wore itself out and he became calmer. He passed from one extreme to the other. He sat in the arm-chair near the window, pale, calm, and motionless. It was the calmness of despair. He felt sure now that Preene would fail, and fail in such a way that Heckett would be converted into a deadly enemy. He wondered what he should do if Heckett grew reckless and turned informer. Should he run away, or should he shoot himself? Oh, the gold! the cursed gold! What was the weight of all those precious bars to the weight lying on his heart now?

He remembered strange things as he sat there thinking. He remembered that when he was a lad his mother read bits out of the Bible to him and sang him children's hymns. He remembered something about conscience and the evil-doer, and he remembered there was a passage in the Bible about the way of transgressors being hard.

He was not repenting his evil deeds yet; they were only revenging themselves on him. He was only just beginning to find out that a man can't put his sins behind his back, be good and live happy ever after, just when he takes it into his head. He had thought in winning Ruth's love once more he was winning happiness, and the greatest misery he had ever known in his life had come upon him now he was her affianced husband.

The striking of the clock upon his mantelpiece broke in upon his reverie, *One! two! three! four! five! six! seven! eight!*

The hour had come!

He rose to his feet and listened for the sounds in the street.

The clock ticked away the seconds and still no Preene.

Five minutes past! ten minutes past! a quarter! At the quarter a sound. Footsteps coming hurriedly along the front path. He rushed into the hall and opened the door.

A figure, big and burly, brushed past him, and dashed through the open door of the dining-room.

Terrified he followed, and the figure faced round.

It was not Preene.

It was Heckett!

His face was red and swollen with passion. The great veins gorged with blood stood out like ridges, the blood-shot eyes were set like those of a tiger that bounds upon its prey.

Marston would have started back, but Heckett seized him by the arm, and, swinging him round into the centre of the room, Blood with his back against the door.

'So, Mr. Ned Marston,' he cried, with a fierce volley of oaths, 'this is your game, is it? You want to get rid of me cus I knows too much, and you must set that sneaking hound of a Preene on to me, to funk me out of the blooming country. But I'm not to be caught so easy, you thundering varmint!'

'What do you mean?' gasped Marston.

'Mean, you sweep? Why, I mean what I say. Preene came to me a-telling me there was a warrant out, and you was wanted, and Turvey had split; and he gave me a hundred, and told me to get over the pond as quick as lighterin'. But I was fly, guv'nor—too fly for you. I waitched Preene come in here larst night, and I guessed you wasn't up to no good. So you're going to retire, are you? And you wanted to get me out o' the way, for fear I should disturb you? Oh, you're a artful cove, you are, Ned Marston.'

Marston made no answer. His white face betrayed him; he saw himself in the power of a master-ruffian. He knew that Heckett would never

forgive the attempted treachery.

'Now, look here, mate,' roared Heckett. 'I'm going to take Preene's advice.'

Marston looked at him wonderingly.

'Yes, I'm goin' to obleege you; but as you sets such a vally on my room hinsted o' my cumpeny, you must pay a fair price.

Marston hesitated.

'And if I give you what you ask,' he said, 'what guarantee have I that you won't molest me again.'

'None,' answered Heckett. 'None, you double-faced cheat!

You've started the rounding game, and it's one as I can play at too. If you don't pay me handsome, I'll split on the whole d——d lot of you. Come!'

He had raised his voice, and was shouting so loud that neither of them heard a ring at the front door. The servant opened it, and the next moment Seth Preene walked into the room.

He closed the door and faced Heckett defiantly.

'You've come then?' he said.

'Yes. I told you I would.'

'You fool!' answered Preene; 'you've only fallen into a trap. We're tracked, every one of us. Hark!'

At that moment there came a loud rap at the door.

Marston turned ghastly white, and looked for some means of escape. Heckett drew a revolver from his pocket and turned like a beast at bay.

'Tell the girl not to open the door!' cried Preene; and Marston went to the top of the stairs and shouted down to the terrified girl to stay where she was.

The knocking was repeated louder and louder. Heckett gave a glance at the hall window. It was high, and looked on to the garden.

'I'm d.-d if I'm going to be taken like a rat in a hole,' he shouted; and he leapt out into the darkness.

There was a cry, a fierce oath, and then the sound of a shot, and footsteps hurrying across the garden.

Seth Preene ran to the window.

Marston, pale as death, followed him. 'What shall we do?' he whispered; 'the place is surrounded.'

'Bosh!' said Preene, 'it's all right; but I'm afraid the poor devil outside's been hit.'

He leant out and called, 'Dickson! Dickson!'

A faint voice answered him.

'Help! help! I'm hit! He's shot me!'

'What, in Heaven's name, does this mean?' gasped Marston, grasping Preene's arm.

'What does it mean? Why, that I've earned my thousand pounds, and that one of my men's been shot by that scoundrel Heckett.'

'One of *your* men?'

'Yes. One back and one front did the trick. You didn't want to bring a dozen.'

'Then it's all a——'

'Exactly; that's just what it is. I knew Heckett watched me here last night, and I didn't tell you, because I saw you were nervous already. I formed my scheme on that, and played my cards so as to force him up here to-night. It was the best place for a sham arrest I could think of. But bring a light and some water, and show us the way into the garden. I don't want the poor devil outside to bleed to death.'

Marston led the way below like a man in a dream.

He could hardly realize that he was free of Heckett, and that the terrible scene he had just gone through was mere pretence.

He had endured the agony of discovery—he had passed in those few minutes through the supremest torture. Now he could foresee what awaited him if ever he should be run to earth in stern reality.

The man outside was only slightly wounded, and was able to go with the one who had been stationed in front to the hospital. It was a flesh wound, and nothing serious.

When they were alone Preene explained fully to the astonished Marston what he had done. 'I wouldn't tell you before because I relied upon your terror to do the trick. If you hadn't been frightened, Heckett

would have smelt a rat. By Jove! you were in a state, Marston. I don't think you'll die game, you know.'

'Don't, for Heaven's sake,' cried Marston, with a shudder. 'But these men, what will they think?'

'That I came up here to arrest a suspected swindler, and that he's got clear away. They know me. Heckett will clear off now double quick, and you won't see him in a hurry. He's bound to believe it was a genuine arrest, and he's shot a policeman, and, for all he knows, killed him.'

Marston drew a long breath, and poured himself out half a tumblerful of brandy.

'It would almost have been a good job if he had killed him quite,' he said, with a ghastly smile. 'I fancy even Josh Heckett would hesitate about running his head into a noose.'

Preene elevated his eyebrows.

'My dear Marston,' he exclaimed, 'in these matters you are evidently not at home. You don't suppose I shall miss such an opportunity of completing my contract with artistic skill? For the sequel of this adventure read to-morrow's papers. I am going to the Telegraph office now. Ta-ta. I hope I shall see you looking better when I call to settle.'

The next day Marston turned to the *Daily Telegraph*, and was astonished to read the following paragraph:

'Last evening a policeman, while endeavouring to arrest a well-known burglar and bad character in the north of London, was shot by the ruffian and dangerously wounded, he is not expected to live many hours, the hospital authorities having no hope of his recovery.'

The paragraph was deliciously vague. It was sent in through an official channel and inserted. No hospital was mentioned, and nothing more was heard of the event. It was nobody's business to contradict or explain it.

But Marston read it, and he acknowledged that Seth Preene had indeed carried out his undertaking like a true artist.

And hurrying down that morning in a fast train to the coast, shaved and disguised, a big burly fellow, dressed like a seafaring man, bought a paper and asked a young gentleman who accompanied him to look it through and see if there were any murders or anything in the professional way.

And the young gentleman's quick eye caught that paragraph and he read it aloud, and the old seafaring fellow seemed to feel for the policeman very much, for his mouth twitched and he looked as if riding with his back to the engine didn't agree with him.

At the terminus, a point of embarkation for emigrants, the young gentleman and the seafaring man parted company.

'Good-bye Josh. God bless yer. Sorry yer-r got to go, but I 'spose yer must. Come back soon.'

'Good-bye, Boss,' answered the sailor; 'and don't forgit what I've told yer, and yer can keep the parrut.'

'Thank yer, Josh. It'll remind me o' you often. I shall fancy it's you a torking sometimes when it's extra strong in its languidge. Come back soon, old pal.'

'All right—now you hook it. I don't want to be seen along of nobody.'

'All right, Josh! but, bless you, nobody knows me here—I arn't distinguished enough in the perfesshun yet to be a universal sileberity.'

The friends parted, the young sinner and the old. The young sinner went back to London, and the sinner went over the seas, with the suspicion that he was a murderer added to the many things which should have been on his conscience if he had such an article in his kit.

CHAPTER XLIX.
MR. MARSTON GOES TO CHURCH.

The affairs of Mr. John Adrian having been thoroughly investigated, it was found that the tremendous call already made by the liquidators of the Great Blankshire Bank would sweep away so much of his capital that, after clearing off other outstanding liabilities, he would have an income of about £200 a year from all sources wherewith to enjoy himself for the remainder of his days, support his wife, maintain his daughter, and keep a little girl and a dog, that daughter's *protégés.* Since the crash, however, one item in this catalogue had been removed. Mr. Edward Marston had very generously offered to take Ruth off her father's hands.

Marston and Ruth were discussing the future together one morning, and naturally Gertie's unfortunate position had to be considered.

'Whatever shall I do about Gertie, Ned?' said Ruth. 'I can't leave her a burden upon poor papa now, and I can't turn her out and desert her, for it was really my fault that she lost her home.'

'A pretty home!' answered Marston. 'But I have no cause to speak against it, for it was there I met you, Ruth. I often wonder if things would have turned out as they have but for that chance meeting.'

'I wonder,' said Ruth, with a far-away look in her beautiful eyes. 'Oh, Ned, do you know I often think how strange it was that poor Gertie should be the means of bringing us together again! I never thought, when I took pity on a poor neglected little girl in the Dials, that my reward was to be so great. We owe a good deal to Gertie.'

'Of course we do, my darling, and so we won't be ungrateful. I tell you what, Ruth, if you wish it, Gertie and Lion shall come and live with us.'

'Oh, you dear, good boy, do you really mean it?'

'Of course I do. Do you think I couldn't see that you were worried about the child?'

Ruth was delighted at Marston's plan, for she really had been troubled about Josh Heckett's grand-daughter. She knew that her mother and father were to make their home with them, but she had not dared to broach the subject of Girtie. It seemed like trespassing on Marston's generosity.

John Adrian had accepted Marston's offer very gratefully, but it had been somewhat difficult to explain matters to Mrs. Adrian, or to persuade her to consent to the arrangement.

Ruth had put it in a very nice filial way. She had pleaded that she could not bear to be separated from her parents or to leave them in their old age, and that, as Ned was agreeable, it would be so nice for them all to live together.

'And besides, mamma,' she added, 'look what a saving it will be to us all to have a nice large house between us.'

'Ah, yes, that's all very well,' answered Mrs. Adrian; 'but who's to be mistress? You know, my dear, I have my little fancies, and so have you. It won't do for me to tell the servants one thing and you to tell them another. I don't want to make you uncomfortable, and perhaps cause words between you and your husband.'

'Oh, nonsense, mamma!' said Ruth, with a little laugh. 'You shall have your own apartments, and one day I'll be mistress and the next day you shall. There—won't it be fun!'

'I don't know, my dear. I'm too old to play at keeping house.'

Ruth persisted in her attempts to make the old lady enter into her plans, and at last she succeeded.

Mrs. Adrian was secretly gratified by her daughter's unwillingness to be separated from her, and she was flattered by Marston's plea that she would be so useful to two young housekeepers.

A new house was to be taken, and she was asked to fix the locality. She was to help choose the furniture, and her voice was to be paramount in everything.

Their plan succeeded admirably. In about a fortnight the old lady was heard to talk about 'my new house,' and in three weeks it was Ruth and Marston who were to be specially favoured by being allowed to live in it.

Marston was delighted. He was positively enthusiastic over curtains and carpets, and he ran about with long lists of domestic requirements in his pockets with the glee of a child who is buying ornaments for a

Christmas-tree.

He was in the first glow of a new happiness—the happiness of doing something to benefit his fellow-creatures. He was secretly delighted that the Adrians were ruined. It would be a pleasure to him to support them, to make their later days happy.

As to Ruth, he worshipped her. Never had damsel more devoted swain; and she, thinking of his many deeds of kindness to her and hers, would often lift up her eyes with thankfulness to heaven and thank God for giving her the love of so loyal and devoted a man. And to think she had once doubted him, believed him a bad, wicked man at the very time when he was nobly atoning for the follies of his neglected, over-tempted youth!

Marston saw a good deal of Gertie now, and he took a new interest in the child. Now and then she would talk of the old life in Little Queer Street, and of her grandfather, and the animals, and of the strange gentlemen who used to come there.

Seeing the child so constantly, Marston's thoughts often reverted to her strange career and the life histories bound up in it.

What he knew of Gertie he had never breathed to Ruth. His shot at Gurth Egerton had been a chance one, but it had evidently hit home.

When he found that Gurth had gone away and left the coast clear, he felt sure that something he had said had seriously alarmed him.

As Gertie grew more and more into the young lady, Marston recognised more than ever the likeness to the man who had come to a violent end in Josh Heckett's gambling den.

Intuitively he felt that Gertie was a thorn in Gurth's side. For her to be living in his (Marston's) house, his ward, as it were, would be a strange revolution of the wheel of fate. He felt, moreover, that it would be galling to Gurth. He did not forget that Gurth had once expressed a desire to do something for Gertie himself.

He determined as soon as he was married and had settled down that he would try and find out a little more than he knew at present of the child's antecedents and of the circumstances of Ralph's death.

Birnie undoubtedly knew a good deal more than he pretended to and Birnie was not so thick with Gurth for nothing.

Marston remembered that Gurth had confessed it was he who had paid the five hundred pounds Birnie had given him on his return from America.

'Birnie knows something,' he said to himself, and I'm not at all sure that Gertie s name wouldn't figure in his secret if it were revealed. I'm not only doing the right thing in taking care of the child, but 'believe I'm doing a very judicious thing. She may be a capital buffer one of these days if Mr. Gurth Egerton should come running on to my line in defiance of the danger signals.'

So it was finally settled that Gertie, and Lion should be figures in Ruth' s new home.

Apart from all other selfish consideration, Marston comforted himself with the idea that if he had driven the child's natural guardian out of the country, he was with poetic justice providing for her himself.

The more he thought of Gertie, the more it seemed to him that she was to be a central figure in his future.

Heckett, Gurth, Ruth—the new life and the old, both were bound up with this pretty blue-eyed girl of eleven, who had come to gentle Ruth Adrian to save Edward Marston from peril, and who was to find her future home beneath Edward Marston's roof.

The arrangements for the wedding progressed rapidly, the new house was taken and furnished, and gradually the day approached when Ruth's old home would be broken up and a new life would commence for them all.

Marston was happy when he was with Ruth, but at home by himself he had occasional fits of despondency. The gold robbery kept cropping up in various shapes and forms. Now and again there was a paragraph in the papers stating that the detectives were on the track, and that the deed was ascribed to a gang of accomplished swindlers who had long defied detection.

Marston never read these rumours without experiencing a feeling of terror which it took him some time to banish. It was not for his own fate he trembled—it was the idea of Ruth finding herself mated to a felon.

He banished the thought with a supreme effort. He flung the vision of the future from him with an oath.

'I *will* be happy!' he cried. 'I can't think what's come to me. I never knew what fear was till now.'

Ruth wished to be married quietly, and Marston was quite agreeable. They had no friends they wished to invite. Gertie was to be the only bridesmaid. Marston was asked whom he should have for best man. That puzzled him. He hadn't a friend in the world he would care to stand by his side when he took sweet Ruth Adrian to be his partner in the journey that lay before him.

No link should be there to connect the old life with the new.

He said he would think about it, and he did. After much cogitation he came to the conclusion that he couldn't have one at all.

The idea worried him. He knew then that all his life long he had never made a friend whom he dare introduce into the little family circle from which he was taking the chief ornament.

'We'll have the wedding very quiet, my darling,' he said. 'I won't have a best man. Gertie can be your bridesmaid, and with your father to give you away, and your mother to say the responses loud, that's all the company we shall want. We shall be happy enough by ourselves.'

Ruth was quite willing. But there was one point which Marston didn't care about, but on which Mrs. Adrian was firm. He wanted to be married by license, but Mrs. Adrian insisted that they should be asked in church, and Marston could not offer any determined opposition.

On the first Sunday that the banns were published, Ruth made Marston promise to go to church with her.

He went.

As he passed into the sacred edifice a strange chill came to his heart—a sensation of dread stole over him.

He could not account for it. Something in the quiet of the place, in the reverent attitude of the worshippers, in the sonorous and musical voice of the officiating priest, pleading to an unseen power in the poetic and soul-stirring language of the Prayer-book; indeed, the whole service impressed and pained him.

He had been a scoffer all his life. He had lived in an atmosphere not so much of unbelief as of indifference. Sitting by the side of Ruth Adrian, bowing his head mechanically with the rest, he found himself repeating the cry for mercy of the Litany, 'Lord have mercy upon us, miserable sinners,' and he felt awe-stricken as he thought of the ghastly reality of such a prayer upon his lips.

He sat dreamily and moodily through the after part of the service. He heard his name given out coupled with Ruth's, and he almost expected some one to leap up from among the congregation and cry aloud that there was indeed just cause and impediment why these two should not be joined together in holy matrimony.

He would have rushed out of the building had he dared, for he felt that he was challenging Heaven.

When the clergyman ascended the pulpit and gave out the text for the sermon, he singled out Marston by the merest accident in the world, and preached straight at him. The text was from Proverbs, 'The way of transgressors is hard.'

The preacher was earnest and eloquent. He drew a powerful picture of the life of the evildoer here below. He showed how amid a show of outward happiness the canker-worm was always present to prey upon the heart of the evildoer. He painted in vivid colours the fate of men who transgressed in their desire for wealth and pleasure; and he concluded a powerful sermon by declaring that often, in attaining the prize for which he had steeped his soul in sin, the transgressor did but grasp the instrument of his own undoing, and find his bitterest punishment where he had looked for his greatest happiness.

Every word fell upon Edward Marston's heart with cruel force. His eyes were riveted on the preacher, and it seemed to him as though he had been singled out and denounced—as though in this sacred edifice, on the very threshold of his new life, the voice of offended Heaven had uttered his condemnation.

He gave a deep sigh of regret when he found himself once more in the open air. Ruth took his arm, and they walked home together, for Marston was to dine with them.

He shook off the feeling of despondency and dread that had come upon him, and managed, with a great effort, to hide his low spirits from the company.

But when Ruth sat with him by the window that evening as the shadows deepened, and the holy calmness of a Sabbath eve crept over

the quiet streets, and talked to him lovingly and hopefully of the future, his thoughts were far away. He was thinking of the preachers words, and wondering what punishment fate held for him in the days to come.

CHAPTER L.
FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE.

Happy is the bride that the sun shines upon,' says the old proverb; and the sun shone bravely for Ruth Adrian's wedding-day.

It poured in chastened splendour through the stained-glass windows of the quiet church, and fell upon Ruth Adrian as she knelt at the altar, her head bowed, and her sweet eyes filled with tears of happiness and love.

There were no omen-readers there to croak and prophesy, or they would have noticed how strangely this strange stream of sunshine divided bride and bridegroom. It caught the window at an angle which threw it on half the church only, leaving the other half untouched. While Ruth was bathed in its bright warm beams, Marston stood always wrapped in the shadow.

As the solemn words of the service fell from the lips of the clergyman, the voice woke in the bridegroom's heart the memory of the sermon that had seemed like a warning and a threat to him on the day the banns were first published.

The solemn charge, 'I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed,' caused him to wince as the eyes of the clergyman met his.

Was he always to be haunted like this? Could he never shake off this strange new consciousness that had come upon him?

He looked at Ruth almost sorrowfully once as the thought flashed upon him that perhaps in the far-off future she might look back and curse the day that made her his.

But she answered his glance with a sweet smile, and it seemed as though a new heaven opened for him—a heaven in which he might forget the past and be at rest.

Oh, how fervently he hoped that here he had reached the outskirts of a new world! He would not abuse the trust confided to him. From this moment no evil thought should sully his mind.

If only the dead past would bury its dead—if only those pale ghosts that haunted him would fade in the bright sunlight of this new life—he would work as man had never worked yet to prove that he had bitterly and sincerely repented of the evil he had done.

'I, Ruth, take thee, Edward, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.'

The prize was won, the golden badge of ownership glistened on the trembling hand of the beautiful bride, and the voice of the Church called down God's blessing on the union.

Ruth shed just one tear; but it was a tear of happiness—a tear coming from a heart overflowing with love and gratitude. And as it fell upon the hand that lay trembling in Marston's, he stooped and kissed it away. Ah, me! if every tear that those sweet eyes are to shed could only be as lightly banished!

Of course Mrs. Adrian cried; and Gertie, who was brave in her beautiful new dress for the occasion, and who was very much overawed by the proceedings, cried a little, too. She didn't know why. She saw Mrs. Adrian weep, and she saw Ruth's lips tremble, and, being of a sympathetic nature and easily moved, she cried just to keep them company, though all the time she was thinking how beautiful and how good Ruth was, and wishing Lion could have been there to see what had come of the Little Queer Street lessons after all.

Lion was not forgotten in the general joy. He was the first to meet the bridal party on their return. He came to the door with a huge white satin bow on, and he wagged his tail in a congratulatory and highly complimentary manner. But he made a sad mess of it after all, for he leaped upon Gertie and put his great paws on her beautiful dress, whereupon he was severely lectured, and afterwards kissed and hugged, and promised a piece of wedding-cake if he was good.

Mr. and Mrs. Marston were going to Paris to spend their honeymoon, and they were going down to Dover by an afternoon train. Ruth had named Paris as the place she would like to see, and of course she had chosen the short sea route.

All had been arranged for the new housekeeping. Mr. Adrian's effects would be sold off during their absence, and then the old couple would

move into the new house, and greet the young couple there on their return.

Marston would have given anything rather than have been compelled to travel that route on his wedding-day. But he had left the choice to Ruth, and he would not oppose her first wish. He would not allow his past to step in and create difficulties already.

As the train rushed down to the sea with them, the scene of the gold robbery came back vividly to his mind.

Something on the journey brought it to Ruth's mind, and she spoke of it to Marston. Little did she dream how every word stabbed her husband like a knife.

She spoke first of the marvellous way in which the crime had been effected, for she had read the graphic newspaper accounts. She wondered what the thieves would do with so large a sum, and how they had managed to escape detection.

'But it will bring them no good!' she said. 'I always pity the men who commit these terrible crimes. What peace can they know—what happiness have they ever known?'

Marston's face flushed, and he complained of the heat, and lowered the window.

As he did so the train was stopping at a station.

The afternoon papers were out, and the contents sheets were posted against the bookstalls.

One of the lines caught Marston's eye, and he closed the window as though he had been shot, and sat back in the carriage trembling violently.

This was the line:—'*The great Gold Robbery—A Clue to the Thieves*,'

CHAPTER LI.
EXIT EDWARD MARSTON.

Marston and Ruth were back from their honeymoon. They had enjoyed a month of almost unclouded happiness. The only trouble Ruth had was the discovery she had made that her husband was subject to occasional fits of despondency and abstraction.

Sometimes she would speak to him and he would not answer her. His thoughts were far away. She asked him, half-banteringly, once if he had anything very dreadful on his mind, that he looked so solemn.

He flushed scarlet, and then laughed.

'No, little woman,' he said; 'I've got nothing on my mind, except the responsibility of being a married man.'

He stopped all further questioning with a kiss, and exercised more control over himself in the future. He took care not to drop the mask again in his wife's presence.

The line on the news paper contents bills which had alarmed him so seriously on his wedding-day had been nothing after all. One of those rumours which are industriously circulated from time to time had been magnified into importance, and when he had the courage to read the paragraph he found that it was merely some drunken fellow who had gone to the police-station and pretended to be concerned in the affair.

But although he had argued himself almost into a sense of security with regard to this special event, he was continually haunted by the idea that many of his old companions in guilt were still about, and that he might always be liable to awkward visits and rencontres. He had not gone under any *alias*. He was known as Edward Marston in the old days, and he was Edward Marston now. The name was tainted, but he must bear it still. If he were ever to become famous or take a position in society it must be as Edward Marston, and then—— He hardly liked to think what a constant temptation he would offer to his unscrupulous acquaintances, if once he became a prominent person. It wasn't pleasant to think that they would always be able to find him out and trade upon their knowledge of the past.

Mr. and Mrs. Adrian had welcomed the newly wedded pair to the new home, and a very pretty, comfortable home it was. The old couple had their own suite of apartments and their own servants, but Mrs. Adrian was not inclined to remain in her own territory.

She still considered that she had conferred an immense favour on Marston in allowing him to live with them, and she took care that he should understand it.

Ruth feared sometimes lest her mother's *brusquerie* should annoy him, but it didn't in the least; and when Mr. Adrian, painfully alive to Marston's generosity in the matter, suggested that perhaps, after all, the good lady ought to learn the secret of their misfortunes, Marston wouldn't hear of it.

'Nonsense!' he said; 'it would break her heart. Let her enjoy herself here, and be mistress of everything if she likes. I don't think she would stop a moment if she knew the real reason of the change: it would wound her to the quick.'

Mr. Adrian and Ruth were very grateful to Marston for his forbearance, and the old gentleman was never tired of singing his praises.

Lion and Gertie were as happy as the day was long in their new home, for there was a large garden where Gertie could watch the beautiful flowers, and a nice lawn on which the dog would roll over and over in the sun like a young donkey at play.

In fact everyone in the house was happy except the owner. He began to dread his own thoughts now. The new ties and the home life only served the more vividly to remind him of what his loss would be if the prophecy of the clergyman came true, and his sin found him out.

He had always intended to invest his capital in some business and employ his leisure and his talents in developing it. He wanted something to do more than ever now, and he set about to find a good opening. He perused the papers daily for partners wanted and businesses to be sold, and he put an advertisement in himself.

His advertisement: 'A gentleman with capital would be glad to hear of a partnership in a going concern, or a business for sale,' brought him hosts of answers. Several of them were of the usual description, and not worth troubling about. One, however, attracted his attention on account

of its absurdity. The writer was anxious to meet with a gentleman of capital, as he had an idea which only needed capital to develop. This idea was to start an office and have a trained staff for the recovery of all offered rewards. The writer pointed out that in every day's paper there were several hundreds of pounds offered for the recovery of lost or stolen property, for the detection of criminals, and for the addresses of missing friends. His letter concluded by pointing out an instance of a large reward still to be had, which, he was sure, with a little trouble and some outlay, might be gained. He alluded to the thousand-pound reward offered by the railway company for the discovery of the gold-robbers. No confederate dare come forward, he explained, but a couple of hundred pounds might induce a confederate to give a clue to private individuals which he dare not impart to the authorities.

Marston flung the letter from him with an expression of rage. Was this wretched business, which he would give the world to forget, always to be flaunted before his eyes in some form or other?

He had just risen from perusing his answers when the servant informed him that a gentleman wished to see him on most particular business.

'What is the gentleman like?' he asked, half fearing that his persecution had commenced.

The servant described him.

It was no one that Marston knew.

'Show him into the library,' he said. 'I'll come directly.'

It was not without some slight misgiving that Marston went to see his visitor.

He had always an undefined dread of something unpleasant.

The gentleman in the library was an ordinary individual with a professional cut about his clothes.

He rose as Mr. Marston entered, and bowed politely.

'Mr. Edward Marston, I presume?'

Marston nodded, and motioned his visitor to resume his seat.

'I come on professional business, sir. I am one of the firm of Doddle and Co., solicitors. The senior partner is from town, or he would have called upon you himself. We ascertained that Miss Ruth Adrian was no longer Miss Ruth Adrian (a professional smile), and—ah—we thought, perhaps, under the peculiar circumstances we had better call ourselves and see you.'

What did the man mean? What could solicitors have to do with Ruth and himself?'

'You see,' continued the gentleman, 'a very large sum of money is concerned.'

'Pray explain, sir,' faltered Marston. 'I really don't understand you yet.'

'Well, do you remember a daring burglary some time ago at the residence of Squire Heritage?'

'Burglary—burglary!' gasped Marston. 'No; what should I know about burglaries?'

'Of course not, my dear sir—of course not; but you might have read about it in the papers. Great sensation!—son suspected!—dreadful affair —dreadful!'

Marston remembered his own share in the subsequent fate of George Heritage. Was this coming home to him too?

'Well,' continued the solicitor, the father didn't recover from the shock. He got worse and worse, and at last he was quite childish. Poor old gentleman!—poor old gentleman!'

'I am very sorry, of course!' exclaimed Marston; 'but, upon my word, I can't see what it all has to do with me.'

'It has everything to do with you, sir. You are very closely concerned in the old gentleman's death.'

'What!'

Marston leapt from his chair as though he had been shot. The professional gentleman was astonished, but he didn't show it. Professional gentlemen never do.

'Yes, my dear sir, you are indeed concerned in his death, but pleasantly' (rubbing his hands)—'very pleasantly indeed. By a will dated some time previous to the painful affair the whole of his property is left to a lady, the daughter of Mr. John Adrian.'

Marston could hardly believe his ears. 'Ruth an heiress!' he exclaimed. 'I really don't understand. I never knew that she was even acquainted

with Squire Heritage.'

'That, sir, I know nothing about. My visit this morning is simply to make your acquaintance and ask you to make an appointment with us, when we can have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Marston and yourself at our office, where all the papers are, and where the whole matter can be laid properly before you.'

On the following day, at the office of Messrs. Doddle and Co., Ruth learned how she had inherited a fortune, and how there was an extraordinary proviso in the will that she and her husband would have to adopt the name of Heritage.

When the first surprise was over, and Ruth recognised the fact that she was an heiress, she whispered to her husband:

'Oh. Ned! You see I shan't be Ruth Marston for long, after all.'

And he, without answering her, clasped her hand in his. His heart was too full for him to speak. Here, at last, was an escape from that he dreaded most. He need he Edward Marston no longer.

Lord of a splendid estate, and taking his place as a prosperous country gentleman, he would be completely isolated from the bitter past.

Who would recognize in Edward Heritage, Esq., of Heritage Hall, the penniless adventurer who met Dr. Birnie in Little Queer Street, started the eminent firm of Smith and Co., and was once the lending spirit in a desperate gang of rogues and vagabonds?

ENTR'ACTE.

Five years have to pass by ere we meet the characters in this story again. Five years, with their many changes and strange vicissitudes. Old Time rolls on like a river, that flows, heedless of what it bears on its bosom, to the great sea—heedless of the wreckage that strews its banks—heedless of all that lies lost in the depths of its weed-tangled bed. Old Time rolls on, and bears its human freight nearer and nearer to the last haven.

They are a strange and motley group, whose ends destiny shapes during the years that elapse ere the curtain rises again on the little life drama that you and I, gentle reader, are waiting to see played out. In one of Her Majesty's prisons a young man—a felon, with the bearing of a gentleman and the garb of a convict—counts the years as they go by and wonders what justice there can be in heaven that a cruel fate should raise this bar of shame between him and the young wife he loves. Up in the great city a woman toils wearily night and day, for a scant wage, to keep the wolf at bay, toiling for bare subsistence, and weeping over her work, when she thinks of the past that was happy, and of the fearful blow that dashed the cup of joy from her lips for ever. Only in her sleep sometimes she looks up, and the skies are bright, and a loving arm encircles her waist, and a musical voice whispers in her ear. 'Bess, my darling, 'tis I—George!'

Out in Australia a burly grey-haired man keeps a low drink store, and upholds the reputation of the old country for thoroughpaced blackguardism. 'Bully Heckett' his customers call him, and his customers are as nice and select a lot as he could possibly wish to have, and they find him remarkably useful in more ways than one. He talks about going back to England 'some day,' and his customers say, 'When the coast's a bit clearer, eh, Bully?' and laugh.

Among the Surrey hills there is a beautiful mansion, and there the new Squire Heritage and his lady pass their days in peace and contentment. Nothing has come to mar their happiness. Ruth's greatest trouble was the death of her father. He died thanking God that his Ruth had found so good a husband and his old wife so kind and gentle a son. No children have blessed the union yet, but there is a young lady who lives with them, and who is their adopted daughter And there isn't a prettier little lady for miles round, or one more beloved by the people on the estate and the villagers than 'Miss Gertie up at the hall,' as they call her. Gertie and Ruth attended by a faithful mastiff dog, who follows closely at their heels, and is almost as great a favourite as Gertie, are to be seen out on all the fine days, going hither and thither among the people and spreading happiness wherever their two kind faces are seen.

The squire does not go about so much, but he gives liberally to charities, never lets a poor man on his estate want when times are hard, and has the reputation of being a kindly Christian gentleman, rather grave and studious, and not fond of too much society. He goes out

occasionally though to the best houses, gives a dinner party or two, and now and then there is a ball at the hall. He is a justice of the peace, goes to the parish church and idolizes the ground his wife treads upon.

The firm of Grigg and Limpett flourishes, though it has lost the services of Mr. Jabez Duck. The firm receives from time to time letters from its absent client, Mr. Gurth Egerton, who seems inclined to settle in America, and whose house is now occupied by Dr. Oliver Birnie, whose brass plate is very large, and whose practice has increased wonderfully with a West-End address.

There is no Mrs. Turvey. She has become Mrs. Duck, and she and Jabez have a lodging-house, and take in and do for single gentlemen.

Miss Georgina, having raised a little capital through the kindness of her friend, Miss Jackson, has taken the house exactly opposite to them, and started an opposition establishment. Miss Duck’s lodgers and Mrs. Duck’s lodgers each support the lady under whose banner they pay their rent, and the amenities exchanged across the street are frequently highly edifying to the neighbourhood. Jabez has been disappointed. Having married his lady in the firm belief that he was marrying a snug thousand pounds, he was bitterly disillusioned a few days after the fatal knot had been tied. The money he has never discovered, and Mrs. Turvey stoutly denies that it was hers.

This is at once the mystery and the misfortune of Mr. Duck’s married life. He has other mysteries and misfortunes to attend to, for he has left the law and entered the service of a private inquiry agent. His taste he determined to gratify: if he couldn’t be a principal, he would be an employé. He likes it better than the law, and he is getting quite clever at poking his nose into other people’s business. His talents always lay in that direction.

Mr. Preene still flourishes and pursues the even tenor of his way, but Mr. Brooks has paid the debt of nature, dying respectably in his bed, and leaving his widow a nice little competency. She was shortly afterwards united to a middle-aged and very hard-up Scripture-reader, who fell in love with her while reading the prayers for the sick by the bedside of her first husband at Mrs. Brooks’s special request. Perhaps the people who assisted to make Mrs. Brooks independent would have been resigned to their loss had they known it would ultimately benefit so devout a man.

So time works its changes, alters the scene, redresses the characters, and clears the stage during the five years entr’acte that elapses ere our curtain rises again.

CHAPTER LII.
AN ESCAPED CONVICT.

HULLOH!' said Mr. Jarvis; 'did you hear that gun? There's another of them there conwicks escaped.'

'Poor fellow!' ejaculated Mr. Jarvis's better half; 'and I hope as he'll get away.'

Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis were the proprietors of a travelling theatrical show, and this conversation occurred late one winter afternoon, as the caravan jolted along over the rough roads of Dartmoor.

Mr. Jarvis's 'temple of the drama,' packed up very small, and the whole affair was very comfortably accommodated in two living-vans and a baggage-waggon.

Mrs. Jarvis was sitting inside the first van with the door open, and Mr. Jarvis was walking behind, to keep himself warm and to enjoy his afternoon pipe. The company had been dissolved at the last town, for the season was over, and the Jarvises were making their way as fast as they could to London, to complete their arrangements for a metropolitan circuit, with a new drama and a specially organized company.

Their last tour had not been a great success. The attendance at the country fairs had fallen off, and in small places where they had built the theatre up and stayed for a week, they had hardly cleared expenses. The new fashion of the London companies touring, combined with the number of first-class theatres rapidly rising in the provincial towns, was slowly but surely dealing a death-blow to the 'booth' business.

To add to the misfortunes of the worthy couple, their only son, Shakspeare, the most valuable member of the company, had been down with a wasting fever, and was so ill when they left town that he was unable to be brought with them.

'Ah!' Mrs. Jarvis would exclaim, with a sigh, when she counted the takings after each performance, 'there ain't no luck about the show without Shakspeare—Shakspeare allus was the draw, father, and we shan't do no good without him.'

'Poor chap!' answered Mr. Jarvis. 'I'ope as he's a-goin' on all right. It don't seem like the old show without him—do it, mother?'

'No, it don't. And what we should ha' done if we hadn't ha' had sich a lodger as Mrs. Smith to leave to look arter him I don't know! He writes as she's been like a mother to him, and nussed him till he can almost stand on his 'ed as easy as ever, and he's turned his fust caterine wheel last Saturday, and 'as been better ever since.'

'He's a beautiful scholard, ain't he?' said Mr. Jarvis, as he took Shakspeare's letter from his wife, and looked at it reverently.

'With the eddication he's got he'll do something for the dramar some day, as'll astonish the purfession. Hulloh, there's the gun again! Why, they're coming this way!'

As Mr. Jarvis spoke a body of men came running along, peering into the hedges, and looking on every side of them.

The fog was deepening as the darkness came on, and the snow lay thick on road and hedge and tree, so that it was no easy matter to distinguish anything at a distance.

As the men came up with the caravan they stopped, and the leader, an armed warder, addressed Mr. Jarvis.

'Seen anybody go by here, governor?'

'What, one of your gents?' answered Mr. Jarvis. 'No, that I ain't. There ain't ne'er a one passed here.'

The officer hesitated.

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind letting us look inside,' he said presently.

'Look, and welcome, master! answered Mrs. Jarvis. Then, bridling up, she added, 'A pretty fine thing, indeed! What d'ye think we should want a-harbourin' conwicks for?'

The officer, without vouchsafing a reply, searched the two living-vans thoroughly, and then, satisfied that his prey was not in them, apologized, and held a council of war among his followers.

If the convict had not passed the caravan he could not be on that road. The man who had informed him he had seen a convict running that way must have been mistaken. The snow was so hard and crisp on the roadway that no footsteps were visible. It would be better to turn back and try in another direction.

The warder and his party returned, and the caravan went jolting on its

way.

Hardly had the pursuers disappeared in the mist, when Mrs. Jarvis's attention was attracted to the baggage-waggon in the rear. The tarpaulin flung over it was moving.

This waggon was unoccupied, the horse following mechanically the vehicles ahead of him.

Mr. Jarvis, attracted by his wife's exclamation, looked, and he too distinctly saw the tarpaulin move.

He stood still in the roadway till the horse came up to him, and stopped it.

As he did so he distinctly heard a low groan.

'Now then, governor!' he exclaimed, 'whoever you are, come out o' that.'

No answer, only a groan deeper than before.

The two living-vans had turned a sharp corner of the road by this time, and there was no one in sight.

Mr. Jarvis climbed up on to the waggon and pulled the tarpaulin back.

As he did so he uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

There lay the escaped convict, his face deadly pale, his eyes half shut, and his hands clenched.

Mr. Jarvis shook him.

'Here, master, this won't do. Come, you must get out of this. We can't have no gaol-birds here.'

The man opened his eyes.

'Oh, sir, for God's sake help me!' he exclaimed. 'Don't give me up!—don't give me up!'

'I don't want to give you up; but I can't harbour ye, ye know—it's a crime.'

'Let me lie here, then, till I can walk!' exclaimed the man. 'In dodging behind the hedges I slipped and twisted my ankle. I managed to crawl into the waggon and hide among these things, or I should have been caught.'

'And I've been and turned the officers back, and declared as I hadn't seen ye!' exclaimed Mr. Jarvis, looking very uncomfortable.

'Hear me!' exclaimed the man, raising himself on his arm with difficulty, for the pain from his twisted ankle was excruciating. 'Hear my story, and then do with me as you will. I'm an escaped convict, but I am innocent of the crime I was condemned for. My time had nearly expired—in a few weeks more I should have been out on a ticket of leave. Unfortunately I incurred the hatred of one of the warders. I refused to help him in a dishonest act. He never forgave me. Twice he found tobacco in my cell. *He put it there!* For the second offence I lost all my privileges. I was not allowed to write to my wife or to hear from her for nine months, and I lost my chance of a ticket.'

'Poor devil!' said Mr. Jarvis.

'I was maddened with rage. Up in London my wife lay ill, perhaps dying—for her last letter was written in a hand that told its own weakness, though she spoke hopefully. I had counted the days till I should see her again—and now, oh! sir, can you blame me if when I saw at last a chance of escape I seized it? That chance came to-day. I escaped from the guard who were marching us to some outdoor work, and you know the rest. I am here at your mercy; but for God's sake save me! Think of my poor wife! Think—–'

The man spoke no more.

In his excitement he had moved too hastily and hurt the twisted ankle; the anguish was so great that he fainted dead away.

'There, there, my poor fellow!—don't you fidget. You lie still. We'll carry you safe to London, or my name is not Lizer Jarvis.'

The speaker was Mrs. Jarvis, and the person addressed was the escaped convict.

Mr. Jarvis had consulted his better half before deciding what to do, and when she had heard the story, the good soul's motherly heart went out to the poor man, and she determined he should not be given up.

So the baggage-waggon was brought up close to the living-van, and the poor fellow was lifted carefully out and put up snugly in a corner and covered over with a rug, and Mrs. Jarvis, who was clever at sprains and

bruises, soon found out what was the matter with his ankle, and bound it up with cold-water bandages.

‘Now, all you’ve got to do is to keep still,’ she said, ‘and lie close, and we’ll get up to our crib in London, and there we can rig you out, and then you must look out for yourself.’

And that night, as the vans went jolting along the road, the convict slept calmly, a free man for the first time for six long years, and he dreamed that his wife was sitting by his side.

When they halted for the night the horses were taken out. The convict awoke with a start.

‘Where am I, Bess?’ he exclaimed.

‘You’re all right,’ answered Mrs. Jarvis cheerily. ‘You stop where you are. Nobody won’t interfere with you.’

‘So his wife’s name’s Bess, is it?’ thought the good lady to herself. ‘It’s a purty name. It’s the name o’ our lodger, Mrs. Smith, as has been so good to Shakspeare. Lor’, how I do long to give that there boy a good motherly hug—bless him!’

Then she walked across to the snug corner where the convict lay.

‘Poor chap!’ she muttered; ‘I hope he’ll find his wife alive., He don’t look a bit like a convict, and I believe as he’s quite as hinnercent as he makes out. If faces goes for anything, I should say he was a born gentleman.’

CHAPTER LIII.
SHAKSPEARE'S NURSE.

In a little back room in a street running off the Lambeth Road, a lad of about sixteen lay on the sofa, wheeled near the window so that he might see out into the street.

By his side, busily plying her needle and thread, sat a young woman whose thin hands and haggard cheeks told their own story of mental torture and bodily suffering.

She was very poor—you could tell that by her well-worn dress and the nature of her occupation. A woman must be poor indeed who sews linen for a livelihood in our great city. She was married, if the wedding-ring on her finger spoke the truth, and she called herself Mrs. Smith. Presently she lifted her face from the work and looked across to the sofa.

'Well, Shakspeare,' she said, 'do you feel wanner now?'

'Yes, thank you, Mrs. Smith,' answered the lad; 'I'm all right now. It makes me warm to see the folks a-movin' about. Lor, shan't I be glad when I can go out! Do you think it'ud hurt me if I wropped up?'

'You mustn't go out, the doctor says, not when the wind's in the east.'

'Ah, I have been bad, ain't I?—reg'lar bad. Do you know, Mrs. Smith, I believe if you hadn't nussed me I should o' been a-turnin' up my toes to the daisies now. Granny's a good soul, but she ain't in the hunt with you at nussin'.

'Poor old lady,' said Mrs. Smith, 'she's wanted nursing herself; but we've got you all right between us, Shakspeare, and when your mother comes back she'll find her boy nearly himself again.'

'Poor mother—ain't she just fond of me!' exclaimed Master Shakspeare Jarvis, drawing a letter from his pocket. 'Here's the last letter as the leadin' tragedian wrote for her to say as they was on the road home. Why, she might be here any time now, Mrs. Smith. It's the first tower as they've bin without me ever since I can remember, and I hope it'ull be the last.'

'Never mind,' said Mrs. Smith, with a smile; 'you haven't been idle; there's the new drama.'

'Ah!' exclaimed the lad, his pale face flushing, 'I think I've done it this time. There's a part for mother as'ull suit her prime, and my part's tiptop. Shall I give you a scene now?'

'No, you must not excite yourself.'

'I know what I shall do,' answered Master Shakspeare; 'I shall get mother and father to call a rehearsal here afore we start on the tower, and then you shall see it. I should like you to see it. I've called the lady in it Bess, after you.'

Mrs. Smith sighed. It was many a long day since anyone had called her Bess. Young Jarvis had found out that it was her name quite by accident.

Mrs. Smith had come some time since to lodge in this little house in Lambeth. She took the top room and kept it to herself, and the other lodgers, who were as curious as most lodgers are about their neighbours, could find out nothing about her except that she worked for one of the City houses, and was a married woman whose husband was never seen.

But old Mrs. Jarvis, the landlady, finding her a quiet, nice young woman, always ready to sympathise with her rheumatics and other ailments, gradually made a friend and confidant of her, and Bess, when she could spare the time, was invited to come down into the little parlour and listen to her landlady's trials and tribulations.

Thus it was that she learned the Jarvis's family history. She learned how Mr. Jarvis, the old lady's son, had a travelling theatrical show; how he had invested a portion of his savings in house property, partly as a home for his old mother, and partly as a refuge for himself and family when in town, which wasn't often. By letting off a portion of the house, and leaving the old lady in charge, this arrangement became a profitable one, for the strolling players had 'a drum' to come to between their tours where they could live rent free.

Mrs. Smith had lived in the little top room for about six months when the Jarvises came home for a fortnight to reorganize their company and arrange for some novelties; and then Shakspeare, the boy, fell ill—so ill that there was nothing to do but leave him at home with granny.

Granny had her hands full with the lodgers and wanted cosseting herself, so that when Mrs. Smith saw the poor boy, who was like a caged bird, and pined for the roving life, tossing on the bed of sickness, she sat

by his side and comforted him, and did little womanly things for him, which helped him to bear his pain more patiently.

At last he grew to look for her, to fret if she did not come and sit by him; he would take his medicine from no one else; and poor-old granny's stock of patience was soon exhausted by what she called his 'whims and contrarinesses.' Then Mrs. Smith would be called in and would act as peacemaker, soothing the irritable boy and the irritated old lady at the same time.

So it came about that at last she was regularly installed as Shakspeare's nurse, and she would bring her work down into the room where he lay, and sit beside him for hours together. A firm friendship grew up between them. All that was best in the lad's Bohemian but honest nature blossomed in the sunshine of Bess's gentle care, and he looked upon her as a sort of angel—an angel who was deserving a much better fate than to be oppressed by some terrible grief, and to have to work for slop-houses in the City for her living.

Shakspeare could write, and was what his mother called a 'scholard'; and so from time to time, as he grew better, he had written her full, true, and particular accounts of his recovery, and of the lady-lodger's kindness to him.

Mrs. Jarvis's heart overflowed with motherly gratitude, for she idolized her boy; but she was not 'scholard' enough to let it trickle from her heart down her arm into a pen and or to paper; and so from time to time she got the leading man (who had seen better days, and taught virtue in a national school before he took to delineating villainy on the boards) to write in reply to Shakspeare, and in every letter there was always a mother's blessing for Mrs. Smith, the kind lodger.

Thus far had events progressed, and thus they stood on the day when this chapter opens, and we see Mrs. Smith at her work, and Shakspeare, who is still weak from his long illness, lying on the sofa.

Mrs. Smith bends over her work and stitches away; and after Shakspeare has read his mother's letter aloud, and then read it to himself, there is a short silence.

Shakspeare folds the letter and puts it away carefully again.

'You like reading letters over again and again, don't you?' he says presently.

Mrs. Smith starts.

'Why, what do you mean?' she says hesitatingly.

'When I was ill and you thought I was asleep, I often used to see you take letters from your pocket and read them again and again. Were they from your husband, who is abroad?'

The question was put in innocent boyish curiosity, but Mrs. Smith flushed scarlet and turned her head away so that the lad might not notice her confusion.

'Yes,' she answered, after a pause; 'they were from my husband.'

'When is he coming home?'

'I—I don't know. Soon, I hope,' stammered Mrs. Smith.

'I hope I shall see him. I'm sure he must be a good fellow, or you wouldn't kiss his letters like you do.'

Shakspeare Jarvis little knew the tender chord he had touched. Mrs. Smith bent over her work, and the tears trickled down her face. She was thinking of her absent husband. She had visited him from time to time as the regulations allowed, and the meetings had been painful to them both. She had cheered him and bidden him hope. One visiting-day she had been too ill to go, and had written, telling him; the next she had gone—had gone at a time when the expense of her journey had crippled her—and had been told that she could not see him. Her husband had committed some offence against prison regulations, and his punishment was 'no visitors, no letters.' Since then she had not heard from him, and now she was getting anxious and nervous again. Every day that passed and she received no news, she grew more and more distressed. She knew his impetuous nature, she had seen how terribly he had been tried by the prison discipline, and she dreaded to think what he might have done in a fit of rage or despair.

She believed him innocent. He had told her all—all that he knew, and she believed him. He was still her noble, handsome George. It was all a vile plot against him; but what could she, a poor, weak, destitute woman, do to prove it?

After her father's death, thrown entirely upon her own resources, she had determined to live—to live on and toil and struggle, trusting that some day, when the cruel prison-gates rolled back, George might not be

alone in the world, but might have at least one faithful, loving heart to look to for support when he began the terrible struggle which would lie before him.

Shakspeare Jarvis noticed the tears as they fell streaming on the work, and he was wise enough to turn and look out of the window and hum a tune, just as if he hadn't the slightest idea what Mrs. Smith was doing.

He hadn't looked out of window a minute before he uttered a little cry of surprise and joy.

A cab had drawn up to the door with four heavy boxes on the roof.

'Oh, Mrs. Smith,' cried the lad, half beside himself, 'here they are!'

'Who?'

'Why, mother and father. Hullo! they've got a gentleman with them. Perhaps he's the new tragedian. Lor 'ain't he popped into the house quick!'

Mrs. Smith rose and folded her work up.

'I'm going to my own room, Shakspeare dear,' she said;

'I'll come and see your mother presently.'

Bess ran out before Shakspeare could reply. She didn't want strangers to come in and see her red eyes.

Hardly had she beat a retreat before Mrs. Jarvis, having duly embraced granny below, came panting up the stairs, making them creak and tremble, and, pushing open the door, she had Shakspeare clasped in her motherly arms, squeezing him so vigorously that his 'God bless you, mother!' came out in spasmodic jerks, a syllable at a time.

Then there was father to shake hands with, and then Shakspeare, looking up, saw a young man, with a shaved facc and a curious, frightened look on it, standing at the doorway. He had on a long overcoat that Shakspeare knew was his father's, and when he, with instinctive politeness, took his hat off, Shakspeare's quick eye noticed that his hair was closely cropped.

Mrs. Jarvis noticed the look.

'This is a friend of ours, Shakspeare, my boy, that we met on the road. He's going to lodge with us for a bit.'

'How do you do, sir?' said Shakspeare, holding out his hand.

The man took the proffered hand and shook it gently, as if he were ashamed or afraid of it. Shakspeare couldn't make him out at all.

'Where's the guardjen hangel?' asked Mrs. Jarvis, looking round. 'I must thank her for all she's done for the boy.'

'She's gone upstairs, mother. She would go.'

'We'll have her down,' cried Mrs. Jarvis, in her quick, impetuous way; but before she could move to call up the stairs, there was a gentle knock at the door.

'I beg your pardon, I left some of my work, 'said Mrs. Smith. 'I——

'GEORGE!'

'BESS!'

In a moment, with a wild cry of mutual recognition, the strange gentleman and Mrs. Smith were locked in each other's arms, while the Jarvis family looked on in blank astonishment.

'Which I'm blest!' exclaimed Mrs. Jarvis, a little later, when the situation was explained to her, 'if it don't beat all the scenes in all the dramers as ever was writ! Well I never!'

CHAPTER LIV.
AT HERITAGE HALL.

Mr. and Mrs. Edward Heritage and Miss Gertie were at breakfast. The post-bag had just come in, and Ruth and Gertie were sorting the letters.

'Fourteen for you, Edward dear, this morning,' said Ruth, with a smile; 'one for mamma, and four for me.'

Mrs. Heritage opened her letters, which were of no importance, and the master of the establishment—the squire, as he was now called in the neighbourhood—put his by the side of his plate.

It was a peculiarity of his never to open his letters until he was alone in his study. Ruth had once asked him the reason, saying jestingly that she was always so anxious to know what was in hers that she could not wait a minute.

Her husband parried the question, and turned it off with a little joke, and Ruth had at last got accustomed to the habit. It was not his only peculiarity. One—and one which sometimes distressed his wife very much—was a habit of sitting for hours without saying a word, heedless of all that was passing around him, his thoughts far away in some dreamland of his own.

Sometimes, after sitting for a couple of hours in one of these fits of abstraction, he would order his horse to be saddled, and ride away, not returning, perhaps, until night.

He told his wife that these attacks were constitutional, that he had been liable to these fits of depression all his life, and that the only thing which relieved them was long and violent exercise.

At last 'the squire's fits' became proverbial in the neighbourhood, and when the villagers or any of the folks round about met Marston galloping along the lanes at a furious pace, his face pale and determined, and his long hair flying in the wind, they knew what it meant. Old Matthews, the village tailor, and the gossip of the place, declared that the squire always rode as if he was pursued by a demon—and old Matthews was right.

Edward Heritage galloped across the country to escape from a demon who was relentless in pursuit—the demon of the past.

Everything had prospered with him from the day Ruth became his wife. He was respected by his tenantry, well received by his neighbours, and thoroughly happy in his home-life. Ruth had been all that a woman could be to him, and he thanked God every day for the blessing of her love.

But amidst every outward appearance of happiness there was a canker preying upon his heart. Do what he would, the memories of the past would crowd upon him, and bring fears for the future.

The more he became accustomed to the new existence, the greater grew his terror lest any ghost of the old life should wander into the charmed circle.

To all the world he was Squire Heritage; to himself he was Edward Marston. People saw in him a benevolent country gentleman, devoted to his wife and his young ward; he saw in himself an undiscovered forger and thief, a criminal hiding from justice. His loving wife was a woman he had dragged into a shameful alliance, and was one sin the more upon his conscience. His ward was the grand-daughter of an accomplice, a man in whose keeping lay his honour and his life. When at the county sessions he took his seat upon the bench, he trembled lest among the malefactors in the dock there might be some who had know him in the old days.

But there was not much chance of his being recognised. The change of name was a great safeguard, and added to that was the fact that his appearance had changed too. He had aged very rapidly since his marriage. He wore his hair long, and allowed his beard and whiskers to grow freely. These were tinged already with grey, and altogether the change was so complete, not only of surroundings but of appearance, that none but those who had known him intimately and who were searching for him would probably have recognised him.

After breakfast on the morning when we renew our acquaintance with Edward, Ruth, and Gertie, the two ladies went up to old Mrs. Adrian's room, and left the gentleman alone.

Mrs. Adrian had broken rapidly after her husband's death, and was now unable to leave her room.

Ruth, like a loving daughter, endeavoured to make her mother feel her loss as little as possible, and always that portion of the morning which her husband spent in his study she and Gertie would pass with the old

lady.

They read to her, chatted with her, brought her all the news and all the village gossip they thought she would care to hear, and sometimes, as an extra treat, contradicted her, just to give her an opportunity of exercising her old privilege of scolding them.

When Ruth and Gertie had gone upstairs, the squire picked up his letters and carried them into his study.

He looked at the superscriptions carefully, and tossed some of them aside. They were either circulars or bills, and not of pressing importance. But one envelope he looked at long and anxiously before he opened it.

He knew the handwriting.

It was that of Seth Preene.

Preene was the only one of the gang he had once been connected with who still enjoyed his confidence. Preene was necessary to him, and could be trusted. He paid him liberally for his services. But why should Preene write to him? He had strict orders not to do so unless it was of the first necessity. He received his allowance regularly through Mr. Heritage's London solicitors, and it was understood that there was to be no direct communication unless something happened which rendered it necessary.

What had happened?

The squire—for so we are bound to call him, as he is Edward Marston no longer—turned the envelope about nervously. He dreaded to open it. Was it possible that at last the blow was about to fall? What he dreaded was the necessity for action. He would do anything rather than that the structure he had raised with so much labour should be pulled about his ears, but he feared the necessity for any active steps arising.

He was tired of crime—he had washed his hands of it for ever; but rather than his sins should come to light and shame fall upon his dear ones, he knew there was no desperate deed he would not commit.

He dreaded to find himself at bay. He hoped that the past was so securely buried that he would need to fling no fresh earth over it, and here was a letter from Seth Preene. What could it be about save the past?

Nerving himself with an effort, he opened the envelope and read the letter at a glance.

It fell from his hands, and he rose from his chair and paced the room.

'Curse him!' he muttered. 'Why couldn't he stay where he was? Have I not suffered enough already, that this scoundrel must turn up to be the terror of my life?—now, now, when at last I had begun to feel secure.'

He picked up the letter and read it carefully again:

'Dear Sir,

'Heckett is back. From what I have discovered he means mischief. I ought to see you at once.'

'How dared he come back?' exclaimed the squire angrily. 'He cannot have found out the trick played upon him. What does Preene mean by "he means mischief"? What has he discovered? Ah! I must see Preene at ones. I wouldn't have an unknown danger hanging over my head now for worlds. It would kill me.'

The squire sat moodily in his chair and gazed across the broad acres that were his. He would have given them all to be free at this moment from the dread which had once again taken possession of his breast.

'Poor Ruth!' he murmured; 'if she only kuew what a miserable wretch I am! How I play an odious comedy every time I smile! I must see Preene and know the worst.'

He sat down to his desk and commenced a letter, bidding Preene come down; but before it was finished he tore it up and flung it into the fire.

'Better not,' he muttered; 'this place has never been polluted yet by any of the gang except myself. I'll keep it pure as long as I can.'

Then he wrote a fresh note. It was to the effect that he would be in town at a certain time on the morrow and Preene was to meet him.

He signed it with his old initials, E. M., and, having directed it in a running hand utterly unlike his own, he went out and posted it in the village himself.

He felt inexpressibly mean and guilty and miserable. As he walked home he fell into one of his fits of depression. He anticipated the worst. There was an end to his fool's paradise at last. On the morrow he would have to be scheming, and might, for all he knew, be drawn into the old vortex again. His only safety from the past might lie in a fresh crime.

Gertie was standing in the garden near the front entrance as he came

up the path. She noticed his black look and shrank aside. He went straight through the house and shut himself in his study. He was busy all the morning with some papers which he took from a drawer that he always kept locked.

Ruth saw nothing of him till evening, when they sat down to dinner. Gertie had told her that he had one of his ‘fits’ on him, and Ruth, like a sensible little woman, thought discretion was the better part of valour, and did not go and worry him.

At dinner he scarcely spoke, and Ruth and Gertie had the conversation to themselves. When the servants were out of the room, Ruth, thinking to coax him out of his silence, laughingly offered him a penny for his thoughts, and, when he did not reply, raised her offer to twopence, and put the two coppers in front of him on the table.

He pushed them angrily away, and in doing so his hand caught the wine-glass and dashed the contents all over the table-cloth.

‘Oh, Edward, how careless!’ exclaimed Ruth. ‘Why, what-ever’s put you out?’

‘Nothing!’ he answered snappishly.

‘Nonsense! something has. Come, tell me. Why have secret from me? Was it anything in the letters this morning?’

‘Will you leave me alone?’ exclaimed her husband, clinching his hand, and striking it on the table.

The tears came into Ruth’s eyes.

‘Gertie dear,’ she said, ‘go up and sit with mamma a little, will you?’

Gertie took the hint and went out, her cheeks scarlet and her lip quivering.

‘Edward, what is the matter with you?’ Ruth then said. ‘I never heard you speak like this before! Are you mad?’

‘No, I’m just coming to my senses,’ answered her husband; ringing the bell violently.

The servant entered.

‘Bring me the time-table.’

The servant went into the study and brought the local time-table. The squire ran his finger down it.

‘There’s a train to town at 9.30. Pack my portmanteau at once.’

The servant withdrew, as much astonished at the idea of the master’s abrupt departure as Ruth was.

‘Do you mean to say that you are going to town to-night’, Edward?’ she asked, scarcely believing her ears.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘But you never said a word——’

‘Madam, am I bound to consult you about my move——’

He broke down suddenly. The sight of Ruth’s grave face and the hot tears welling to her eyes was too much for him.

‘Forgive me, my darling,’ he cried, clasping her to his breast and kissing her passionately. ‘Ah, Ruth, Ruth! if you only knew what I have suffered you would forgive me.’

‘Tell me what it is, Edward,’ sobbed Ruth. ‘Let me bear your secret with you.’

‘I cannot,’ he moaned. ‘I am going to town now. When I return all may be well. In the meantime trust in me.’

He kissed her passionately and went out of the room. Half-an-hour later he bade her adieu and drove to the station.

He could not let the night go over. He was in a state of nervous excitement, and felt that he must get away from home at once, and see Preene there and then and know the worst.

That night, for the first time since their marriage, Ruth and her husband were parted. That night, for the first time, she closed her eyes with a heavy heart, and felt that something had come between them.

And up in London the squire sat with Seth Preene and heard his story, and then he knew that his dream was at an end; that he must wander back into the old path of shame once more, and plot and plan again, putting his conscience behind him if he would not let his enemy triumph over him and drag him and her who bore his name to ruin and disgrace.

CHAPTER LV.
THE ARREST.

It was late that afternoon, and the shades of evening were falling rapidly on the little street, but the happy little party seated round the hospitable board in the front parlour seemed little inclined to break up.

Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis were honest-hearted genuine English folks, with hearts as big as their appetites, and they were as pleased to think they had reunited the convict and his wife as they would have been had royalty patronized their show at some country town.

Besides, steeped as they were in the morality of the British peripatetic drama, it seemed to them that things were only in their right course. In the drama all escaped convicts are innocent, and in the drama it is always the duty of the ‘first old woman’ to help the convict to find his sweetheart. And when that sweetheart turned out to be the kind lodger to whom her Shakspeare owed his life, no wonder Mrs. Jarvis declared that Providence had arranged it all with a keen eye to a ‘situation’ and the triumph of persecuted virtue.

Up in her own room Bess had cried and sobbed upon George’s shoulder for a good hour, and then, when all the tears were shed, and the sacred joy of that strange meeting had been duly respected, Mrs. Jarvis came upstairs and insisted that they should come down and have dinner with them. It was a grand dinner indeed. Granny was sent out with a plentiful supply of coin, and returned from the cookshop with a famous dish of hot boiled beef and carrots and at least a dozen slices of ‘spotted dog,’ which were popped into the oven to keep hot while the beef and carrots were being disposed of.

George and Bess had little heart to eat, for to this joy of their sudden meeting was added the bitter knowledge of the circumstances which led to it.

George had told Bess all; how, maddened by his unjust treatment, fearing that she might be ill, perhaps dying, he had determined to make a desperate effort to escape, and how when the opportunity presented itself he had seized it.

Directly the first flush of joy was over Bess grew nervous. Every sound terrified her. She dreaded lest the police might suddenly appear upon the scene. It seemed so cruel that, now they were united after these long years of absence, George should still be a hunted felon, with a price upon his head.

The old showman and his good wife saw how matters lay, and did their best to cheer them. Shakspeare and granny were not in the secret of the circumstances under which George had been found, and they could not understand the nervous little jumps which Bess kept giving when there was a knock next door, or the sound of a cab stopping in the street. George concealed his feelings better than his wife, but he, too, was nervous. They had left the vans and the horses a little way out, in charge of the men, who were to move slowly across country with them to the starting-point for the next tour, and George, though well disguised in a slouch hat and Mr. Jarvis’s long coat, was in an agony of fear as they came by a suburban line of railway to a point where they could take a cab to the door. He felt sure that a description of him had been telegraphed to all the stations, and that there would be plenty of people on the look-out to earn the reward which had doubtless been offered.

He would have been still more nervous had he known that for days a stout gentleman had been hanging about the street looking up at this very house—a stout gentleman, who had recognised Mrs. Smith’s face, and who had also read in the papers an account of a convict’s escape, and had ascertained that this runaway convict was his old lodger, Mr. George Smith.

Mr. Jabez Duck, applying himself diligently to his new business of private inquiry agent, had progressed rapidly in his employer’s favour, and found himself soon very fairly off, with a good salary, liberal journey ‘exes,’ and a house full of lodgers at home, who more than paid his rent. He and Susan occasionally had a little flare up, but as a rule they jogged along very comfortably.

It was in the course of his professional perusal of ‘Lost, Stolen, or Strayed,’ the agony column and the mysterious crime department of the daily press, that Jabez lighted upon the intelligence that his old lodger, George Smith, had escaped and eluded his pursuers.

Jabez had previously by accident recognised Mrs. Smith, as she stood

looking out of the window of Shakspeare Jarvis's room one day, and Jabez said to himself that if George Smith got to London undiscovered he would make his way to where his wife was.

When the days went on and the escaped convict was not heard of, Jabez felt sure that he had got safely through the country and was coming townward. Here was a chance for him to distinguish himself in his business and get his name in all the papers. He might beat the professional detectives at their own game, and show how much cleverer he was than the Scotland Yard folks.

Day after day he watched the little house in Lambeth, and made inquiries round about in a quiet and innocent manner as to whether any one had arrived. He got acquainted with one of the lodgers in the house, and went through the whole programme of manouvres which enables the private inquiry agent to know our business, if he wants to, better than we know it ourselves.

If I am curious about Mr. Jones in the next street, or Mr. Stubbs opposite, and want to know all about him, I have but to get a subscriber to one of the trade protection societies to 'put an inquiry through' for me. The process is simple. The inquirer fills up a printed form with the name and address of the person he is curious about, and the nature of information required, and hands it in at the office. In three or four days he gets a reply. One of these replies lies before the writer. It is a gem. 'No. 316. The person inquired about has lived at his present address two years. Was formerly a publican, but became bankrupt in 1874. Since then has married a second wife, who is said to have money. Attends race meetings, and is addicted to drink. Has been summoned twice for assaulting his present wife. Tradespeople in neighbourhood have difficulty in getting their accounts settled. Has a brother undergoing penal servitude. Further information if required.'

It isn't pleasant to think that, without our knowledge, we ourselves, gentle reader, may be inquired about half a dozen times a year by these agent gentlemen, and that whatever scandal they may pick up of a tradesmen we have ceased to deal with, or a discharged servant, is duly entered against us to our detriment, without the possibility of our refuting the libellous statement, of which we are in sublime ignorance.

Mr. Jabez gathered his information from the usual sources, but his legal training had taught him always to verify hearsay evidence, and he generally got pretty near the mark. In the present instance he ascertained that Mrs. Smith was still a grass widow, and that no husband had appeared upon the scene.

He was almost giving the ease up as a bad job, when, walking through the street on other business, he looked up at a passing four-wheeler, and just caught sight of a face which caused him to stand still and utter an exclamation of surprise.

It was the face of George Smith, the escaped convict.

In an instant Jabez guessed whither his prey was bound, and he did not take the trouble to follow him. He walked quietly back to his office, settled the business he had in hand, and then went to a detective with whom he occasionally worked, and concocted the plan for George's arrest.

Jabez told the officer a romantic story, all intended for publication in the daily papers by-and-by, of how he had gone to work to discover the whereabouts of the runaway convict, and then arranged that the detective was to arrest George and take him off, and charge him with being a convict at large, while he telegraphed to the prison authorities, and he and Jabez were to share the reward offered for the capture, Jabez in addition getting the fame for his sagacity and ingenuity. The affair would be well reported, and would give Mr. Duck what he was pleased to call a rare 'leg up' in his profession. Who could say but that the authorities might not employ him by-and-by? He would start on his own account on the strength of the advertisement, and be sure of the private patronage of missing-friend and disappeared-daughter hunters.

So it was all arranged, and that afternoon, as the shadows fell and the inmates of the little parlour were sitting round the fire, Detective Johnson, with two men in uniform, came down the street, and reconnoitered the house from the opposite side of the way.

There was only one thing Jabez had forgotten, and that was to give his friend a description of the man.

Johnson remembered it afterwards, and would have gone back and asked whether he was young or old, and what he was like, but there was no time, as the bird might fly when the darkness came on.

Now it happened that at that very moment Shakspeare was flattening

his face against the window-pane, and peering down into the street. His quick eyes caught those of the detective fixed upon the house.

'Hulloh, father!' cried Shakspeare; 'look here! Isn't that the 'tec that we see so often at the races?'

At the word 'tec,' George's face went deadly pale, and he sprang from his seat.

Old Jarvis looked out, and he took the situation in in a moment.

'By Jove, yes! He's watching the house; and there's two peelers at the corner.'

Bess, with a wild cry, flung her arms around George's neck.

Old Jarvis hesitated a moment. Then he turned to George.

'Quick, quick!—this way!' he said. 'I may save you yet!' Hardly knowing what he did, George followed the old showman from the room, and ran upstairs with him.

Bess staggered after him as far as the door, and then fell fainting into the arms of Mrs. Jarvis.

At that moment a loud knock.

'Let'em knock,' shouted Jarvis down the stairs. 'Don't open till I tell you.'

The knocking continued. There was a sound of hurried movements in the room above, and Mrs. Jarvis wondered what her husband was doing.

Presently there was a noise of some one going rapidly upstairs, and in a minute or two all was still.

The knocking grew louder and louder, and a curious crowd, attracted by the noise, gathered outside. The policemen had been sent round to the back to watch the garden, lest the bird should attempt to fly that way.

Mrs. Jarvis ran half-way up the stairs.

'What am I to do!' she cried. 'They'll burst the door in directly, and there's a crowd half across the street.'

'Open!' answered a smothered voice that she could hardly recognise.

Mrs. Jarvis stepped to the door, and opened it.

'Hoity-toity!' she exclaimed, putting her arms akimbo; 'what's all this noise about? Are you the Taxes, or the Gas, or the Water?'

'All right, mum,' said the detective, coming in and shutting the door after him; 'you're fly, I see. We want the man who's here—an escaped convict. Here's my authority to search the house.'

Mrs. Jarvis looked at the detective's card, her buxom form effectually blocking up the staircase.

'Conwick!' she exclaimed. 'Why, lawks a mussy, man, whatever should we do with a conwick here?'

'I don't want to do anything unpleasant, my good woman,' answered the detective; 'so perhaps you'll stand aside and let me search the house.'

'Search away, and welcome!' replied Mrs. Jarvis, moving aside; 'and if you finds a conwick, let's have a look at him. I never see one afore.'

The detective went up the stairs two at a time, and commenced to search. A policeman stood at the front door to see no one passed out.

The detective was not very long before he found what he was in search of. He went straight to the top room, which he had ascertained was occupied by the convict's wife.

He entered cautiously, and looked about him. It was empty.

But he was not content with a superficial glance.

He peered into every corner, and then, stooping down, looked under the bed.

'I guessed as much,' he muttered. Then, drawing a revolver from his pocket, he exclaimed, in a loud voice:

'Now, then, out you come, or I shall shoot.'

Slowly a man crept out, trembling and holding his face aside. He was wrapped in a long coat, buttoned to the chin.

The detective, still holding the revolver in one hand, walked up to him and looked him full in the face.

'George Heritage,' he said, 'I arrest you as an escaped convict.'

'I am not George Heritage,' said the man in a low voice.

'You're not George Heritage, aren't you?' he said. 'Well, I'll take you on spec. If you're not the man, What did you hide under that bed for, and what are you doing in Mrs. Smith's room, eh?'

‘I don’t know,’ answered the man huskily.

‘Ah, but I do,’ exclaimed the detective, suddenly seizing the trembling wretch. ‘Come, let’s slip the bracelets on’ In the struggle, the long coat was torn aside. ‘Ah, you’re not the man, aren’t you? That’s good! I thought I should bowl you out.’

There could be no doubt that this was the right man. Underneath the long coat he wore the prison garb of the convict.

He went quietly enough then. The police kept the door while he was put into a cab, and then they jumped in too, and off went the party to the police station.

The scene in the little parlour was heartrending.

Bess lay in a dead faint on the sofa, Mrs. Jarvis slapping her hands and bathing her face to bring her to, and Shakspeare, white as death, crying in a corner.

Presently there was the sound of footsteps creeping cautiously down the stairs, and the next minute a man, his face ashy white, stole into the room. Bess opened her eyes and gave a loud hysterical cry.

The next moment her head was on the man’s breast, and her lips were moving in thankfulness to heaven.

It was George.

The good showman had dressed himself in the convict’s clothes, which they had brought with them in the box, and the detective, who knew nothing except that he was an escaped convict, and had no knowledge of his age or appearance, had been caught in the trap.

George had climbed through the trap-door that led to the roof, and lain concealed till the officers had gone.

‘We mustn’t stay here a minute,’ he cried, when Bess had recovered. ‘The trick will be found out directly he gets to the station, and they’ll be back here directly. I must go.’

‘Not alone, George,’ cried Bess; ‘not alone. Let us be together while we can. Oh, George, away from you now I should die. Let me share your danger! Let me come with you!’

It was in vain that George pleaded.

Bess would not hear of it. She would wander forth with him. She should know his fate then. The uncertainty would kill her.

In a few minutes, well wrapped up with scarves and shawls, which the good-hearted Mrs. Jarvis insisted upon their taking, and with five sovereigns which she thrust into Bess’s hand as they were going, the convict and his wife stole cautiously out of the house, and harried away, intending to make for the outskirts, and trust to Providence for some means of leaving the country undetected.

Bess wore a deep veil, and George, at Mrs. Jarvis’s suggestion, bought a pair of eye-protectors, and wore his scarf over his mouth, as though he had a bad cold. Thus disguised, and dressed in the loose, ill-fitting suit Mr. Jarvis had lent him in the morning, there was every possible chance of their eluding pursuit with ordinary caution.

Shakspeare came up to the door as they were leaving, and put his arm round Bess’s neck and kissed her, and bade her goodbye.

He knew her story now, and why she cried over those letters.

‘I wish I was as sure o’ heaven as I am o’ that young fellow’s hinnocence,’ exclaimed Mrs. Jarvis, as she tried to soothe Shakspeare, who was quite upset by his nurse’s tragic departure.

‘Innocent!’ exclaimed Shakspeare. ‘Do you think *she’d* love him if he wasn’t? Ah, if I was only strong again, and a bit older, I’d soon prove it.’

‘Don’t you fret, my boy,’ answered Mrs. Jarvis. ‘It’ll all come right yet, like it does in the dramas. You mark my words. Wirtue’s always triumphant in the last act, and I shouldn’t be at all surprised if that act ain’t the next in this here drama o’ “The Conwick’s Wife,” though what’ll happen to your poor father as is playing the low-comedy business in it just now, Goodness only knows!’

CHAPTER LVI.
A RESCUE.

Twelve o’clock has chimed from Big Ben, and Hyde Park is deserted.

It is a cold winter night, and the snow lies upon London’s open spaces.

It has been freezing hard all day, but the ice on the Serpentine is not thick enough to bear the great army of skaters yet, and so there are no loiterers along the bank.

Here and there, eluding as best they can the bull’s-eye of the policeman who saunters along on his round, lie the miserable homeless wretches who creep into the London parks and stretch their weary limbs out for a while upon the seats.

On one of these seats sit, or rather crouch, a man and a woman.

The man is speaking.

‘Bess, my darling, leave me,’ he says. ‘Leave me. I can shift for myself. Go back to the Jarvises—they will give you shelter, and I will contrive to let you know from time to time where I am.’

‘No, George dear,’ answers the woman, ‘I will not leave you. Come what may, I will stay with you. I could not rest, knowing that at any moment you might be discovered and taken back again to that dreadful place. Something tells me to hope—to hope that our troubles may yet pass away, and we may find peace at last.’

‘In the grave—nowhere else,’ answers the man sorrowfully. ‘I am branded. I am something to be hunted like a beast. Every man’s hand is against me. I am an escaped convict.’

‘Hush, hush!’ whispers the woman. ‘Do not speak so loud; some one may hear you.’

‘Where are we to sleep to-night says the man presently. ‘You can’t wander about again such a bitter night as this.’

The woman does not answer. She is wondering what they are to do. They are not starving, these people, and they are warmly wrapped up; nor are they penniless, for Mrs. Jarvis had not only slipped some money into Bess’s hand, but told her to come for more if they wanted it.

They could afford to pay for a lodging; but where are they to go? Everywhere the man is terrified lest questions should be asked, lest he should be recognised. The news of his escape is far and wide, his description is advertised in the papers; for days they have been wandering about, Bess going into the shops and buying the food, and at night they have been sleeping in out-of-the-way parts of London, entering late at night into the lodging-houses, and George keeping his face tied up as though he had a bad cold.

They have adopted every means in their power to elude discovery; but George is nervous, and Bess shares his fears. Last night when they applied for a room at a little inn up by Hammersmith, the landlady stared at George and hesitated, and all night long they lay awake, fearing they heard the steps of the police on the stairs. To-night they dread to apply anywhere. So long as they can wander about in the parks and quiet places they feel safe. It is when night comes, and they must go between four walls, that the great terror comes.

Thus it is that they are lingering on to-night in the park. George suggests presently that they shall move on a little, for a thick mist is falling.

Just as they are rising to go they hear voices down by the water, the voices of men quarrelling, and something impels them to stay where they are and listen.

They are quite alone in this part of the park; the night is too bitter for any to linger in such a spot. The mist has grown thicker and thicker, and they can see no forms, they can only hear the two voices in angry dispute.

Presently there is a loud oath, then a crash, as of yielding ice, a splash and a cry, and then the sound of footsteps hurrying away through the fog.

Bess clutches her husband’s arm and listens.

‘Help! help!’

It is a faint cry from the water’s edge, and the thick mist half drowns it.

Forgetting his position, forgetting all save that perhaps a fellow-creature is in deadly peril, George Heritage runs in the direction of the

sound. Bess follows him.

He can hear a voice, and he can see two dark arms waving through the mist.

‘Where are you?’ he shouts.

‘Here! here! Help, for God’s sake, help!’ shouts the man in the water. ‘I cannot hold out! I’m going!—the water’s a-dragging of me down! Help! help!’

Quick as thought, Bess tears her shawl off, and gives it to her husband.

‘God have mercy on me!’ cries the man, struggling fiercely to raise himself above the crackling, treacherous ice. ‘Lord forgive me!’

At that moment George, clutching his wife’s hand firmly to support himself, throws the shawl across the thinly frozen water. With a wild despairing cry the man flings out his hand and clutches it. A moment more and he is dragged ashore.

He is faint with exertion, and gasping, and he can scarcely stand.

‘Give me some brandy, quick!’ he murmurs. ‘The damned villain’s nearly put my light out—curse him!’

‘Hush!’ cries George. ‘Thank God for your safety.’

Bess, trembling in every limb with terror, has been feeling in her pockct. Dreading lest George should fall ill, she had, like the loving, thoughtful little woman she always was, put a small bottle in her pocket, and had it filled in the morning.

The half-drowned man seizes it, and gulps the contents down. Then he turns to his preserver and peers into his face. Directly he can discern his features he starts back. His teeth are still chattering with the shock of the immersion, as he gasps out, ‘George Heritage!’

George starts back in terror, and Bess almost falls. Who is this man they have saved from death to cry their secret aloud like this?

‘Nay, don’t be afeard,’ growls the man. ‘You’ve saved my life, and you’ve done the best night’s work you ever done in your lives. Let’s get out of this place, and I’ll tell you something as’ll make you thank God all your days for what you’ve done.’ Hardly knowing what they do, so dazed are they by the rapid progress of events, George and Bess follow the strange man. He is wet to his waist, and his saturated clothes are frozen on him, but he doesn’t seem to care about it. His mind is busy with some thought that makes his burly frame heave with passion, and his fierce face hideous with rage.

‘By G—d, if he only knew!’ he cries.

At the park gates he gets into a cab, and bids his preservers follow him. He tells them enough to assure them he means them no harm.

In a quarter of an hour George and Bess are safely sheltered in a house in Lisson Grove, and the man they have rescued sits with them by a roaring fire, and tells them a story which makes Bess’s pale cheeks crimson with excitement and her eyes bright with joy, and which makes George raise his eyes to heaven in thankfulness, and cry:

‘At last. Thank God!—thank God!’

The man they have rescued is Josh Heckett, and the man whose retreating footsteps they had heard in the mist, and who in a fit of furious rage had hurled the old man on to the treacherous ice, was Edward Marston.

The next morning there was a council of war. George confided his story fully to Heckett, for he had learnt enough to know that Heckett cherished a scheme of deadly revenge, and that George was to be the chief instrument in it.

Heckett had only one idea now—to hunt down Marston. He was relentless in his hate, and he had found an instrument ready to his hand.

Heedless of his own safety, and the use that might be made of the knowledge, he told George all, How the burglary had been planned; how it was George had been suspected; how the cheques had been forged by Smith and Co.; and how the evidence had been built up in order to secure the conviction of an innocent man.

George was for dragging him away there and then to tell his story; but Heckett soon showed him what folly that would be. He himself dare not appear. He could not face the police, he said, for reasons; and, besides, to exculpate George he would have to accuse himself.

‘You bide a bit, governor, and you’ll see it’ll all come right; but it’s

Marston as must do you justice, not me.’

‘Where is he?’ asked George.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Heckett. ‘I saw him last night for the first time for five years. I sent word to a man named Preene as I must see him, and Preene found him and sent him to me. I made the appointment in the park late, for I didn’t want to be seen by too many people, for I didn’t know what cursed game he might be up to. Then we had a row, and he tried to murder me, the blackguard!’

‘It might have been an accident,’ suggested George.

‘No, it was my life against his, and he knew it. I knew too much, and he feared as I should peach, and so he thought to settle me that way. You saved me, and it’s the rummest thing as ever was. One ‘ud think it was to be.’

At last George yielded to Heckett’s solicitation to let him go his own way to work. So far he was already benefited by the acquaintance. The house was Heckett’s. For reasons of his own he kept it to himself entirely, and there George and Bess could remain for a while safe from pursuit.

Safe until Heckett’s great scheme of vengeance was ripe, and then the old man swore to George he should stand boldly before the world and unmask the author of all his misery and sufferings.

CHAPTER LVII.
SQUIRE HERITAGE HAS A BAD ATTACK.

On the morning after the attempted murder and the rescue of Josh Heckett in Hyde Park, Mrs. Heritage rose early and came downstairs.

She had not slept all night, and she was thoroughly miserable. Her husband had been up in town several days, and she had never had a line from him.

She invented a story to tell her mother and Gertie when they asked where the squire was; but she was terribly distressed by his extraordinary conduct, and his cruelty in leaving her without any news of him.

She was terrified lest there was something in the old life which he had kept from her and which was now troubling him. A thousand nameless fears floated across her brain and caused her the most terrible mental torture.

She remembered his wild youth, their long separation, and the tales that she had heard from time to time. But their married life hitherto had given the lie to calumny. He had been a tender and devoted husband, and there had been nothing to show that he had anything to trouble him, save those occasional fits of depression which he assured her were constitutional.

Suddenly all had changed. He had broken out fiercely, spoken cruelly to her, and gone away without giving her the slightest clue to his whereabouts.

What could it mean?

This morning she went into the breakfast-room to feed her birds—to do anything to divert her mind from painful thoughts—and there she found her husband.

He must have come back by the first train and entered the house directly the servants were up, for she had heard no bell ring.

When she entered the room he was sitting by the fire, his head bent down and his hands clasped.

He raised his head at the sound of her approach, and she started back and gave a little cry of terror.

His face was ashy white, his eyes were bloodshot, and a strange hunted look in them that she had never seen before.

‘Edward!’ she cried, running to him and falling on her knees beside him—‘Edward, you are ill!’

He raised her gently.

‘No, Ruth,’ he said, ‘it’s nothing. Don’t make a fuss, there’s a good girl. Give me the brandy out of the cellaret.’

Ruth took her keys from the little basket she carried, and gave him the brandy.

He half filled a glass and swallowed it at a draught.

‘I’m better now,’ he said. ‘Don’t ask me any questions, there’s a good girl. I’m going to bed for an hour or two. I shall be all right directly.’

He seemed to avoid her gaze. He wanted to get away from her, and, with a woman’s quick instinct, she saw it. She let him go, and then she fell on her knees, and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she sobbed out a prayer to God to watch over and protect her husband, and to let no black shadows come to mar their lives—lives that had been so happy until now.

The squire came down to luncheon, but he was still white and restless. He answered Gertie and his wife haphazard, and evidently did not know what he said.

That afternoon, for the first time in their married life, Ruth saw her husband drunk. He had stupified himself with brandy, and had fallen into a drunken sleep.

She had gone to him in his study to ask him a question, and there she found him dozing fitfully, with the empty bottle by his side.

He heard her footsteps, but did not recognize her. Without opening his eyes, he addressed her as though she was some one else.

He cursed her and called her horrible names. Then suddenly he leapt up, his bloodshot eyes starting from his head, and struggled with an imaginary foe.

‘It’s your own fault, curse you!’ he cried. ‘Drown, like the dog that you are!’ Then he fell back heavily into his chair, and Ruth, alarmed, rushed out and called for help.

He was in a fit.

The doctor came, and was astonished. ‘The brain is affected,’ he said. ‘Some terrible shock has unnerved him. He must be kept quite quiet and watched.’

That night Ruth sat and watched by the bedside of a delirious husband.

And in his delirium the horrible secrets of his life were told. Secrets so horrible, things so vile and unholy, that the woman who bore his name raised her despairing eyes to heaven, and cried to God passionately to close the madman’s self-condemning lips.

It was a fortnight before the squire came round again, and then he was the wreck of his former self.

Weak and ill, he would wander about in the air for an hour or two a day, leaning on his wife’s arm, and uttering never a sound.

Ruth, too, had changed. Her beautiful face was deeply lined, and her eyes were sunken. ‘She’s fretting about the master,’ said the servants. They did not know that she was crushing down in her heart the ghastly secret that chance had revealed to her.

Under that awful knowledge, slowly but surely her heart was breaking. And yet knowing all—having heard every awful word that had fallen from this man in his delirium—she loved him still, loved him as fondly as ever, and would have laid down her life to save him from one moment’s pain.

Slowly the squire mended. He grew less feeble, and could get about alone again. He seemed like a man recovering from a terrible dream. But the doctors were very careful with him. They had heard a good deal that he had said, and put it down to some terrible story in a book or a newspaper having made a great impression on him when he was in a low, nervous state. So he was forbidden on any account to see a paper yet and none were brought into the house. He was glad of the prohibition. Had he seen a newspaper, the first thing he would have done would have been to search for a paragraph among the old ones in which there was something about the dead body of an old man being found in the Serpentine.

CHAPTER LVIII.
DR. OLIVER BIRNIE'S NEW PATIENT.

Dr. Oliver Birnie's consulting-room was generally pretty full in the morning, and always with paying patients. He had long since passed the 'super' stage of the profession. Lest any intelligent reader should be unacquainted with this phase of medical practice, let me explain that it is the custom when young doctors are anxious to work up a reputation for being fashionable for them to engage a few supers—that is, to give advice gratis to a few selected persons, on condition that they come once or twice a week and help to make a crowd in the waiting-room.

A doctor's house, like a theatre, must be crowded if the proprietor would have a success. An empty waiting-room is like an empty pit; it dispirits the *clientèle*. Let a patient have to wait a couple of hours, and he considers the doctor a great man; let him find himself alone, and be shown in directly, and he imagines that the medical man can't be clever or he would be busier.

Dr. Birnie was at home for consultation till twelve, and his rooms were generally crowded with genuine patients. They were, naturally, well-dressed, well-to-do people, for his fee was high. One morning, as the ladies and gentlemen at Dr. Birnie's sat glaring at each other amid the funereal silence which generally reigns in a doctor's waiting-room, the door opened, and a rough, hulking old man was shown in by the solemn attendant. He was about six feet, and broad in proportion, his hair and beard were grizzled, and his face was bronzed with exposure. He wasn't a nice-looking old gentleman at all, and his get-up did not improve his appearance. He wore a thick pilot jacket, which was anything but a fit, and round his throat was twisted a dirty white comforter. He took off his hat as he entered the room, and sidled awkwardly to a chair, sitting on the extreme edge, and eyeing the company nervously. At first the ladies and gentlemen wondered what such a huge, powerful fellow could possibly want with a doctor. They imagined he must be a navvy, or something of the sort, and they felt it was like his impudence to come and sit down in their presence. But presently the great frame was racked, the fierce face became crimson, and the silence of the waiting-room was broken by the violent coughing of the new-comer.

That a man with a cough like that should need medical advice the ladies and gentlemen understood, but their astonishment was great when the door opened and the solemn attendant beckoned to this 'navigator' to come out.

The idea of the doctor taking such a person out of his turn!

It was strange, certainly, but Dr. Birnie had done it, and when the rough-looking fellow was shown into his consulting-room, he held out his hand, and exclaimed, quite familiarly, 'Well, Josh, wherever have you turned up from?'

Then Mr. Josh Heckett told Dr. Birnie a long story, beginning in England, then going to Australia, and coming back to England again, and the said story ended on the banks of the Serpentine.

'Good gracious me!' said the doctor. 'And you mean to say that Marston deliberately tried to murder you?'

'I do by———!' exclaimed Heckett, bringing his fist down on the table till the surgical instruments danced again; 'and he's done it, except as it's a slow death 'stid of a quick un. I ain't been the same man, guv'nor, since that there night. It's the wettin' and the cold as done it. This 'ere corf don't give me no rest night nor day.'

Dr. Birnie put something to the old man's chest and listened, then he put his ear to his back and made him draw his breath, and then the doctor's face assumed a grave, profound look.

'Hem!' he said; 'that's bad. You ought to have come to me before. How long have you had this cough?'

'Soon arter the duckin' it come on, and it's got wus and wus. I bought no end o' lozengers and things off the barrers, as they sez cures a corf in no time; but they didn't do me a bit o' good. So I thought as I'd find you out and see if you could set me right. I ain't bothered you for a good many years now.'

'Well, Josh, I'll see what I can do for you, but you must be careful. You'd better keep indoors as much as you can, and I'll give you a prescription.'

The doctor wrote something on a piece of paper, and handed it to Josh.

'You'll get that made up at any chemist's,' he said. 'Let me see you again in a week.'

Josh took his prescription and thanked the doctor; but before he went he told him a portion of another little story, and, carried away by his excitement, he even went so far as to let the doctor into the details of a little scheme of vengeance which he was brewing against a man whom the doctor in days gone by had once known exceedingly well.

The doctor was so interested in the story that he let Josh talk on for ever so long, utterly oblivions of the ladies and gentlemen drumming their heels in the waiting-room.

And when Josh was gone he didn't send for a fresh patient at once, but sat for a few minutes buried in thought.

'I wonder what to do for the best,' he said, thinking aloud. 'I suspect Gurth would like to be in at the death, and it's all up with Edward Marston. He need fear nothing in that quarter now. Yes, I think Gurth had better come.'

That morning, when all the patients were disposed of, Dr. Birnie started out on his round of visits.

But the first thing he did was to send a telegraphic message to America:

'From Birnie, London, to Egerton, ———— Hotel, New York.—Come back. The game is yours. M. is trapped.'

Josh Heckett's cough grew worse and worse. Bess and George were still with him, and very grateful they were for the means of avoiding pursuit. George never ventured out now, but Bess, thickly veiled, did all the marketing for the little household. She was a capital nurse too, and Josh, in his rough, uncouth way, was grateful. He had never known all his life what kindness was. Gertie he had looked upon as bound to do what he wanted, because he fed and kept her, and Gertie was only a child. But with Bess it was different. She and her husband had not only saved his life, they were going to be his chosen instruments in a deep-laid scheme of vengeance.

He had found out now the whole vile plot against him, and as he sat at home and coughed, he brooded over his wrongs. He had found out that he had been frightened out of the country by a ruse, and that Marston and Preene were at the bottom of it. Every time he coughed, every time he swayed to and fro, the great gorged veins on his head standing out in ridges with the violence of the paroxysms, he cursed Marston. He believed that he had caught his death that night in the cold waters of the Serpentine, and he grew almost to thirst for his destroyer's blood.

If he had met Edward Marston face to face now he would have sprung upon him and throttled him where he stood. But the temptation did not come, and he sat and brooded over his wrongs, and matured the deep-laid scheme which was to put his enemy under his feet.

He rubbed his hands when he thought of the scene. He chuckled and laughed to himself as he pictured the hour of his triumph.

And day by day the cough grew worse and worse, and his brawny limbs lost more and more of their strength. Long sleepless nights and days of unrest were telling on him, and at times he would lean back in the easy-chair, which Bess had wheeled to the fire for him, close his eyes, and wonder what sort of a world it was men like himself went to when they died.

Bess and George knew only a portion of their protector's secret. They knew that he, like themselves, had been foully wronged by Marston. George lost sight of everything in his desire to wipe the awful stain from his name, and to clear himself before the world. And Josh Heckett promised him if he would only be patient he should wring a confession of his innocence from the real culprit himself.

It was necessary for them to act with caution, for George's recapture would have ruined all. Heckett would not risk all by striking till the blow was sure, and he had not the information he wanted yet, though some of his old associates were at work for him.

Birnie had promised to assist him in something that he particularly wanted to know, and one day the doctor's carriage drove up to the door, and the doctor came in and told Josh two things—one he was glad to hear, and one he would not have heard for untold gold.

From the first piece of information he learnt that Marston was in his

clutches now. The doctor had traced him to his den; the doctor had found out that he had inherited, through his wife, the Heritage estates, and that he had taken the name with the money.

But the doctor also told Heckett that his cough was worse, and that he must take every care of himself, for the symptoms were serious, and a fresh cold on this one would end in consumption.

And the doctor spoke only half the truth.

The wetting and exposure to cold that eventful night in Hyde Park had done their work, and a fatal disease had already seized the stalwart burglar in its grip.

The symptoms of galloping consumption had shown themselves to the experienced eye of Dr. Birnie.

CHAPTER LIX.
A VISITOR FOR RUTH.

On one of the first days of spring Gertie Heckett stood at the lodge-gates, looking along the road as though she expected some one.

Ruth had driven her husband out in the pony-carriage for the first time since his illness. Until to-day he had not gone beyond the park-gates.

While Gertie was looking for the carriage, a young woman, deeply veiled, came by, and, seeing Gertie, stopped.

'Is Mrs. Heritage at home, do you know, miss?' said the woman, in a nice soft voice that took Gertie's fancy directly.

'No, she's not,' answered Gertie. 'Do you want to see her?'

'Yes. I've come from London on purpose.'

Gertie thought at first it must be some one in distress who had been recommended to come to them, for the young woman, though neat, didn't look very well off, so she asked if she could do anything for her.

'Yes, miss, you ean; you can do me a great favour. I want to see Mrs. Heritage on most important business—important to her and to her husband. If you will let me go into the house and wait till she comes, I shall be glad.'

'Will you step into the lodge?' said Gertie, pointing to the open door.

The woman shrank back with a little start.

'No, thank you,' she said hesitatingly. 'I'd—I'd rather not.'

Gertie thought it very funny that this strange woman should object to go into the lodge, and she was just going to ask her why she objected, when a loud bark was heard, and Lion came trotting along in front of the pony-carriage.

The squire sat by his wife's side; but few who had known him in the old time would have recognized him now. He had aged terribly. His face was deeply lined, and his hair had gone almost white during his illness. His head was bent forward and his eyes were half closed as the chaise drove up to the lodge-gate. At the sound of Gertie's voice he looked up, and saw the young woman talking to her.

In an instant the listless look upon his face vanished, his lips trembled, his face flushed angrily, and his dull eyes flashed.

'Who's this?' he exclaimed angrily.

'Some one who wishes to see Mrs. Heritage, 'answered Gertie, surprised at the squire's manner.

'Mrs. Heritage can't see her, then,' said the squire, taking the reins from Ruth and whipping the pony into a gallop.

Gertie stared after the carriage in astonishment, as it was whirled up to the house-door; but the young woman never moved.

'I'm afraid the gentleman's offended with you for talking to me,' she said. 'Will you kindly give this to Mrs. Heritage presently, without the gentleman seeing?'

Gertie, bewildered by the whole scene, took the note mechanically that the woman handed to her, and slipped it into her pocket. Then, fearing that the squire would be angry if she stayed talking, she called to Lion, who had remained with her, and was sniffing suspiciously at the intruder, and ran up the broad gravel path to the hall, while the woman, with a brief 'Thank you,' walked away in the direction of the village.

Inside the house poor Gertie soon found that things were 'uncomfortable.' The squire had suddenly gone off into one of his fits, and was storming and raging in his study. Gertie ran in to see what was the matter, and found Ruth vainly endeavouring to calm her husband and make him listen to reason.

The sight of Gertie aggravated him. She was a little spy—she was this, she was that. She was always talking to a parcel of tramps, and letting them learn everybody's business. What did this strange woman want with Ruth? He wouldn't have a stranger admitted to the place. How often was he to say so? They were all in league against him—that was what it was.

Poor Ruth sat and listened patiently. She was used to her husband's paroxysms of temper and suspicion now. After the first great shock that had come upon her, she had set herself a task, and determined to bear all patiently. She had gathered from her husband's ravings only that he accused himself of terrible crimes. At first she had believed that he was really guilty, but gradually she had persuaded herself that it was merely

the remembrance of his earlier surroundings appearing to a disordered mind. The doctor had told her that men in her husband's peculiar mental condition often accused themselves of terrible things, and that she was to take no notice of his words. It was but a phase of his disease.

Some strong and sudden excitement had caused a temporary derangement, that was all. Rest and quiet were all he needed. The rest and quiet he had, and Ruth in time had the satisfaction of seeing him grow more reasonable, and at last, so far as his mental condition was concerned, all fear was removed.

But his bodily health became worse and worse, and his nerves were always in a highly wrought condition. He could not bear the least noise, and the most trifling circumstance would fling him into an ungovernable rage. He was suspicious of everybody and of everything—of the servants, of Gertie, and of his wife.

Ruth had long thought seriously of getting him away to try a complete change of scene, and on this very morning that they had gone for their first drive she had been urging him to try a three months' tour on the Continent.

He had jumped at the idea, and the thought of the change had seemed to put new life into him. He had been almost cheerful and amiable all through the drive, and it was not till they neared home that he fell into a brown study, and the old dull, worried look came upon his face.

The sight of Gertie talking to a strange woman at the lodge-gates, and the woman's request to speak with Ruth, had produced a remarkable change.

He became violent and abusive, and poor Ruth had to put up with another 'scene.' It was some time before she could quiet him. Gertie assured him again and again that the woman had said nothing more than that she wanted to see Mrs. Heritage; and Ruth explained that it was probably only some one sent from the village to appeal to her charity.

Ruth and Gertie left the squire alone directly his temper had cooled down, for they knew by experience that after these paroxysms he would sit for hours gazing into vacancy and uttering no sound.

When they were at a safe distance from the study, Gertie, trembling and looking as shamefaced as though she were committing some awful crime, drew the strange woman's letter from her poeket and gave it to Ruth.

'I was to give you this,' she said in a whisper. 'I hope it wasn't wrong to take it.'

Ruth took the letter, looking almost as guilty as Gertie.

Were her husband's suspicions justified after all? Was this some new trouble coming upon them?

She put the letter in her pocket and went upstairs to her own room.

She would not open it while Gertie was standing by.

Alone in her bedroom, she turned the letter about and hesitated still.

'Pshaw!' she exclaimed, with a forced laugh. 'What a goose I am! I dare say, after all, it's somebody wants assistance.'

She opened the letter and read it. It was short, but there was enough in it to drive the blood from Ruth's cheeks and make her tremble like an aspen-leaf.

'Madam,

'For your husband's sake, and if you value his liberty, let me see you alone. If I cannot see you at the house when I call, meet me outside the lodge-gates at eight. It will be dark then. Do not delay, as I must return to London to-night. Show this to no one. All depends upon your secrecy.

'A Friend.'

The letter fluttered down from Ruth's trembling grasp on to the floor.

What did it mean?

Was it a trap? She had read of such things. No, the woman had asked at first openly to see her. She had come in the broad daylight and been refused.

For her husband's sake!

What terrible secret was about to be revealed to her? She remembered now his wild words and the strange confessions he had poured out during his illness.

She would know the worst.

She made up her mind to go, and then the brave heart gave way. Surrounded on every side with mystery, her life, once so happy, had become almost a burden to her. She had hoped to be so happy with

Edward, and everything had looked so bright once, and now—— Ruth Heritage buried her head in her hands and sobbed out an hysterical cry to heaven that God would guide her feet aright through the mazes of the rough, bleak road she and her husband were treading now.

CHAPTER LX.
A SECRET MEETING.

The night was pitch dark. There was not even a star in the sky to look down upon Ruth Heritage as she crept quietly ont of her house and went swiftly down the walk towards the lodge gate.

She was bound on an errand of love and mercy. She was going to see old Dame Huntley, the sexton's widow, who lay dying down in the low-lying district, where the fever and ague had been busy of late. The servants knew that their mistress was bound to Dame Huntley's, the squire knew it, and the lodge-keeper, who opened the gates, knew it, otherwise they might have wondered at Ruth going out alone at such a time.

Outside the lodge gates the woman who had given Gertie the letter was waiting.

Ruth trembled violently now.

She half hoped the woman would not be there.

Instinctively she paused.

'Don't be afraid, madam,' said the mysterious woman, in a sweet, reassuring voice; 'I only wanted a few words with you. I may not tell you who I am, but I have heard your story, and I pity you.'

'You pity me!' said Ruth, astonished. 'Why?'

'Because I know what is in store for you.'

They had walked along by the side of the park, away from the lodge gates to a place where the hedge grew thickly over a low-lying wall.

'Do not speak in riddles,' exclaimed Ruth. 'If your object is a friendly one—as something in your manner tells me it is—speak freely and let me know the worst. You said my husband's liberty was threatened—by whom?'

'By justice.'

Ruth started back. The old suspicion rushed back upon her, and her face flushed hot, and then went deadly pale.

'By justice?' she stammered. 'I do not understand.'

'Listen to me, madam, for my time is short. There are those to whom the history of your husband's past life is known. Soon they will accuse him openly. One of his former associates will turn Queen's evidence against him. His deadliest enemy knows all. I tell you this now, because I have suffered myself, and I do not wish to be a party to that which will be a life-long separation between husband and wife. I am doing wrong, but I cannot help it.'

'Yes—yes!' cried Ruth, 'I believe you. But what am I to do?'

'Bid your husband leave this place to-night. Tell him that the secret of the great gold robbery is known to Mr. Gurth Egerton, and that to-morrow he may be arrested.'

Ruth gave a cry of horror—a cry which died away on her lips as a loud rustling by the hedge announced the presence of some one—some one who had perhaps overheard all.

Ruth and her informant walked quickly away.

'Go now,' said the woman. 'You have no time to lose. Let your husband fly at once. To-morrow it will be too late.'

'Yes; I will! I will!' cried Ruth, almost fainting with horror and grief. 'But tell me how you know this.'

'How I know it!' said the woman, passionately flinging up her veil. 'Look at me well—you, whose husband I have saved—and remember me. I am the wife of George Heritage. I am the rightful mistress of these broad lands. My husband is a convict—a hunted felon. He was the victim of a vile plot, which your husband concocted. I know all now; and yet I forgive him for your sake. I want no wife's agony on my head if it can be spared. Your husband ruined mine. I have come to save yours!'

Ruth buried her face in her hands as Bess poured out her wild words—words wrung from her heart.

'Remember,' said the woman, 'to-morrow it will be too late.'

As she spoke she walked rapidly away, leaving Ruth rooted to the spot.

As soon as her limbs would obey her will, terrified and heartbroken, Ruth staggered, rather than walked, back to the hall.

Coming down the walk she met her husband.

'Edward!' she cried, 'where are you going?'

'Hush, Ruth!' he exclaimed, seizing her arm. 'Don't say a word. I have

heard all. I followed you. God forgive me for dragging you down to this! I will save you yet if I can.'

'Oh, Edward! what would you do?' she cried.

'You call me Edward still?' he said, with a look of gratitude in his eyes —'you, who are so pure and good, though you know now the secret that has preyed upon and been slowly killing me for years? Ruth, can you ever forgive me for my base treachery in letting you link yourself with a God-forsaken wretch?'

'Yes, Edward, I forgive you. You are my husband—my kind, loving husband—still.'

'Thank God for those words, Ruth!' he said. 'Kiss me.'

He bent over her in the dark night, and his trembling lips pressed hers.

'Where are you going?' she said. 'Let me go with you.'

'No; there is only one chance now. I must find out Egerton at once. He is the enemy who is doing this. I believe I can silence him yet. If I can't I must leave the country at once. Ruth, if we never meet again, God bless you!'

He tore himself from her agonized embrace, and went swiftly down the walk and along the road to the station.

All that night there was a faint light burning in Ruth's room—the room where everything reminded her of the husband who had set out on a perilous journey from whence he might never return.

And all that night, with tears and sobs, Ruth knelt and prayed—prayed as she had never prayed before to the God she worshipped—for help and succour in this, the darkest hour of her life.

Late that evening Squire Heritage called at Mr. Seth Preene's house.

Seth started up in astonishment.

'Why, whatever brings you up to town?'

'The worst,' answered the squire. 'Gurth Egerton is back, and knows all. He will split to-morrow.'

'How do you know?' gasped Preene,

'A woman has split on the plot,' answered the squire. 'There s only one chance now. Do you know where Egerton is?'

'Yes, at his house—at Birnie's that is now.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I followed him from Heckett's only yesterday. I wondered what he was doing there.'

'At Heckett's!' gasped the squire. 'Is Heckett still—still—alive?'

'Yes,' answered Preene, looking steadily at his companion; but he won't do much more mischief. He's in a galloping consumption.'

The squire heaved a deep sigh. At least he was free from the brand of Cain.

'I've been going to write to you once or twice about the goings-on there,' said Preene; 'only you agreed to see Heckett, last time you were here, and square him, and as I never heard any more from you, I concluded you had. There's some people staying in his house, and I can't make out who they are.'

The squire scarcely heard what Preene said. He was turning over a desperate scheme in his mind. If he could secure Gurth, he could secure Heckett too. He would brave the worst and see Egerton at once.

'By Heaven!' he muttered to himself, 'I'll play my last card, 'and hazard all upon it. Let Garth Egerton look to himself, for now it is a struggle to the death. I will not fall alone.'

CHAPTER LXI.
A LATE VISITOR FOR MR. EGERTON.

Squire Heritage, or Edward Marston, as we may now again call him, leapt into a cab when he left Preene, and bade the man drive to Birnie's address.

It was then close on midnight.

He was playing a desperate game in venturing thus into the lion's den, but it was the last chance left him.

If he could silence Egerton he might purchase a respite from Heckett even now. Heckett was evidently dying, and had no longer fear or trouble for himself. He had escaped from the Serpentine that night, and had made Egerton the instrument of his vengeance. But the blow had not actually fallen, and he might yet stay the uplifted hand. If he could, there might be some peace in store for him. He did not care for himself. He was sick and tired of it all. His punishment was heavier than he could bear; but for Ruth's sake he would strive and struggle yet to fight against fate. Let the shame be spared to her of being a felon's wife.

'Poor Ruth! Noble Ruth!' he thought. 'She knows me now in all my hideous impurity, and yet she forgives me. Oh, how different things might have been!'

Ah, me! that 'might have been!' It is the anthem of the lost soul, the despairing cry of the sinner caught in the toils of his sin.

It was a little past midnight when Marston rang the doctor's bell, but the lights were still burning in the house.

'I want to see Mr. Egerton, if he is in, on important business.'

'He is not in yet, sir,' said the servant. 'He and the doctor are at the theatre, and have not returned yet.'

'I will wait,' said Marston, brushing past the man into the hall. 'My business with him is of the utmost importance.'

'Will you step into the library, sir?' said the servant, overawed by the manner of this imperious visitor.

Marston followed the Servant, who turned up the lights and left him.

The evening papers, unfolded, were lying on the table.

Marston picked up one casually, and glanced along the columns.

Suddenly his eye was arrested by a name, and he read the paragraph carefully. It was headed, 'A Message from the Sea,' and ran as follows:

'This morning, as some fishermen were off the coast of————, one of them picked up a bottle which was floating past them and brought it ashore. On opening it it was found to contain a piece of paper, on which was something written in pencil, of which the following words only are decipherable, the salt water having soaked through a faulty cork and obliterated the remainder:

'"*On board the '"The ship is sinking rapidly. I, Gurt am about to die, do solemnly declare tha of September, 18—, I stabbed my cousin, Ra house, kept by a man named Heck I freely make this confession, an*

'The bottle with its contents has been handed to the police, though it is doubtful if any clue will ever be obtained to the meaning of this extraordinary message from the sea.'

Yes, to one man there was a clue.

Edward Marston read each word, and it seemed as though Providence had sent the message to him. His pale facc glowed; his sunken eyes gleamed.

He had Gurth Egerton's life in his hand.

Let him. come now—he was ready.

He saw it all.

When the *Bon Espoir* was sinking, Egerton, with the terrors of death upon him, had hurled this into the sea; it had floated about for years, to be cast ashore now—now, when such a revelation placed the murderer at the mercy of the man he would injure.

Marston's suspicions were confirmed. He had always suspected that Ralph Egerton had met with foul play.

He could hardly believe that the paper he held in his hand was real—that he was not the victim of some nightmare, from which he would presently awake.

While he sat staring at the paper, and reading it again and again, there

came a ring at the bell.

Marston folded the paper and threw it back in its place.

The next moment Gurth Egerton came into the room.

The servant had told him a gentleman wanted to see him.

He started violently when he saw Marston.

'You here?' he exclaimed.

'Yes', Mr. Egerton,' said Marston calmly. 'I've just come to pay you a little friendly visit before I leave the country.'

Egerton wondered what he should do. On the morrow he was prepared to denounce this man to justice—not openly, but through George Heritage—and here was the man sitting quietly and calmly in his house.

Egerton could not at once conceal his agitation at being thus confronted by his intended victim.

'You don't seem pleased to see me,' said Marston.

'Well, to tell you the truth, my dear fellow,' answered Gurth, 'I'm not. What have you come for?'

'On the old business. Just to have a chat. When are you going to split on your old pal?'

Egerton's face flushed crimson, and he stammered out, 'I—I—don't understand you!'

'Tut, tut, man! Let's play cards on the table. We're not the raw lads we were in the old days when you were plucking your cousin Ralph.'

'It's a lie!' said Egerton fiercely. 'I never plucked Ralph, as you call it.'

'My dear fellow, what a fuss you make about such a paltry accusation. Why, if I had said you murdered him you couldn't look more indignant.'

'Enough!' exclaimed Egerton with an oath. 'You have not come here to talk about Ralph Egerton.'

'Indeed I have!' said Marston. 'And be civil, if you can, for I've come to do you a service. You're a careless fellow, to leave a confession of murder kicking about on the sea.'

Egerton leapt to his feet and seized Marston by the arm. His face was a deathly white, and his lips trembled, while great beads of perspiration stood upon his brow.

'Hush!' he whispered hoarsely. 'Not so loud. What do you mean?'

'Lord, man! what's the matter? You don't think I'm going to round on you, do you? I only want you to do me a favour, and I'll do you one in return. I have in my possession your written confession of the murder of your cousin, signed by you. You wrote it when the *Bon Espoir* was sinking—and I have it.'

'The sea has given up her dead!' cried Egerton, starting back, his face distorted with terror.

'It has,' said Marston quietly. 'Your life is in my hands. Come, you were going to play me a scurvy trick. I'll return good for evil. This confession is in my hands. Do what I ask you, and you shall have it and tear it up.'

'Name your terms,' groaned Egerton, sinking into a chair and burying his face in his hands. 'I am at your mercy.'

'My terms are simple. Come with me now to Heckett's and make him swear not to betray me. I know the plot between you. I am not so easily fooled as you think. Come and do this, and I will place the confession in your hands.'

'You swear it?'

'I swear it. But you don't want an oath from an old friend like me, I should think.'

'I will do it,' said Egerton eagerly. 'Come—come at once. Not a word to Birnie—not a word to any living soul. Come!'

Egerton went out first into the hall. Marston followed, quietly slipping the evening paper into his pocket as he went out. The servant was in the hall.

'Tell the doctor I'm gone out with my friend,' said Egerton to the servant; 'and don't sit up for me. I'll let myself in with the key.'

The two men went out, and the servant closed the door after them.

'What's up, I wonder?' said that worthy to himself. 'Here's a gent, as don't give a name, comes in as white as a ghost, and Mister Egerton comes in afterwards as jolly as a sandboy, and presently they goes out, and then it's the gent as looks as jolly as a sandboy, and Mister Egerton as is as white as a ghost. It's rum—very rum!'

With which criticism on passing events, the aforesaid observer of countenances went downstairs to the kitchen to finish his disturbed

supper and enjoy a quiet half-hour over *Bell's Life* before retiring for the night.

CHAPTER LXII.
A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Egerton and Marston reached Heckett's house.

During the journey neither had spoken. Each was busy with his own thoughts.

Gurth knocked a certain number of times, and Heckett, lying tossing on the little bed in the back room, knew who was there, for he did not have his door opened at all hours to every one.

Lately Egerton had been a constant visitor, for Heckett—too ill now to move—had confided his schemes to him, and entrusted him with the disposal of his secrets, and his effects when he should be dead.

Heckett was very ill to-night, and Bess was still sitting up with him. She had been out on business, and had not come back till late.

George had watched by the old man all day, and had gone to bed tired out.

'It's Egerton,' said the old dog-fancier, lifting his quick ears from the pillow; 'that's his knock. What's in the wind now?

'Go and let him in, missus—there's a dear!'

Bess went to the door and started back. There were two men outside.

'It's all right,' said Egerton. 'This is a friend. Come in.'

Gurth led the way iuto Heckett's room, and Marston followed him.

Bess, fancying she should be *de trop*, went on upstairs to the little room which she and her husband occupied, and where he had been unsuspected and secure ever since that eventful night in Hyde Park.

Their troubles were soon to be over now, and they were patient, for George had, through Heckett, acquired, sufficient evidence to prove how the whole scheme was concocted.

Heckett, who knew how near his end was, had agreed to confess everything, and to leave the proof of what he stated with George, so that he might use them. He had ascertained through the police that an accomplice giving evidence which would secure the capture of the gold robbers would be pardoned, and on the morrow justice was to have the whole plot laid in her hands.

'To-morrow,' said George, as Bess came into the room. 'Tomorrow is here, Bess, already. In twelve hours the first step will have been taken to prove my innocence and take this horrible shame from my name. Once free from this odious stigma, I can work, my darling, and make a home for you, where, with God's help, we shall be happier than had we had the lands and the fortune my poor father willed away to the stranger—to come into the hands of the very man who was the ruin of his son. But to-morrow we shall strike the first blow for freedom. Nay, today. What time is it?'

'Past one,' answered Bess; 'and there's Mr. Egerton come with a strange gentleman to see Heckett.'

'It's about this business, I expect,' answered George. 'Heigho! I'm tired. Let's go to sleep, and wake to find the new day dawned—the day that is to do so much for us.'

While the escaped convict was conversing so hopefully above, the astonished Heckett found Marston by his side below.

Weak as he was, he rapped out an oath as he saw his would-be assassin enter the room.

It was a stormy interview at first, but gradually Heckett calmed down. In his confidence he had told Egerton everything, and now Egerton urged him to accept Marston's proposition, and hold his peace. What good would Heckett do himself? He would have his revenge, that was true—but what use was revenge to a dying man?

Heckett listened calmly at last, and when Egerton had finished and Marston had added his argument, letting Heckett see pretty plainly that he could not injure him without injuring Egerton also, and dropping something more than a hint that the old story of Ralph Egerton's death in Heckett's gambling-house might have to be gone into too, if he were forced into a corner—when all this had been said, Heckett closed his eyes, and lay back on his pillow thinking.

'I can't promise,' he said. 'There's others besides myself as 'as got accounts to reckon with you. I tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a week—a dear week—to put daylight between yourself and the tecs.'

'I'll accept that offer,' said Marston, quietly.

He saw there was nothing better to be got from Heckett that night. In a week much might be done. In the mean time he knew he should hold Egerton safe. Delay was all he wanted now. Given a week, he might yet surmount every obstacle.

He rose from the chair by Heckett's side, and prepared to go.

As he did so Heckett beckoned to him.

'There's one thing you can do for me,' he said. 'I believe as you know what's become o' my gal. I ain't got long to be here now, and I'd like to see my poor Gertie's gal afore I go. There's some things o' her poor mother's as I've kept for many a year as I'd like her to have. If you know where she's been all these years, maybe you'll tell her her old grandfather's dyin', and he'd die easier if he could see her again, and ask her to forgive him.'

'You shall see Gertie if I can find her,' said Marston eagerly.

A new idea had come to him. Gertie might induce the old man to hold his peace for ever. He had almost forgotten that Ruth's *protégée* was Heckett's child.

Gurth and Marston bade the old man 'Good-night,' and went out into the deserted street.

'He's sinking fast,' said Gurth. 'Birnie saw him the other day, and says he can't live a month. Now I've kept my promise—keep yours.'

They had walked to the corner of the street.

'Oh—ah—yes,' answered Marston, quietly; 'that confession. I promised it to you when you had silenced Heckett You have only silenced him for a week, and he will live a month. But, my dear fellow, I always like to treat an old friend well. See here——'

He pulled the newspaper out of his pocket and handed it to Gurth.

'There you are, you see—there is your confession. The original is in the hands of the police. You're fond of trips to America—I should try another at once if I were you. Good-bye.'

Marston turned on his heel, and walked rapidly away, leaving Gurth Egerton glued to the spot with horror. He read and reread the paragraph by the flickering light of the lamp. At any moment he might be arrested. The clue had been found by Marston. Why should it not be found by others? and then—He dared not think of it. He felt a choking sensation at his throat.

He would go back home at once and see Birnie, confide all to him, and take his advice. Birnie was the only friend he had in the world. He would go away again. There was nothing else for it. It seemed as though his wandering feet were to find no rest in this world. He was to be pursued everywhere by the shadow of the rash crime committed in his youth, and buried, as he fondly hoped, for ever.

And now the sea had borne witness against him. How had the confession he had made to the clergyman in the hour of imminent death been so miraculously preserved?

He could not think.

He only knew that a voice had cried out against him from the far-off seas, and that at the present moment his confession of the murder of his cousin was in the hands of the police.

CHAPTER LXIII.
EDWARD MARSTON GOES HOME.

When Gurth Egerton got home he found Birnie still sitting up and smoking. The doctor had gone home, after the theatre, with some friends to a supper party, and had only just returned, although it was nearly four o'clock.

As Gurth let himself in the doctor called out to him.

'I'm glad you're up, Birnie,' said Gurth, 'for I want to speak to you.'

'Why, how pale you are, old fellow! You look as if you'd seen a ghost.'

'So I have,' answered Gurth, sinking into a chair; 'or something quite as bad. That cursed business about Ralph has turned up again!'

Birnie sat for a moment looking at his companion, and said nothing. For a long time past he had been wishing to speak to Gurth on this very subject, and yet he felt it was an awkward one to approach.

He was firmly established in his profession, he had made a fortune, he had not the slightest need now of pecuniary assistance, and he felt that some day Gurth might be tempted to do some stupid thing, and then the blame would rest on him.

Birnie had all his life long let nothing trouble him, and had always taken a passive rather that an active part in the search after fortune. He objected now to these periodical alarms of Mr. Egerton's. He didn't want to be bothered with his friend's business any more. He felt that the time had come when it would be perhaps as well if he and Gurth Egerton really did have a little conversation about the late Mr. Ralph Egerton.

'Well, what about poor Ralph now?' asked the doctor, after he had determined on his course of action and let a big ring of smoke float gracefully from his lips.

'Birnie, I must make a clean breast of it,' said Gurth. 'It's no good beating about the bush. You know that unfortunate night when in the heat of a quarrel I stabbed Ralph, and he died. It wasn't murder, but the world might call it hard names. I ran away, like the coward that I am, and you sent me word that he was dead, that you had signed the certificate, and that I could come back. I have always been grateful to you, Birnie, and I think I've shown it, for you helped me out of a horrible mess.

I tremble to think what might have happened but for you.'

'It might have been a little awkward, certainly,' said Birnie.

'Indeed it might. Well, when the *Bon Espoir* went down, and I thought it was all up with me, like a cursed fool that I was, I wrote out a confession and gave it to a clergyman. I confessed that I had stabbed my cousin.'

'Good Heavens! you didn't do that?' exclaimed Birnie, his calm face agitated for once.

'Yes, I did. And that cursed confession must have been preserved, in some miraculous way, when the ship went down, for it floated ashore yesterday and my written words are in the papers. Thank goodness! it's not all decipherable; but there's no knowing what chemicals may do. Birnie, I must go away again; and this time, I fear, for good. There is God's hand in this. I shall never know what peace is again.'

Dr. Birnie was fairly astonished. Gurth had never taken him so completely into his confidence as this before.

'Gurth Egerton,' he said, presently, 'you must be mad!'

'I was, to sign such a damning document as that.'

'And to confess a crime which you never committed.'

'But,' stammered Gurth, 'you know I——'

'I know you stabbed your cousin, certainly, but it was only a scratch. I thought I told you I signed the certificate of his death.'

'Yes. To hide the real cause.'

'Nonsense! I signed a proper certificate. Ralph Egerton died from what I wrote on the certificate—from a complication of diseases brought on by drink. The wound had nothing to do with it. The bleeding did him good, if anything.'

Gurth Egerton sat like a man in a dream.

'Do you mean that?'

'I mean you've been accusing yourself all these years of a crime you never committed. I called a physician in to Ralph—he can be produced, if

necessary. The cause of death was what I say.'

'Why, in God's name, did you never tell me this before, Birnie?' exclaimed Egerton, still half dazed.

'I never knew you accused yourself of the murder,' said the doctor, quietly. 'I showed you the certificate.'

'Yes, but I thought——'

'My dear fellow,' exclaimed Birnie, interrupting, 'you've been the victim of an hallucination. The sooner you get rid of the idea that you murdered your cousin, the better; and as to this confession, they'll never decipher any more. The salt water has destroyed the paper, I take it. No chemistry can restore what does not exist.'

Gurth Egerton fetched a deep breath. He had punished himself all these years for his evil passions. He had fled when no man pursued. God had marked out his penalty, and he had had to bear it.

And Marston had used this mare's nest to frighten him with. Marston believed it true, and had triumphed over him. Ah, now the tables were turned. He was safe, and Marston was still at his mercy.

Edward Marston went to the Waterloo terminus and waited for the first train that would take him down home.

The first train left at six, and he walked about until it started. He was anxious to go down at once, and relieve his poor Ruth's suspense. He had gained a week's respite, and removed a dangerous enemy from his path. He would send Gertie up to the dying man at once. Gertie might plead with him for longer grace still for those who had been so good to her. At any rate, while things were as they were, it would be as well that the girl should be out of the way.

Hope was strong in his breast that morning as he took his seat in the train. During one short night a change—a great change—had taken place. He had faced his enemy and conquered him, and diplomacy might easily accomplish the rest.

He would give up everything willingly, if need be. All he asked was to get away with Ruth somewhere where he could live quietly and end his days in making his peace with God.

Oh, if he came through this crisis, how earnestly, how truly, he would repent! He leaned back in the carriage, as the train rushed on through the early morning, and thought of the poor heartbroken woman at home, whose love for him had been so good and pure and noble, and his eyes filled with tears.

He pictured her at home, hoping and praying through the weary watches of the night for his safety. He could see her cheeks flush with joy as she heard his step upon the walk, and knew that he had come back to her safe from the jaws of his deadly peril.

He pictured her hiding her head upon his guilty breast, and thanking the good God who had restored him to her once again, and then he forgot everything, save a sensation of horrible anguish, he heard a crash, the shrieks of men and women, he felt a terrible blow and the hot blood trickling down his face, sharp pain shot across his chest, and he knew no more till he found himself lying in a strange place, where he could not say, and he had a dull, dim sense of voices round him buzzing and humming like innumerable bees.

He opened his eyes, and then he felt that he was terribly weak. He looked up and saw Ruth—his Ruth, with swollen eyes and a white, worn face, bending over him.

Then he remembered that he had been on the railway, and that there had been a collision. He could not move; he felt that there were bandages about his body, and he had a fearful, terrible pain in his chest and body. He tried to speak, and his voice came in a thin, weak whisper.

Ruth was bending low, kneeling by his side. There were grave doctors standing by the bed, and a woman who looked like a nurse.

Then he knew that he was in the hospital. His head felt, oh, to queer and strange, and everything seemed swimming about him.

'Do you know me, Edward darling?' whispered Ruth.

'Yes, you are Ruth,' he said, feebly. 'Am I hurt?'

Ruth's sweet eyes were filled with tears again in a moment, and she nodded her head.

The doctor came up and bent over him, and looked at him anxiously.

'You are a doctor?' whispered the injured man.

‘Yes.’

‘Am I much hurt?’

‘My poor fellow,’ said the doctor, ‘we must hope; but it is my duty to tell you that there is the gravest danger in your case. It is only right that you should know it.’

He had guessed it.

He knew what the grave faces and the weeping wife meant. He was in danger of his life. He knew what the awful pain meant, and the weakness that almost robbed him of his voice.

‘You won’t go away, Ruth?’ he said, feebly, as his wife bent towards him.

‘No,’ sobbed Ruth; ‘I shall not leave you. They will let me stay.’

The doctors were still by the bedside.

He saw them—he saw Ruth—he dimly remembered all that had happened now, and, just as the remembrance was getting clearer, everything faded, and he relapsed into unconsciousness again.

Ruth, watching by the unconscious form of her husband knew the worst. In mercy the doctors had told her. Her husband had been brought in from the railway with terrible internal injuries, which must be fatal. He had been identified as Squire Heritage by the papers in his pocket, and his wife had been sent for by the railway officials. He was dying. The doctor told her he would not live four-and-twenty hours. Science could do nothing.

It was near midnight when he came to himself again, and a great screen was drawn about his bed. He was weaker now, but he did not feel the pain so much; only there was a sensation of floating away. His body seemed too light to stay where it was. He looked up, and saw his wife’s face pressed down on the pillow by his, her sweet eyes watching for the return of consciousness.

‘Ruth, my darling,’ he whispered, ‘keep your face there a little while.’

She kissed him gently, her hot tears wetting the pillow.

‘Don’t cry, Ruth,’ he said. ‘It is better so. I shall escape them all now. Pray for me, Ruth. Had I lived I might have tried to be better, but God knows best.’

He lay for a moment and said nothing.

His breath was coming faster and faster, and the gray shadows were settling down upon his face.

Presently he closed his eyes again and sighed deeply.

For a moment all was still.

Then he opened his eyes and fixed them lovingly on Ruth’s face,

‘Smile, my darling,’ he said. ‘Let your smile be the last thing I see on earth. Forgive me for all the wrong I have done, and pray for me sometimes. The only happiness I ever knew in this world was your love. God bless you, my own Ruth!’

She smiled at him as he bade—smiled through the tears that she could not check.

His lips moved feebly, and she bent down till they touched her in one last feeble kiss.

‘God—bless you—Ruth,’ he murmured, but so faintly that she could hardly hear it.

He never spoke again.

Her name was the last word upon his lips.

CHAPTER LXIV.
GURTH AND HECKETT.

The news of the terrible accident on the railway had travelled far, and Edward Heritage's name had been seen among the list of the injured.

The identity of Squire Heritage with Edward Marston was known to Birnie and Egerton. The latter was the first to bring the news of his death to Josh Heckett. The sudden and tragic termination of Marston's career materially altered the aspect of affairs. He was beyond the reach of all vengeance now.

Gurth, relieved by the discovery that the crime he had accused himself of for years had existed only in his imagination, was in a sufficiently charitable frame of mind to bear no malice towards a man who could now do him no further harm. He had always had an intuitive dread of Marston. Birnie had played his cards so well that both Gurth and Heckett had always believed their old comrade knew more about the affray in Heckett's gambling-den than he cared to say.

'And so he's the fust to go arter all!' exclaimed the old man, raising himself with difficulty in the arm-chair where George had placed him. He was so weak now that he required assistance to get across the room. That burly frame had shrunk, and his clothes hung loosely about him. His massive jaws were sunken, and the fierce eyes, large and bright with the fatal light of consumption, were set in deep violet circles. Every now and then a distressing cough shook him as a whirlwind shakes the old tree, and the great beads of perspiration caused by the paroxysm trickled down his attenuated face.

'You're very bad, Josh,' said Gurth, as he sat by his side.

'Ay, ay,' answered the old man. 'I'm goin' to make a die of it, mate. Josh Heckett's had his sentence. I'm to be put away for good and all.'

'Have you made your will?'

'Will!' said the old man, almost fiercely. 'Who have I got to leave anything to, and what have I got, eh?'

Gurth smiled.

'You know best, Josh. I suppose you haven't lived on air all these years.'

'No—I ain't—but-' He hesitated a moment, then added, with a resolute accent, as though he had made a sudden le-solve, 'There, it's no good a-playing dark any longer. You ain't likely to want my bit o' property, so I'll tell you what I'd like to do. I wants to leave all I got to some charity—what's a good'un?'

'Charity!' said Gurth. 'But what about your grand-daughter? Charity begins at home.'

Josh shook his head.

'I shouldn't like to leave what I got to her. She's a-comin' bimeby. Mrs. Smith's gone for her to come and see me afore I die.'

'Gone for her—where?'

'She's been kept by Marston at his grand place all this time. Mrs. Smith told me about the young gal as was there, and I see how it was in a minnit. It was that teacher-lady as used to come here, as he married—she 'ticed her away.'

'Ah!' said Gurth, shaking his head, 'there was some deep game on, Josh, in Marston keeping Gertie dark from you. Now, whatever it was, it's beyond his reach now.'

'I dunuo,' answered Heckett. 'I think it was the teacher-lady as was at the bottom on it. Poor Gertie! I didn't use her as I oughter a done. For my poor dead girl's sake I oughter a kept her out o' my swim.'

'And yet even now you are going to leave your property away from her!'

'Yes, I am. Do you think she'd thank me for it, seein' how I got it—by robbin' and swindlin'? It's dirty money, governor, and I wants to do a lot o' good with it. I should like it for to go to a chapel, or a church, or something. There cannot be no harm in that, ean there?'

'Is it in money?'

'Well, not all on it; a good bit is. There's a lot o' plate and a lot o' joolery, but I suppose that wouldn't matter. Churches and chapels don't ask no questions when they has property left 'em, do they?' Gurth smiled.

'Can't say, Josh. I haven't any experience.'

‘At any rate, the gal don’t soil her fingers with none on it. I should like to leave her summat, too—summat as I come by all right and proper—summat as I needn’t be ashamed on; but I’m blest if I ever earned much on the square, when I comes to think it over.’

Gurth turned the conversation.

‘What are you going to do about the Smiths now?’ he said.

‘Do? Why, see’em right, come what may. Marston’s dead, and nothing as I can say will hurt him. I’m a-going to blow the whole gaff—make what they call a clean breast on it. I couldn’t die easy if I thought as I’d left that poor chap to be collared again.’

‘When are you going to do it?’

‘Bimeby,’ answered the old man uneasily; ‘bimeby.’

It was evident that although he had made up his mind to put himself at the mercy of the law, he was loth to do so while the least chance of life remained.

Gurth Egerton left him much perplexed about the disposal of his property, and went away charged with a message to Birnie.

‘Tell him to give us a look in if he can,’ groaned Josh ‘I’m deuced bad, and I can’t sleep. If he sees me he can give me summat as will let me sleep; he’s done it afore. Tell him I shan’t trouble him much longer, but I’d like for to see him if I can.’

Gurth took the thin, trembling hand of the old man and shook it gently.

‘I’ll tell him,’ he said. ‘He’ll come and see you, Josh. He doesn’t forget old friends, though he is such a big pot now.’

‘No, no,’ said Heckett; ‘he’ll come—he’ll come. I want him to tell me how long I shall live, for I’ve a lot to do—a lot to do.’

Wearied with the exertion of talking, old Heckett sank back in his chair and closed his eyes, and Gurth, with a farewell nod, went out and closed the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER LXV.
MR. JABEZ DUCK DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF AT LAST.

Mr. and Mrs. Jabez Duck, by saying very little to each other, managed to avoid those scenes of wordy warfare which are considered part and parcel of English domestic institutions. Indeed, so common is it for husband and wife to disagree when they commence to converse, that the expression, ‘Master and missus have been having a few words,’ is quite understood in the kitchen to mean that ‘Master and missus’ have been having a quarrel.

Mrs. Turvey, having once become Mrs. Duck, and mistress of an establishment of her own, was quite content to let Jabez have his own way so long as he kept out of hers. Her triumph over Georgina was dear to her woman’s heart, and the greatest enjoyment she had in her married life was to stand at the window and glare at the opposite house, where Miss Duck, still a spinster, exhibited ‘Apartments to Let’ in her window.

Georgina returned the glare with interest whenever she perceived it, and time, instead of healing the feud, seemed to increase it. Jabez endeavoured to effect a reconciliation, but as each attempt only brought him the abuse of both parties, he finally gave it up, and determined to let things take their course.

Whenever Jabez visited his sister he was prepared for a lecture on his folly in throwing himself away, and also for sundry warnings as to the conduct of his better-half. He didn’t know half that went on. A nice stocking his wife was putting by. The lodgers were robbed, and he got the credit of it. The house was untidy—everybody talked about it. Everything that feminine malice could invent Miss Duck launched at the head of the lady who had, as her friend, Miss Jackson, feelingly observed, divided the children who once sat on one mother’s knee.

As a rule, the observations of his sister made no impression upon Mr. Duck. He had served an apprenticeship, and knew from personal experience how Georgina could magnify trifles into importance.

But one day Georgina flung a reproach at his head which did not pass off without doing mischief. She boldly declared that during his absence a remarkably dissipated and disreputable individual of the male sex was in the habit of interviewing Mrs. Duck, and generally left with his pockets bulging out; and on one occasion lately Miss Georgina noticed and declared that the said individual had exhibited all the signs of excessive intoxication on the front-door step, and had been seen to leave, after a stormy interview with Mrs. Duck at the front door, clutching some silver money in a dirty and trembling hand.

Miss Georgina’s story was so circumstantial that Jabez believed there was something in it, and determined to cross-examine his better-half. But, before he left, Miss Duck entreated him not to name her as his informant, as she didn’t want her windows broken, or bad language flung down her area to the annoyance of her lodgers.

Mr. Duck ridiculed the idea that his wife could so far forget herself, but he promised Georgina that she should not be implicated.

He left in a very uncomfortable state, and his sister watched him across the road, inwardly delighted at the idea that she had fired the train, and that her rival would come in for the full benefit of the explosion.

Jabez nursed his wrath that evening until he had had a good tea, and no temper on his good lady’s part could interfere with his enjoyment of that favourite meal.

But when the tea-things had been cleared away, and Mrs. Duck had settled herself down in her chair to make out the first-floor’s bill, which had been standing for a month, Jabez cleared his throat, and, picking up a newspaper, prepared to open a masked battery upon the good lady from behind it.

He was just about to inquire casually who the gentleman was who called so frequently during his absence, when there came a loud knock at the door.

The servant was upstairs, Mrs. Duck was busy with her book, so Jabez proceeded to the door himself. He opened it, and let in a tremendous whiff of spirits and a voice which, in a thick, husky whisper, demanded if Mrs. Duck was at home.

Jabez surveyed the visitor in astonishment. He was a middle-aged man, very shabbily dressed, and with bloated features, red, watery eyes, and a ragged, untidy beard.

'And pray what do you want with Mrs. Duck?' exclaimed Jabez, when he had recovered from his surprise.

'Hulloh, guv'nor!' exclaimed the man, with an attempt at a smile which gradually merged into a hiccough; 'why'sh my old fren' Shabez—dam' fool'sh married my sis'er! Glash shee you.'

Jabez looked at the man silently for a moment. His words were a revelation. This, then, was the drunken visitor Georgina had seen so often. Mrs. Duck's brother had certainly not prospered in business lately.

While Jabez was hesitating whether he should ask his brother-in law in or not, that gentleman relieved him of all further anxiety by walking or rather rolling in himself, and seizing Jabez affectionately in his arms.

'Gos blesh you, ol' fler,' he said. 'Why'sh years since shaw you lasht. Know old shong—

> '"'Tish yersh since las' we met,
> And we may not meeteh again."'

Mr. Turvey, having raised his voice and howled forth the above in a melancholy manner, here fell exhausted with the exertion and overcome by his feelings on to Mr. Jabez's breast and wept copiously.

Mrs. Duck, alarmed at the strange operatic performance in the hall, came running out, and, beholding her drunken brother helpless in her husband's arms, immediately began to upbraid the former in an excited and hysterical manner.

'Oh, you good-for-nothing brute!' she exclaimed, 'to come here disgracing me like this! Oh, you bad man! Ain't I done everything I could for you? Oh, you wicked wretch!'

Mrs. Duck's feelings were working up to the screaming-point, when Jabez, alarmed lest the noise should reach the lodgers and cause a scandal, took the bull by the horns and dragged Mr. Turvey into the parlour.

'Come in, Susan, and shut the door,' he groaned. 'This is dreadful—very dreadful!'

'It isn't my fault, Jabez,' sobbed Mrs. Duck; 'indeed it isn't! I didn't want him to come here. I was ashamed for you to see him, and I done what I could to keep him away. I've given him money, and food, and clothes, and it's all gone in drink. He's a bad man—a bad man—though he is my own flesh and blood, as the saying is. Ugh!'

This last exclamation was addressed to Mr. Turvey, whom Jabez had deposited on a chair, where he was vainly endeavouring to catch an imaginary fly with his hand—a proceeding which ended in his falling out of the chair on to the fender, and bringing down the fire-irons with a terrible clatter.

'What's to be done with him?' exclaimed Mrs. Duck, wringing her hands.

'Wash' be done?' said Mr. Turvey, struggling into a sitting posture; 'wash' be done wi' me? I'm lasht rosh shammer left blooming 'lone; all lovlish companshish ish faded and gone—eh, Shabez?—faded and gone, old cock—fa' angone.'

The remembrance of the fall of his lovely companions was too much for Mr. Turvey, and once more his voice became lachrymose.

'Shuck me oush!' he exclaimed; 'shuck mo oush! Lesh die in the streetsh; all monsh gone.'

'Really, Susan,' said Mr. Duck, knitting his brows and assuming an attitude of firmness, 'I am very sorry to see your relative in this condition. It's disgraceful—most disgraceful!'

'Dishgraceful!' exclaimed Mr. Turvey, dragging himself up into a horizontal position and dropping heavily into the chair again; 'wheresh dishgrace? Look here, Mishter Duck, I'm har' up. Send me oush country. "To the Wesht, to the Wesht—land o' the free; Missh—Misshouri "—cetra; you know; or elsh I shall give shelf up to the polish.' Mrs. Duck screamed.

'Don't listen to what he's going to say, Jabez; it isn't true; he's saying it to extort money.'

Mr. Jabez had not been an inquiry agent all these years without having acquired a habit of pricking up his ears. The mention of police aroused his attention at once, and then he remembered the mystery of the

thousand pounds. He saw that if he wanted Mr. Turvey to become communicative he had better irritate him.

'Give yourself up to the police!' he exclaimed; 'if you don't leave my house instantly I'll save you the trouble.'

For a moment Mr. Turvey looked at Mr. Duck as though he was wondering if he meant it. Gradually his features assumed an expression of rage which would have been comical had not the hideous surroundings of drunkenness overpowered all.

'You—will!' he exclaimed, speaking slowly and dully, at first with an effort, but more clearly and rapidly as passion sobered him for a time. 'You will! Do! Then you'll have to send her to quod with me.'

Mrs. Duck hid her face.

'It isn't true, Jabez,' she moaned; 'it isn't true.'

'Ha, ha!' laughed Mr. Turvey, staggering up to the table, and bringing his dirty hand down on it with a blow. 'Look at her! She won't do anything more for me, she won't! Here!' he shouted, 'police! police! come and take me! Come and arrest the great gold robber, Turvey the guard! You've done it now, Susan! It's too late! Police! police!'

He rushed about the room in his drunken rage, smashing the things out of his way, and yelling 'Police!' at the top of his voice. Mrs. Turvey rushed to the door, her face white as death and her lips parted in terror. Jabez seized the furious drunkard in his arms and, exerting all his strength, forced him down into a chair.

'Hold your row, you fool!' he exclaimed. 'Do you want the whole street about our ears?'

For a moment the man seemed inclined to struggle. He made one violent effort, and then began to sob, and whine, and maudle again.

An hour later Mr. Turvey was fast asleep on the sofa in Mr. Duck's parlour.

Mr. Duck had agreed to allow him to remain for the night, for he was very anxious to question Mr. Turvey when his present intoxication should have passed off.

He had heard quite enough to know that he had the secret of the great gold robbery within his four walls, and he had seen a means by which he could not only earn a large reward, but the fame he had thirsted for all his life, without in any way injuring the esteemed individual whom he had the honour to call brother-in law.

He quite understood about the thousand pounds that had so mysteriously disappeared, and he had learned now for the first time from Susan that her brother, having dissipated every penny of it, had latterly returned and endeavoured to sponge upon her.

'I lost the money that time,' said Mr. Duck to himself, with a chuckle; 'but if I can pump him, and get the names of his accomplices from him, I shall make a thousand out of the relationship yet.'

The next morning the fates were propitious. Mr. Turvey, having been offered a passage abroad and a little ready money to get drunk with when he landed, communicated to Jabez the whole history of the great gold robbery.

A couple of days later Mr. Duck saw his promising brother-in-law safe on board a vessel bound for the colonies, and he then immediately proceeded to put his plans into execution.

Having ascertained that the large rewards offered at the time had never been withdrawn, he placed himself in communication with the authorities at Scotland-yard.

The only men accused by Jabez were Seth Preene and Josh Heckett. For some reason, possibly because in the muddled and drink-sodden condition of his brain he had forgotten the other parties to the robbery, Turvey, the guard, had named only the two men who had ridden in his van and taken an active part in the robbery. On Jabez's information warrants for the apprehension of Preene and Heckett were issued and given to one of the principal detectives to execute. His orders were to proceed with the utmost caution, as the evidence was of the weakest possible description, and to make his own investigation before making an arrest.

He certainly did act with caution, for the very first person to whom he confided the secret of his mission was his old friend, Mr. Seth Preene.

'I suppose I'd better hook it?' said Mr. Preene.

‘I think so,’ said the detective. ‘As soon as you’re safe away I can collar Josh. He’ll do for me.’

CHAPTER LXVI.
BESS MAKES A CONFESSION.

‘George, I want to tell you something.’

George and Bess were sitting upstairs in the little room which they occupied in Heckett’s house. Josh had fallen into a doze, and Bess, who had nursed him devotedly, had stolen upstairs to her husband, for her mind was troubled.

She had been round to Mrs. Jarvis that morning, and Mrs. Jarvis had started off down to the late Squire Heritage’s with a note for Gertie.

The sands of the old man’s life were running fast, and he yearned for the presence of his granddaughter—‘Gertie’s gal,’ as he called her.

Bess had seen the Jarvises once or twice, for hers was not a nature to forget such service as these simple, good-hearted people had rendered her and her husband in their hour of peril.

Mr. Jarvis had emerged from his adventure with the police with flying colours. They were unable to obtain the slightest proof that he had ever thoroughly harboured the runaway, since he had boldly declared that when the detectives had the confounded impudence to come searching for convicts at his residence he had declared they should find one, and so had donned the clothes which he had found in Mrs. Smith’s rooms.

‘Oh,’ said the Inspector, ‘then he was there?’

‘Of course he was,’ answered Mr. Jarvis; ‘the gentleman came to see his wife, but he didn’t stop. I didn’t know as he was a conwick; he didn’t come and say “Guvnor, I’m a conwick,” he dissembled, like willuns always does in the dramer. I thought he was a respectable cove come from a woyage.’

‘Then why didn’t you say he had been at your house when the officer came with a warrant, instead of deceiving him?’

‘Deceiving him!’ exclaimed Mr. Jarvis; ‘me deceive the police! Get out, guvuor! Why, I wouldn’t do it. I tell you, I put on the clos for to see if they’d fit me, ’cos I’m a-going to play a conwick in a new drama what my son wrote for the show. Clever boy he is, I can tell you; he’ll be a writer for Drury Lane afore long.’

‘Nevermind about Drury Lane,’ said the Inspector. ‘Why did you deceive the officer?’

‘I’m a cornin’ to it; you can’t have all five hacs at once, yer know. Well, I was a-tryin’ on the clos, when my missus calls up as the perlice is at the door. “This is hockard, I sez, goessin’ what they wanted; ’blest if they won’t take me for the conwick!” So I hides under the bed, not a-wantin’ for to be dragged through the streets for the public to see the part gratis, as might interfere with the receipts, ’cos if the public can see you for nothink as a conwick they ain’t likely for to pay, are they?’

It was in vain that the Inspector cross-examined the showman; the latter stuck to his talc, and produced undoubted evidence of his respectability.

‘Of course,’ said the Inspector, ‘we could charge you with being in possession of the Government clothing, you know.’

Mr. Jarvis looked down the convict’s suit.

‘These the Government’s clothes!’ he exclaimed, with a comic look of astonishment. ‘Well, I should advise the Government to change its tailor.’

Mr. Jarvis was at last allowed to return to his home, but not before Mrs. Jarvis had been sent for to bring him a suit to return in. The convict’s dress was retained at the station, and Mr. Jarvis was informed that he might go home, but he might be charged at any time.

The Inspector, who was a shrewd man, fancied that it was quite possible, if there was collusion, by watching Mr. Jarvis, the police might come upon the escaped felon.

But George never left Heckett’s house when once he got into it, and Bess was so thickly veiled, and had so altered her style of dress, that the men, who had only had an occasional glimpse of her once, quite failed to recognise her as the convict’s wife on the one or two occasions that she called at the Jarvises’.

Early on the morning on which the events to be narrated in this chapter happened, Bess had been round, and despatched Mrs. Jarvis with a note to Gertie, at Heritage Hall, bidding her accompany the messenger if she would see her old grandfather alive.

‘George, I want to tell you something.’

George looked up.

‘What is it, my darling? No bad news, I hope?’

Bess put her arms round her husband’s neck.

‘I don’t think you’ll blame me, dear, for what I did. Now that unhappy man is dead who caused us all our trouble, I think you will be glad. I warned his wife, George, of what was going to be done.’

For a moment George looked doubtfully in his wife’s eyes. Then he stooped down and kissed her tenderly.

‘Bess, my own faithful, long-suffering little wife, you might have ruined all, but you obeyed the promptings of your woman’s heart. The shadow of his fate cannot rest upon us now. We dragged no loving wife through such misery as he dragged you.’

‘I did it for the best, George.’

‘I know it, my darling. It was God who sent you on your errand of mercy: We shall but have to wait a little longer. God will lift the stain from my name, and let the whole world see my innocence in His own way. Something tells me that the days of our pilgrimage are nearly over.’

Bess took her husband’s hand.

‘Do you remember, George, how we used to arrange in our old days, before the trouble came, what we would do when we had made a fortune?’

George sighed.

‘Ah! they were happy days—happy dreams. But there may be a bright future before us yet.’

Bess knew that George, in his heart of hearts, would approve what she had done, but she dared not tell him before, lest it should seem that she too was leagued with his enemies.

But when the news of Marston’s death came, she was thankful that no act of theirs had helped him to his doom. She had seen Ruth but once, and had read her goodness in her face.

The woman’s heart of George Heritage’s wife went over in sympathy to the woman whose husband might one day be torn from her arms, and she determined at least to warn her of the peril that encompassed them.

She thanked God all her life that she had done so, and she thanked God that all his trouble and his great wrongs had not crushed out all tenderness and human sympathy from the big, noble heart of George Heritage, her husband and her idol.

CHAPTER LXVII.
GERTIE'S BIBLE.

Gertie Heckett sat by the bedside of her grandfather, holding his thin, trembling hands in hers.

It was a bright sunshiny day, and the light streamed in through the curtained window and fell upon the fair young face as it bent in gentle sympathy over the prostrate and suffering man.

Gertie had been with her grandfather all the afternoon. Much had been said. Gertie had told the old man the simple history of her later life, and how she had heard once that he had gone away never to come back any more.

The old man's eyes never left the child's face.

'You're rare and like my girl, Gertie,' he said once—'rare and like my poor lass! P'r'aps if I'd seen how like you was to her years ago I'd have been the better for it. I didn't use yer well, Gertie, but it was all fur the best. You've been brought up like a lady, and you found good friends. It was all for the best—all for the best.'

Bess came in by-and-by to shift the old man's pillows, and see if he wanted for anything.

'Missus,' said Josh, in the low voice he always spoke now, 'missus, ask the young master to come in, will you? I've summat as I want to say to my gal as I wants yer both to hear.

I carn't make no will, but there's things as I wants Gertie to 'ave, and maybe if you hears what they be, you'll know it's all right when I'm gone ——'

'Oh, grandfather, you will get well perhaps!' said Gertie, her eyes filling with tears.

'Nay, my lass—I'm goin' home! Larst night I seed my gal a-sittin' there, and I knows what that means. They say you allus sees the dead when you're goin' to die yourself.'

Gertie said nothing, only in her heart she wondered if her grandfather was fit to die. She longed to ask him if he had asked God to forgive him, but she dared not.

When Bess returned with George the old man bade them shut the door and lock it. His old caution had never left him.

'That's right, mum,' he said; 'now stoop down and give us the letter-box as is under the bed.'

Bess did as Josh asked her, and handed him a tin box.

He raised himself in the bed, and Bess propped him up with the pillows.

'Give us my keys, they're under the pillow,' he said, hugging the box to his breast.

When he had the keys he unlocked the box, and waited a moment before he opened it.

'Listen here, guv'nor, and you, too, missus, now, 'cos I'm agoing to make my will. I carn't write it, so I say it. There's jewels and things in this here box as I've kept by for years, 'cos they was proputty and easy to carry about. Some o' these here walyables I should like given to a church or something—some place as'ud be likely to do good with'em. I carn't give'em to the gal, 'cos why, 'cos they ain't clean. There's that on'em as makes'em not fit for my gal's gal to have.'

He opened the box and drew out a beautiful diamond ornament.

George started back in astonishment.

'Why, Heckett,' he exclaimed, 'where did you get that from? They're my mother's jewels!'

'What!' cried Josh, his white face flushing. 'Why o' course they are! I forgot. These here things are what I got at the Hall.'

'Good Heavens, man!' said George, 'why didn't you tell me you had them? They're all conclusive evidence of my innocence of that monstrous crime of which I was suspected.'

'Don't talk so quick,' said Heckett, 'don't talk so quick, guv'nor. I'm weak, and I carn't think in a hurry. Yes—yes—these are all yours. No church won't have'em. I can give 'em back to you. It'll be a sin off my soul, won't it?'

George had taken the box from the old burglar's trembling hands, while Bess and Gertie looked on, astonished spectators of the scene.

'These are the jewels,' cried George, lifting them to the light, 'that my

poor father prized and never would part with! Often have I seen him gazing at them and whispering my mother's name.'

Suddenly from the things in the box George drew a faded sheet of paper, and looked at it steadfastly.

'It's my father's handwriting,' he said softly, placing it to his lips. 'Poor old dad! poor old dad!'

Gently he unfolded the writing and read it from beginning to end; then he lifted his eyes, streaming with tears, and said:

'Thank God! thank God! he forgave me!'

George Heritage had read the codicil by which his father had revoked the will which left his property to Ruth Adrian, and had given everything once more to his beloved son.

For years it had lain concealed among the old burglar's treasures, mixed up with the contents of the box stolen from the Hall, and thrust away together by the thief in a secure hiding place. Josh Heckett little knew the value of the bit of paper that had kept the stolen jewels company, to see the light when on his death-bed he wished to make reparation for the past.

'Heckett!' exclaimed George excitedly, holding the paper up; 'there is the band of Providence in this! You have done much evil in your long life, I fear; but now, lying here near your end, God has made you the instrument of His sovereign justice. You have united the husband and wife whom you helped to separate—you have restored an honest man his good name, and a disinherited son his rightful fortune!'

'Have I done all that?' exclaimed Josh, sinking back on his pillows exhausted. 'Lord, Lord, only to think on it!'

'You have done all this, my poor fellow,' said George, lifting the old man's head gently and putting the pillows right—'all this and more. You have made me the happiest man on earth!'

'I've made somebody happy at last,' sighed Josh, closing his eyes. 'Don't speak for a minute or two; I want to lie still and feel what doin' good be like.'

The little group sat silent when Josh Heckett lay with closed eyes, his thoughts wandering far away into the past.

He was the first to speak.

'Gertie!'

'Yes, grandfather.'

'Would you like to read my gal's Bible to me?'

'Oh, yes, grandfather, if you would let me!' cried Gertie, eagerly.

'Missus, 'said Josh, 'give the gal her mother's Bible. I ha' kept it all these years, but I never know as I should want it. I kept it for my gal's sake. It's over yonder in the dror there.' Bess followed the old man's finger.

She opened the drawer and drew out an old-fashioned cheap Bible, faded and worn with age.

'Give it to me.'

Josh took the book and looked at it reverently.

'That's it,' he said; 'she was always a-worriting of me to hear summat out of it, was my gal. "Father," she used to say, "I wish you'd let me read yer a bit out of the Bible," but I never would. It warn't in my line then.'

'Shall I read it to you now, grandfather?' said Gertie, softly laying her hand upon the book.

'Yes, gal, do. I seem to hear your mother's voice a-sayin' "Read the Bible! Read the Bible!"'

'What shall I read you, grandfather?'

'Arn't there summat in it about storin' away proputty and about thieves? Once I heard a chap at a street-corner a-lecturin' on that. I fancy something about that'ud be best for me to hear, eh?'

Gertie knew what her grandfather meant. She opened the Bible to search for the passage, and as she did so a paper fluttered down upon the floor.

George picked it up and read it.

'Why,' he exclaimed, 'it's a marriage certificate!'

'A what?' shouted Heckett, rising in the bed with new-found strength —'a what in my gal's Bible?'

'It is the marriage certificate of Ralph Egerton and Gertrude Heckett.'

'God of heaven!' cried the old burglar, clasping his hands; 'my gal was a honest gal arter all! His wife! his wife! My gal—my gal! why didn't I

look in your Bible afore?’

In his wild excitement the old man had started up, and was clutching fiercely at the pillows; his face was crimson and his sunken eyes were starting from his head.

His hand was stretched eagerly towards Gertie, as though asking her to give him the Bible. As Gertie held it out he clutched it, pressed it to his lips, and then, with a little cry, fell heavily back upon the pillows, while the life-blood welled from his mouth. The sudden exertion had completed the long work of disease. Josh Heckett had burst a blood-vessel, and was bleeding to death.

Late that evening a cab rattled up to the door of Josh Heckett’s house, and Mr Duck and a strange gentleman got out.

The strange gentleman knocked at the door.

Bess opened it, and before she could ask their names the men had brushed past her into a room where they heard the sound of voices.

George and Gertie were sitting in the shadow, and something was lying quite still upon the bed.

‘Josh Heckett,’ exclaimed the strange gentleman, moving towards the bed, ‘in the Queen’s name, I arrest you!’

George, forgetting caution, had hardly time to recover from his astonishment at the entrance of strangers before the detective had proclaimed his mission.

‘You are too late!’ exclaimed George, seizing the officer’s hand as it was about to touch the bed. ‘Your prisoner has already gone to answer for all his offences.’

‘Gone!’ exclaims the officer.

‘Yes, to the Great Sessions where all men are tried—Josh Heckett is dead!’

‘It is true!’ whispered Jabez Duck; ‘he is dead!’

He had stolen softly to the bed where the dead man lay. At the sound of George s voice he turned and faced him.

‘George Smith, by all that’s wonderful!’ he exclaimed. ‘Officer, arrest this man! He is an escaped convict!’

Then, for the first time, did George remember his position. The sudden death of Heckett and the strange circumstance which had produced it had made him forget his own perilous position. That night Bess and Gertie kept watch in the house of the dead, and George lay with the iron bolts of justice shot upon him.

But his heart was light, for he knew that His hand which had lifted the veil so far would bring the whole truth to light in His own good time.

CHAPTER LXVIII.
GERTIE GAINS HER HERITAGE.

Ruth Heritage, dressed in the deepest mourning, sat in the great room of Heritage Hall, looking out upon the grounds but seeing them not. Her thoughts were far away in the past, and the form that was ever before her eyes was the form of her dead husband.

Ruth, when her first paroxysm of grief was over and she could think calmly, acknowledged that it was far better that the man whom she had loved so devotedly should be lying in the green churchyard than that he should be living a hunted outcast, perhaps imprisoned in a living tomb on which the iron hand of the law had turned the key for ever.

At the grave Justice halts—beyond it neither friends can aid nor foes pursue. With all his sins upon him, Edward Marston slept the long sleep until the Great Judge should call him.

Religion with Ruth was no superstition, it was a beautiful faith, and, accepting the grand story of salvation as a Divine revelation to man, she treasured the abiding hope that He who had promised forgiveness to the very worst would be more merciful to the guilty soul of her lost love than earthly judges would have been to his guilty body.

Her mother was but little comfort to her in her loneliness. Poor Mrs. Adrian had become more and more hard to please, and infirmity of temper grew apace with infirmity of body.

It was an intense relief to the bereaved woman when Gertie came back.

For Gertie she had always cherished a motherly affection.

Gertie was associated with all her later life, and was for ever bound up with the short history of her wedded happiness.

Gertie and she and Marston had been a happy little family group before the trouble came, and with Gertie she could talk of the past without restraint.

But Gertie brought back with her a strange story—a story which when Ruth heard she resolved at once to test to its foundation.

From Gertie Mrs. Heritage gleaned not only the fact that her little *protegee* was in some mysterious way heiress to a fortune, but she heard all that happened to the late squire’s son and his faithful wife.

Ruth sent a loving message to Bess at once, and bade her come to the Hall without delay. She remembered what this woman had done for her, and if, as she more than suspected, the romantic history of which Gertie only knew a few detached scraps was true, she was bound by every consideration of justice and humanity at least to make such reparation for the bitter wrong as was within her power.

It was with a strange feeling that Bess came to the Hall once more, for the events of the last few days had made a deep impression on her.

The law was already at work to prove George’s innocence, and she had no fear for that. But she had hesitated to break in upon Ruth’s sacred sorrow with the tiding that she had lost not only husband and peace of mind, but fortune and home.

Ruth and Bess sat together all the spring afternoon, and the light died down in the west, and the grey shadows crept up the long walk and fell softly on the tearful faces of the two women.

Gently had Bess broken to the widow the secret of her dead husband’s treachery, and Ruth listened, never doubting a word, for truth was written on every line of Bess’s sweet, thin face.

And while in the twilight they still sat on, all told, all known.

Bess placed her arm gently round Ruth’s neck, and drawing her towards her called her sister, and pressed the kiss of peace upon her lips. Ruth had seen her duty from the first.

Not for one moment would she dispute the just claim of the man and woman she had unknowingly and unwittingly ousted.

She wished that the Hall should be Bess’s home until all was settled, and that there should she welcome her husband as the rightful owner when the strange story had been told, and Justice had acknowledged that it had added one more to its long list of innocent victims.

Not a word was said about Gertie’s claim until after the funeral of Heckett, but on the following day Ruth’s solicitors wrote Mr. Gurth Egerton an official letter which completely spoiled that worthy gentleman’s breakfast.

He flung the letter across the table to Birnie.

'The bombshell's dropped, Birnie!' he exclaimed. 'They've found a certificate of Ralph's marriage with Gertie's mother among the old man s papers. What the deuce shall I do?'

'That's awkward,' answered Birnie. 'What are the terms of the will?'

'Ralph's father left everything to me if his son died without legitimate issue.'

'Ahem! And now they pretend that he married; that this girl is his daughter, and therefore entitled to the property?'

'Exactly.'

'You didn't know of this marriage, did you?' said Birnie quietly.

'No, my dear fellow! Of course not,' answered Gurth colouring. 'If I had——'

Gurth did not finish the sentence.

'Well,' said Birnie, after looking fixedly in the bottom of his cup for a minute, 'I should compromise—or fight.'

'It's no good fighting. I'm afraid it's too straight.'

'Then compromise, my dear boy. Get an indemnity for the past, and an allowance for the future.'

'But would they do it?'

'Rather than have a long lawsuit. You can raise no end of quibbles. The law is a glorious weapon to fight Justice with, you know. If you lose the estate you haven't got a rap; all the expenses would have to come out of the estate. Perhaps they'll think it cheaper to compromise. Try it.'

Gurth took Birnie's advice and found it good. The solicitors were instructed to do nothing unfriendly.

Mr. Egerton was the victim of an unfortunate circumstance. If he resigned his claim and avoided litigation he would be fairly treated.

Gurth accepted a liberal proposition, and acknowledged the genuineness of Miss Egerton's pretensions, giving his legal assent to a transfer of the property, and accepting an indemnity for the revenue he had already had through his hands.

He managed to come out of the business with a small secured income and a by no means small nest-egg, and once more Mr. Oliver Birnie rubbed his hands and congratulated himself on the distinguished services he had rendered his friend.

He knew how, moreover, that perhaps Gurth might have some day appealed to him if the settlement had been less satisfactory, and though he owed his present position entirely to Gurth's assistance in early days, he was by no means inclined to return, the compliment.

Men of Birnie's stamp never return anything, unless it is an I O U in answer to a friend's appeal for help.

Ruth's solicitors were dealing not only with the affairs of Miss Egerton, but they also, at Ruth's request, undertook the task of releasing George Heritage.

In the quiet lawyer's office Ruth, deeply veiled, told the whole story, and though her heart almost broke and her face burnt with shame as slowly, and with a trembling voice, she recounted her husband's share in it, she went on bravely to the end, never halting until she had branded herself with the shame of being a felon's wife, and stripped herself of every penny she had in the world.

The solicitors took up the strange case with energy, and worked bravely for their client. Link by link they rejoined the long-broken chain, and carried the case even into the sacred precincts of the Home Office.

And in the end, after delays and endless trouble, the Home Secretary was good enough graciously to advise Her Majesty to grant a free pardon to a man who had done nothing—nothing except to escape from the prison where he had been cast by the merciless machinations of a gang of guilty wretches with the assistance of Mr. Seth Preene, late in the confidence and in the pay of the authorities of Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER LXIX.
AND LAST.

There is a charming little villa some distance from Heritage Hall—a pretty place, on which many a weary wanderer, tired with life's pilgrimage, has looked with an envious eye, and thought what a peaceful haven it must be to anchor in at last.

It is the bright summer time when we pause to admire this rustic retreat. The June roses are hanging about the porch; the scent of the sweet, old-fashioned flowers fills the air, and the lattice windows are opened wide to let in the odorous breeze.

In an invalid chair, wheeled to the door, sits an old lady, peacefully dozing. The evening of her life is far spent, and the night is at hand, but loving hands are ever ready to guide her tottering footsteps to the journey's end.

Old Mrs. Adrian—dead to the past, dead to the future—dozes her declining days away here in this peaceful cottage, still finding a tongue that can chide for fancied slights, still in her feeble frame finding the strength to oppose and to contradict, but never failing, when she hears a gentle footstep approaching, to brighten into a smile, and to mumble out a loving word to the pale, gentle lady who bends over her and kisses the wrinkled brow.

And often with the quiet lady there comes to her a tall, graceful, blue-eyed girl—a girl just budding into womanhood.

These three—the old woman, the quiet, pale-faced lady, whose face bears traces of a sorrow too deep for words, endured nobly, and the young girl standing on the threshold of womanhood and waiting till some footfall shall make her heart beat with a new strange feeling—are together near the open door this warm June morning. Lying with his head upon his paws stretched out in front of his young mistress, is an old dog, who has his meat cut very small for him, and who now and then wags his tail with a stateliness suitable to grey hairs, but whose old eyes brighten still with a fond look of love when a gentle hand pats him and the voice which is the sweetest music he ever heard calls 'Lion.' Together they form a picturesque group that arrests the attention of a very dusty, very hot, and very fat gentleman, who takes his pocket-handkerchief from his hat and mops a shiny bald head with it.

'I beg pardon, ladies,' says the man, 'but maybe you can tell me where Squire Heritage lives?'

The young lady rises and comes to the garden gate. She is about to direct the man, when a cloud of dust comes round the corner. There is a clatter of horse's hoofs, and a pony-chaise rattles up to the door.

'Here is the squire,' says the young lady.

The fat gentleman stands aside and the squire does not see him. He is a handsome, happy-looking fellow, this squire, and there is a lady with him whose cheeks glow with health and whose bright eyes are full of life.

'Oh, George'!' says the lady, 'I'm sure you'll drive over somebody some day. My dear Gertie, if you could have seen us come down the lane you'd have thought we were mad. Ah, Ruth, how's your mamma to-day?'

The quiet lady had come down the little garden path to the carriage, and the lips of the women meet in a sisterly kiss.

'I want you to come back to the Hall with us if you can leave your mamma for an hour,' says the gentleman called George. 'Bess has been up to her mad tricks again, and what do you think she's done?' Ruth smiles, 'I'm sure I can't guess.'

'Why, she's invited the whole of the Jarvises down, caravan and all, and, if you please, they are to perform for our special benefit an entirely new drama, written by Mr. Shakespeare Jarvis.'

'Oh, Ruth, you will come, won't you?' says Bess, clapping her hands, for Bess Heritage it is. 'I want only our old friends. You and Gertie must come—do!'

Ruth laughs and nods her head.

'That's right; and now, Ruth, I'll come in and have a quiet chat with you, while George talks nonsense to Gertie.'

Gertie laughed and shook her head, but she stayed by the pony-carriage, for she knew that the two women wanted to talk about the past and about her, and Gertie didn't care to hear her own praises sounded.

George was patting his pony and telling Gertie about a new pair he had bought for Ruth to drive herself, when the stout gentleman approached nervously, and, giving a little cough, attracted the squire's attention.

‘I beg pardon, Squire Heritage,’ he said.

George turned in a moment. He had reason to remember the voice.

‘Why, Duck,’ he exclaimed, ‘what the dickens are you doing here?’

‘Ahem—Squire; to tell you the truth I’m come to see you.’

‘See me!’

‘Yes. I’m afraid our connection wasn’t very pleasant, but—ahem—let bygones be bygones—and I thought perhaps you wouldn’t mind—ahem—taking my card, and if you want anything done in my line——’

George took the proffered card.

It announced that Mr. Jabez Duck had embarked in business on his own account as a private inquiry agent.

George stared at the card, wondering which to do—to admire the man’s cool impudence or to kick him.

‘You see, sir,’ said Mr. Duck, giving his shiny head another mop, ‘things are altered with me now. When I had the misfortune to have to do business with you I had an encumbrance, sir, and I couldn’t afford to go about as an inquiry agent on his own account ought to. Mrs. Duck wouldn’t hear of it. But now, sir, Mrs. Duck is no more, and I’m going to try business on my own hook altogether.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Duck’s dead, is she?’ said George, for the sake of saying something.

‘Yes, sir; she is. She never recovered the shock of Georgina, my sister, getting her front floor away through calumny, and she went over and stood in the cold a-shouting down the area at her, and got bronchitis, and is now an angel.’

‘Indeed,’ said George; ‘I’m very glad—or rather, I mean, I’m very sorry. If I want any private inquiries made I’ll think of you.’

‘Thank you, squire. I thought I’d come to you for the sake of old acquaintance. We always made you and the missus as comfortable as we could when you was lodging with us. Thank you, sir; you won’t forget if you should, will you? Good day, sir!’

Mr. Jabez bowed to George, took off his hat to Gertie, gave his head another mop, and waddled slowly out of sight.

Inside the house Bess and Ruth sat together talking. They had grown to look upon one another as sisters, for the bonds which had united them in a dark hour of peril to both had grown firmer now the tempest was over and the light had come again.

And, talking, they spoke of Gertie.

‘God’s ways have been mysterious,’ said Ruth. ‘How little did I think when I rescued her from that den of wickedness in Little Queer Street and let my home be hers, that one day she would repay me a hundredfold, and that when I became penniless and without a friend the child I reared would take me to her arms and make me the chosen inmate of her home, the guardian of her wealth, and that through her noble generosity my mother’s declining years would be cheered and all care for her future and for mine be spared to me!’

As George drove Bess back to the Hall the young squire told his wife of Duck’s strange visit and request.

‘It gave me quite a shock, Bess,’ he said: ‘it brought back the old story so vividly to my mind.’

It was a quiet shady lane, and there was no one looking, so Bess put her arms round George’s neck and gave him a kiss so suddenly that he pulled the reins and nearly jerked the pony up on his hind legs.

‘Don’t talk about the old days, George, darling,’ she said; ‘that’s all done with for ever. The dream we dreamt in Mr. Duck’s parlour has come true. We are rich, and happy, and contented, and what more do you want?’

‘Another kiss,’ answered George.

And he had it.

THE END

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