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ONE AGAINST THE WORLD;

OR,

REUBEN'S WAR.



# ONE AGAINST THE WORLD;

OR,

## REUBEN'S WAR.

A Novel.

BY

JOHN SAUNDERS,

AUTHOR OF "ABEL DRAKE'S WIFE," "GUY WATERMAN," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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# ONE AGAINST THE WORLD ;

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### CHAPTER I.

“THE TRAVELLER'S JOY” (THOMAS JESSOP, PROPRIETOR) IS PERPLEXED WITH STRANGE GUESTS.

“Ay, ay, Molly, that will do, my beauty !” said the gigantic landlord, as he stood for a moment with his head almost touching the low ceiling of the principal room of “The Traveller's Joy ;” and then dropped, with an awful shaking of the foundations of the house, into his wooden chair, with its old-fashioned projecting sides and high back sloping away at an acute angle. “Yes, Molly, that will do. Now give me the footstool. Right, right. Now for the pipe, my lass, now for the pipe.” The latter he took and put aside for

the time on a place in the immense thickness of the wall of the old stone house, which looked like the window of some mediæval fortress, so narrow was the exterior opening for the glass, so wide the mouth within.

“Unlock the bar, lass,” was the next command. The bar was a little dark cupboard with a glass front and a narrow door, through which the landlord must have long ceased to go.

“It’s pretty warmish this morning, I think. Let’s open the front door, my charmer, and have a peep at the crocuses in the bit of garden there. ‘Open doors and close pockets!’ that’s the motto for a thriving landlord, Molly. Always invite guests in, if you can, Molly, with an open door. And now, my lass, as I think I can see pretty well what is going on in every direction of my domain for the next few hours, you may go and help the missus in the kitchen, for she’s got a busy day on it with this feast coming on. And, Molly, you needn’t shut the kitchen door, unless you’ve got any secrets to tell. Then you may. There—don’t stand grinning at me; one little full moon grinning at another very big one isn’t at all desirable; so get along.”

Mr. Thomas Jessop thus began his usual morning life and arrangements on the day of the opening of this history. No wonder he had to

be careful when he began, for he never moved if he could help it through the whole day after. He had been the wonder and admiration of the neighbourhood for his height since he was nineteen; and now that he was forty he was equally distinguished for his bulk. It was a matter of pride with him that he had once been offered an engagement with a wealthy showman who occasionally came into the valleys of this remote and hilly region. He had felt proud, partly because of the distinction, partly because he had had too much respect for himself to accept it. He had been an industrious man as long as industry was possible, and had thus scraped enough money together to marry a pretty and diminutive black-eyed wife, and to get into a picturesque old inn, then called "The Fighting Cock," but which he and his proud little wife had transformed into "The Traveller's Joy," in the first flush of the honeymoon.

And, fortunately for him, when he could no longer bustle about, he found he had got a wife who could; who loved such occupation; and who felt only the more put on her mettle by seeing such a "grand" man as her husband reduced to so complete a dependence upon her. So, while he sat there surveying his "domain," and chatting with the guests, and taking care the reckon-

ing was always right, and doing his part (when properly asked) to swell its amount, Mrs. Jessop, with her Irish maid Molly, went singing about the house like (as her husband said) any throstle. It turned out, too, that Mr. Jessop's personal difficulties helped to increase his pecuniary means. People came up the valley from far distant villages and hamlets to see the great man, who, if they only minded their p's and q's, received them with affability; and would even occasionally condescend to decide a bet as to the number of yards of broadcloth required for his Sunday coat. But woe to any rustic ribalds who came there to jest at his expense, or even to be guilty of any rudeness or ill-breeding. Only some five years back, a conceited young farmer, who was a well-known bully, walked in and said with a bounce, not seeing very well through the dark house-place, then filled with smoke,

“Where's this big man folk talk so about?”

About half a minute later—for the operation of rising took Mr. Jessop time—the young farmer found himself suddenly caught by the collar and lifted up like a wretched puppy, with one gigantic hand, while the other, as he was dangling, pushed him through the narrow but open front window, and then dropped him all of a heap outside, where he was greeted in a voice almost as deep

and powerful as a minster bell, with the words,—  
 “D’ye know where about I am now?”

That was the last occasion on which Mr. Jessop had been known to have signalised himself by any personal activity. But the effect was decisive on his fame and dignity.

Mr. Jessop was not, we may be sure, a suspicious or unkindly man. He was, indeed, very much the reverse. Nature’s overpowering bounty to his person, he seemed instinctively to feel, ought somehow or other to be dispensed in good humour towards the world. But on this March morning, as the clock began to give warning for twelve and suggest thoughts of dinner, the landlord found himself a good deal perplexed by two guests.

They came in separately, and with an interval of half an hour between their arrivals, and they appeared, at meeting, perfect strangers to each other. The older one came first, and wanted to know how soon the coach to Carslake would pass the place where the cross roads met close by; and on being told, “Not till evening,” had appeared surprised, but sat down quietly, saying, he supposed he must wait. Still, the men had said nothing to offend him; on the contrary, they had, while drawing together to drink as if casually met, invited the landlord to join them, and began

with a promising order of brandy-and-water and pipes for the three. Partly, it was the look of the pair that puzzled him; they seemed to be mixed so oddly. The elder was a man of low stature, but great strength of build, seemingly about fifty years of age, with short bristling hair, of that unpleasant colour that reminds you of a pig, a bull neck, eyes small but piercing, and reddish with a kind of fixed bloodshot expression; and features that, if not naturally repulsive by their form, had become so by their intensely hard expression. The whole head might have been cut out of some gigantic knob or protuberance of a forest tree, with a good deal of the rough surface left on, it looked so hard and bosslike. You could not look in that man's face and hope to change any resolve the man himself might have come to; unless, indeed, you had the good fortune to know and be able to point out beyond all possibility of cavil, that you knew better what was for his interest than he himself did. But you might conclude, from a sight of his face, he did not often give anybody the chance of doing that. Another feature about him that added strangely to the landlord's discomfort, almost disgust, was the unpleasant shortness of his arms, which almost approached deformity. But then, if short, they seemed only to have become so in order to



get more strong, and better able to take a bulldog grip of fortune. He was respectably dressed, and carried a carpet-bag, as if he expected the world to take him for a tradesman; but there was no trade the landlord had ever heard of that he could fit happily to the look of that guest—except one that he didn't care to acknowledge even to himself.

Contrasted with this man was the other guest, who had been the last to arrive. He was very young, scarcely more than a youth, though above the average height, with slender form, broad shoulders, and narrow waist; a model of wiry, muscular strength and agility. He had a mobile, expressive, and intelligent face; firm, bold mouth and broad chin, expressive of strength; dreamy, soft brown eyes, changing suddenly with intense light and fire under excitement, and short chestnut curls, through which he often passed his hand, straightening out the locks and then letting them spring back again into new forms of beauty—a habit that seemed to have grown unconsciously upon him. His voice, too, was as free, pleasant, and frank as the elder man's was abrupt, disagreeable, and provocative of all kinds of doubt; for it did not flow, but seemed to issue from him with a sound that reminded you of a thick rope revolving round a rusty cylinder and

coming now and then to a knot. And so far the landlord seemed to take kindly to the younger guest, both for his own sake and for the contrast to the elder one. He was dressed in a gentlemanly-looking suit of lavender grey—jacket, vest, and trousers, all of the same cloth; wore a straw hat with black band and edging, a violet neck-scarf fastened by a showy pin, and he carried a neat little black bag, slung across his shoulder by a strap: looking altogether like a tourist who had come to see some of the beauties of the valley—probably the abbey, with its woods and falling waters. But, then, there was something peculiar about the person and gestures of this young man that undid much of the effect produced by his features. He seemed to sit on springs; to bend his head aside suddenly and listen without apparent reason, as a wild animal with its acute sense of hearing might do when startled by some very distant intimation of danger, and when certainly the landlord heard nothing in particular to listen to; to be wonderfully quick, agile, and lithe in all his movements; and then the fingers—so long, and slender, and white, and elegant, and kept so clean at the nails—seemed to have an individual life of their own, which caused them to be in perpetual play, now strumming on an imaginary piano, now throwing



up and catching with unerring and easy accuracy a sharp-pointed knife that happened to lie on the table; now brought to a sudden and enforced rest by that owner’s will in clenching them, though even then they must go on rapping the table with the knuckles and playing all kind of fantasias upon it.

He had not been long under Mr. Jessop’s observation before he announced himself as a pianoforte tuner, and asked Mr. Jessop if he thought he was likely to get a job at the Squire’s close by. He was told that one of the footmen generally looked in at “The Traveller’s Joy” in the course of the day, and might be spoken to. Then Mr. Jessop was asked the servant’s name, which struck him as odd; and, when he told it, he saw the two men exchange glances, which he naturally thought still more strange. In fact, he was getting quite uncomfortable.

By-and-by a Scotch drover came in and asked for the paddock till the next morning for his cattle; and, while he was busy arranging with the man about the price, the way to the paddock, and so on, he saw the men together at the window examining a gleaming metal substance that looked very like a weapon or tool of unknown structure, but which, as he remembered a mo-

ment after, might be only a part of the tuning process.

Just then Molly came in to know if the gentlemen would like dinner, as they had a joint of roast beef ready, and they could have it comfortably together by themselves in the little parlour. Mr. Jessop appreciated his wife's thoughtfulness as to the interest of "The Traveller's Joy," but was vexed that she had said anything about a spare room. He had a strong desire to keep his eye on these "gentry."

The invitation was accepted instantly, and again glances were exchanged before both men turned to look for the promised parlour. Molly led them into it, and drew up a blind which showed outside the window the green paddock, with the bullocks just beginning to scatter over it.

"Molly!" resounded the landlord's voice. Then, when she came within sight, he made a gesture to her to come nearer, and whispered,

"The room smokes a little, you know, when the door is shut. Say so, and leave it open so that I can see in. Thou understands, my lass?"

But the gentlemen found the open door too chilly, and preferred the smoke; and then they

asked for tobacco, to fight the enemy with his own weapons, as the young one said. And so Mr. Jessop, while getting his own dinner from a little round table with three legs, put down carefully and accommodatingly over his bulky limbs, was left to wonder and speculate as to the meaning of the laugh he heard every now and then resounding from the closed-up parlour, and which seemed always to come from the younger man.

Apple-pie followed the roast beef, and cream cheese followed the apple-pie; and then there was a demand for more brandy and water and fresh pipes. And, though they never once opened the door to let the curious proprietor see how his guests were getting on, there could be no doubt, after hearing Molly's report, that they were on uncommonly good terms together, and enjoying a most satisfactory digestion.

But as for the landlord, who had generally a good appetite (though one scarcely proportionate to his bulk), he didn't enjoy his dinner a bit, and told Molly so, who told the little black-eyed wife in the kitchen, to the great vexation and surprise of the latter, who didn't know of the oddities of these strange guests, but stared at Molly, as the representative of her husband, with the very largest powers of vision of those good-humoured,

sparkling black orbs, while being further told to look after the six silver spoons and the silver mug which Aunt Jessop had given as a christening-gift to their only, and no longer living, child.

## CHAPTER II.

### BRINGS MORE GRIST TO THE MILL.

IT was well on in the afternoon when Mr. Jessop saw that door once more flung widely open, and left so, as if to invite observation.

The young man came out, and said,

“Your friend in plush hasn’t made his appearance yet.”

“Friend! Humph! He comes here when he likes, and pays for what he has; and he’s civil, and that’s about what our friendship amounts to. He’s a new man, and I don’t take to new men so fast as some people.”

Was this said in covert sarcasm of the young man’s readiness to pick up acquaintances? The latter looked an instant on the broad, but not at the moment smiling, disc presented by the landlord’s face, then gave a laugh, turned on his heel, and went back to the room. But Mr. Jessop noticed he didn’t shut the door.

Wheels were now heard entering the stable-

yard, and the landlord saw the youth run to the further window and lift the sash, and then slowly raise the blind. Mr. Jessop could then see, as well as the inmates of the parlour, an old-fashioned, roomy phaeton standing outside with two ladies in it, whom the landlord knew to be a Mrs. Maxfield and her daughter, who lived further up the valley. This daughter was already talked of as the most beautiful girl that could anywhere be found in Mr. Jessop's native place, a wild and picturesque country, which was noted alike for its stalwart men and its lovely women.

Mr. Jessop manages to give his heavy chair a bit of a turn on its castors, in order to have a good look at her, but his attention is soon directed to the young man, who stands near the window, partly concealed by a curtain, gazing out, as if struck at once into silence and immobility by what he sees. What is it that so interests him? There is Mrs. Maxfield, a lady of some fifty-five years, not in very good health, with an anxious, querulous voice, speaking to the lad who acts as ostler when he happens to be at home, as now. She is dressed in black silk, over which she wears a peculiarly rich red Indian shawl. She has grey hair, grey eyes, and a grey, unhealthy complexion. Certainly, it is not Mrs. Maxfield that so enthral the eye of the young piano-tuner.



But there is Miss Maxfield—Bella, as the mother is heard calling her as they are descending from the vehicle; perhaps it is the fascinating picture *she* makes, as, throwing back the dark linsey mantle upon the seat of the phaeton, she appears in a pink muslin dress, with a long scarf of the same colour descending from the shoulders, and a little round straw hat, trimmed with a bunch of red roses and white daisies in front. Her hair, as it is seen gleaming in the evening sunset, might be supposed to consist of innumerable threads of the finest burnished gold; but then the form of the ringlets into which they shape themselves is so beautiful that one seeks vainly for any image that can represent it other than itself; and is not very beautiful hair one of the most perfectly beautiful things in the world? Her face is fair—so fair, that the blood seems to be ready to start through the exquisitely transparent skin at the slightest emotion. She looks tall, but is not so; for there is a certain graceful completeness of form that always seems to suggest greater than the true height, and she has that. But it is the simplicity and modesty—both almost childlike—of her every look and gesture, that are so peculiarly winning. When she speaks—now to her mother—now to the lad who drives them—now to the ostler of “The Tra-

veller's Joy"—and now to the drover who comes up for a bit of gossip—there is a kind of perceptible struggle between her desire for self-possession and the consciousness of a momentary display—a stepping out of her inner sanctuary of reserve—that touches you almost with a sense of the pathetic in its beauty.

Mr. Jessop cannot but notice how the young man stands there watching her and listening for her every word. And what the look began, the sound seems to have completed for him. The voice is so clear, sweet, and silvery, that he thinks it must be delicious to be able only to listen to it hour after hour without taking in the sense of a single word. But in the voice again there occurs occasionally a something tender—suggestive of melancholy—a kind of minor chord of human speech. Altogether the young watcher wonders what possessed him, when he begins at last to recover the ordinary use of his senses.

She and her mother walked up and down on the white stones of the clean stable-yard while the horse was getting his feed, and thus gave new opportunities to her unsuspected admirer of studying this fresh human rose, yet only half blown, and with all its first perfume, and all its first deep tints of sunny life upon it, not a leaf touched or discoloured.



The young man was rudely awakened by the resounding voice of the landlord calling to him from the house-place beyond,—“Mister, if you please, can I have a word with you?”

He came out wondering, and inly vexed at the disturbance.

“The other”—here Mr. Thomas Jessop seemed puzzled for a word that would suit his grammar and the discordant nature of his ideas; but he made a gulp at his difficulties, and said, “gentleman—the other gentleman has paid the bill for both, and gone away.”

“Paid my share too!” repeated the piano-tuner, but then seemed to forget his own surprise.

“Yes. He said you were such a pleasant companion he thought he could do no less.”

“Oh—indeed!” was the comment. Then, turning suddenly to the landlord, he said—

“Pray who are the ladies in the phaeton?”

“A widow lady and her daughter, of the name of Maxfield.”

“And where do they live?”

“At Northope, some fifteen miles off.”

“And does that road lead to Northope?” asked the youth, pointing in a certain direction.

“Will you be good enough first to tell me why you ask?” suddenly broke in the land-

lord, with an angry flush on his beaming face, as the young man, in his unconscious anxiety, came up close to the chair of the great man, who sat looking at him with his right fist resting on the little three-legged table.

“Why?—why? Oh, of course I will. I don’t like the look of that man who was here, and left so suddenly.”

“Neither do I. And you mean to say you don’t know him—you never met him before—you didn’t come here pretending only to meet for the first time?”

Just for a moment there was a furtive glance from side to side of the frank eyes, then they met the landlord’s honest gaze in full confidence, and said,

“I really don’t know what makes you say all this. Do I look like an intimate of his?” And the youth laughed, and shook his curly head with an air of intense enjoyment of the joke, and looked altogether so perfectly free from any kind of embarrassment that the landlord’s gathering suspicion changed its aim, and settled exclusively on the departed guest. He looked at the young man, then away in the direction of the outer door, and then dropping his voice to a deep guttural sound meant for a whisper, he said, striking his fist on the table,

“ If that man isn’t a rogue, then I am !—then I am !” he repeated, clinchingly, as he looked in the young man’s face.

“ Gracious goodness ! you don’t say so. You don’t mean a thief—or a burglar—or—— ”

“ He’s all that, and more, as I’m a Christian, and has gone off to waylay those poor ladies.”

“ Then hadn’t you better say so, and warn them before they start ? ”

That remark cleared off the landlord’s last doubt, and he was glad to think so good-looking a young fellow was not what he had fancied after all. So he became quite confidential, while relapsing into social prudence :

“ Well, you see, it’s easy for us who have seen the man and taken his ugly measure to say he’s what he shouldn’t be, and that these ladies had better stop here for a night ; but then I can prove nothing, and mayhap they’d think I only wanted to keep ’em to make brass out of ’em. Besides, they may be obliged to go ; and it might frighten ’em out of their lives if I said any thing, and I be mistaken after all.”

“ Which way did the man go ? ”

“ Well, I must own I was venturing a little too far, perhaps, in my doubts, for he went not up the road there between the black lines of trees, which you’ll see if you look out, and which is

their way, but in the direction of the Squire's house, along the cross-road that goes by the Hall."

"Then I think you may dismiss your fears, landlord; for, if he meant what you suppose, he'd have to go pretty quick, and by the nearest way, to waylay the vehicle in a safe place."

"So he would. A—h!" and the landlord here took his cap off with the air of a man who was at the same time removing a great load from his mind; and he wiped his head with his handkerchief, and seemed altogether greatly relieved. "And do you stay here to-night?" he asked the youth.

"No," was the reply; "I am seeking jobs, and must reach Lillington before nightfall. Our friend in the plush evidently is not coming. Which is the way to Lillington?"

"Lillington? Oh, the same as the phaeton is going."

"How many miles?"

"Five and three-quarters exactly from here; three from the half-way house."

"Good-bye, then. I'm off. It'll be a fine evening, I think."

"Yes."

They shook hands and parted; and not till the landlord had heard the rumbling of the phaeton

betokening the departure of the ladies, and talked the matter over with his wife, who now at last came out from the kitchen, where she had been busy, did it occur to him that, perhaps, after all, the two men were connected, and were by this time laughing over the way in which they had tricked him almost into co-operation with their plans against the poor unprotected ladies. For the whole of that night "The Traveller's Joy" was unable to boast of its influence, for its owner remained wakeful, restless, and full of misgivings.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE TURN OF THE HILL.

“LET the mare walk up the hill. I wish you wouldn't be so fond of the whip, John,” said Mrs. Maxfield, testily, to the lad who was driving them. “It seems to be getting steep. I think we will get down and walk.” The two ladies did so, and walked on by the side of the steaming horse, the vapour from the animal mixing with the gathering mist. It was almost evening, and as the eyes of the women glanced from time to time to the woods through which they were passing, vague forms, suggesting vague but decidedly unpleasing fancies, troubled them.

“I wish we were safely home, mother,” said the young lady.

“Heaven knows, Bella, so do I. 'Twill be a long time before I undertake such a journey again. Good God! what's that?” She touched her daughter's arm, who gazed in the direction indicated, and saw some object that looked like



a man stealing along by the side of the hedge as if desiring to evade their notice—perhaps in order to burst out upon them when quite near.

“John,” said the younger lady, “you had better jump down and lead the horse, while we walk by your side. Let us all keep together.”

John did as he was told; and so they went on for a few yards, seeing nothing of the figure, and finding the hill grow more and more steep. The horse began to pant and to stop as if in distress; and the women, forgetting their late fright, began to wonder how they should get home—the mare being so tired—when suddenly they heard a blow given—a cry—and saw the lad drop senseless on the road. Mrs. Maxfield screamed, but found her throat rudely grasped, while a voice said,

“Be quiet, can’t yer? I mean ye no harm; I won’t hurt a hair o’ your blessed heads, if you’ll only be quiet.”

“What do you want?” asked Bella Maxfield, in trembling accents.

“Just what money and valleyables you’ve got about you, that’s all, my beautiful young lady.”

“There, there,” said Bella, giving her watch and her own purse, and then her mother’s purse, Mrs. Maxfield being too frightened to speak or to resist.

“Werry good; but I’m fond of watches; can’t

have too many of 'em, they make such nice keepsakes, you see, from ladies; and I'm not particular as to the age of them as gives. Eh?"

"My mother has no watch."

"That's a lie, young un. What's this?" roughly exclaimed the man, as he snatched with brutal violence at the gold chain he had seen from the parlour window of "The Traveller's Joy" hanging round Mrs. Maxfield's neck.

"Don't hurt her! Don't hurt her! She will give it to you," pleaded the poor girl. "Mother, give it to him."

"I won't! It's only a locket with my poor husband's portrait. It was his dying gift."

"It'll be your dying gift, marm, if you don't do it, and make no more fuss. D'ye hear?" he said, grasping the old lady's arm as if in a vice, while she shrieked again and again with pain, fright, and anger.

"Oh, mother, for my sake give it to him, or we shall be murdered."

The last words were uttered low, but the man heard them.

"There's the way poor men's charackters go. Murder!—just because I says I wants that ere locket—and means to have it." Again Mrs. Maxfield would have screamed, but the ruffian's hand was at her throat. She felt faint. The



locket and chain were given up. Another minute, and the shuddering, almost fainting, women saw the man pass into the dense shade and disappear.

Mrs. Maxfield dropped on a little bank of earth, and sat there in a kind of sullen anguish. But her daughter was already kneeling by the side of the lad, and supporting his head on her knee, glad to find he was recovering from the stupor in which he had been plunged by the merciless blow.

“Be that you, Miss Isabel,” he said at last. “What’s been the matter? I thought all the stars in the sky were dancing in my head. I feels very bad. My hand’s wet where I touched my forehead. It’s blood! O dear! O dear!”

While they were all three in this state of agitation the young maiden heard another step, and with beating heart she looked round. It was a man—a young man—who approached, walking more and more rapidly as he saw the group before him dimly through the dusk, and who spoke in a friendly and pleasant voice that came with a sense of inexpressible relief to the poor women.

“What is the matter?” said the stranger, who seemed to be breathless, as if with great exertion in trying to come up to them.

“We have been robbed; and our driver, a

lad, has been knocked down, and, I fear, much injured."

"What sort of a man was he who robbed you?"

"We couldn't see very well, and we were so dreadfully frightened; but I thought he seemed to have deformed arms, they appeared so short and strong."

He made no comment on this, but, after a pause, said,

"There is a halfway house, I'm told, about a mile or so further on. Suppose I drive you there, and then come back for the lad? We are near the turn of the hill, I believe, where the way gets easier."

There was no immediate answer, so the speaker added,

"I am only a piano-tuner seeking jobs. You needn't fear me. Pray don't be frightened."

"Yes, Bella, we cannot do better. There's honesty in the young man's voice. But let's all go together. I think we can manage with John sitting on the bottom and leaning against us, if the young man will be good enough to drive the horse."

"I shall be glad to help you in any way," said the stranger, simply.

And as they went along he was very silent, as

if listening to their conversation; though he had always a prompt and cheerful reply ready when either of them spoke to him. Minute by minute, as the wheels moved slowly round, the fears of the women passed away, and they began to narrate to him, or to comment between themselves, on what had passed, till they all three seemed to know each other like old acquaintances.

On parting at the halfway inn, Mrs. Maxfield wanted to give him money—forgetting she had lost her purse; but he smiled, and said he should be well repaid with a shake of the hand, which she gave him very cordially.

“Come and see us at Northope,” she said to him. “Our piano needs looking to, and I think I can recommend you to some of my neighbours. We shall be glad to give you house-room and board while you look about. You have rendered us a great service, and you won’t find me ungrateful.”

“Thank you, perhaps I may come,” he said, in a curiously constrained tone of voice.

Isabel, too, had been thinking to herself she would say something of her grateful feeling; but, somehow, she could only put out her hand and murmur,

“Good-bye; I shall never forget this night—I mean your kindness.”

It might have been the shadows of the boughs flickering over the young man's face, but Bella fancied its careless, half-scornful expression disappeared while he held her hand, and gave place to one that became him much better, or at all events one with which she ever afterwards tried to remember him. It was a look partly of tender respect and admiration, and partly it was a look of trouble and regret, which out of pride he strove to conceal. Suddenly he said,

“Good-bye! If you do ever forget to-night, I shan't. But of course you will. Good-bye!”

Before Isabel could say another word, if she had been inclined to do so, he was gone.

## CHAPTER IV.

### RINGING THE ALARM-BELL.

ABOUT midnight—that is to say several hours after the events recorded in our last chapter—two men issued through a window in the basement of Squire Gorman's mansion which stood about a mile or so distant from "The Traveller's Joy;" and, although each of them carried a bulky and seemingly weighty package in a green baize bag, they began to run fast across the park towards the open country, which could be dimly distinguished through the faint light by the absence of the black masses that in every other direction indicated the neighbouring woods.

For some time not a word was spoken between them, as though they felt it necessary to concentrate all their powers into the one effort—speedy flight.

They had scarcely advanced a quarter of a mile when they heard the clang of the hall bell ringing a most unmistakable alarm. Looking

back, they saw lights flitting across the windows. Presently they could distinguish shouts. Yes, they were being pursued: and the conviction of that fact seemed to give new impetus; so on again they went, still in silence, for another half mile or more.

“I say, Nobby Bob, you must give them better leg-bail than this,” observed one voice, which we regret to have to state was the very voice that had seemed so winning to Mr. Thomas Jessop, the giant landlord, and to Mrs. Maxfield and Mrs. Maxfield’s beautiful daughter.

“That’s easy for you to say; but I’m getting blown a’ready, through startin’ too fast. Allus take care o’ yer wind. Softly, young un; softly, Gent Rube.”

“Not that way!” suddenly cried the young man who was thus addressed. “Don’t you see there’s some wall or stoppage at the bottom.”

“By the living jingo, so there is!” panted Nobby Bob.

“Give me your bundle for a bit, I can carry both.”

“Not if I knows it, Gent Rube; not if I knows it. Every man to his own belongings.”

“See, there’s the end of the park; let’s dash through the plantation and climb the wall.”

On they went, fast as the heavy bundles they



carried would permit, till they got to the wall, which was high but covered with ivy. Nobby Bob put his bundle on the grass and began to mount, but wherever he planted his heavy boot the ivy gave way, and made him graze his hands and nose, with great injury also to his temper.

Gent Rube then tried, and ascended the wall with the agility of a wild cat, and there seated himself astride and received the bundles in succession and dropped them on the other side; then, balancing himself upon the wall and clasping it with his lithe wiry limbs, he held out his hand, saying,

“ Now, Nobby Bob, put your toe between the cracks, anywhere but for a single instant, and I’ll have you up and tumbling over before you have time to think better of it and fall back.”

“ Look out !” was Nobby Bob’s only answer. In an instant he found himself at the top, and obliged to let himself slide over and fall heavily to the ground on account of his loss of balance through the suddenness of Gent Rube’s operations. Lightly and laughingly the young man dropped on to the ferny heath, and then the bundles were snatched up, and the two were again sweeping along under the wild but not dark midnight sky, towards a wood they saw some miles distant on an eminence; being, in-

deed, the same hill as that on which Mrs. Maxfield and her daughter had been waylaid.

Although by degrees the sounds of the alarm-bell died out from their ears, as they got further and further off, they soon became aware that the whole country was being raised about them. If they came at all near a road (as they more than once did, without intending it) they could hear the clattering of horses' feet, and men shouting to one another by their names. At one part they even came almost face to face with a mounted policeman, a knowing fellow, who waited in grim silence under a dark hedge at the end of a little gully running straight across the heath and opening into the road. Just as he had expected, the moment the robbers had struck upon this gully they had determined to keep to it, so that they might not be visible to any neighbouring eyes. But "Gent Rube" was on his guard; and, perceiving by various indications that the gully was changing its character, he put out his hand in silence to warn his companion; and the two then went slowly and cautiously feeling their way, till the young man's quick eyes saw the statue-like man and horse keeping watch and ward under the trees, and he even caught a glimpse of the steel of the scabbard as the horseman's cloak was moved by the light breeze.



When they had got off to a considerable distance in another direction, but still towards the wood which stretched out very far upon the horizon, Nobby Bob whispered, in his hoarse tones,

“ We’ll never get away with all this swag.”

“ I’ve been thinking so myself.”

“ They’re everywhere barkin’ on our heels.”

“ Yes, and will grab us if you blow your bellows so hard. Why, you might be a steam-engine, only you’re so precious slow!”

“ It’s all through that varmint of a flunkey. His heart misguy him at the last moment, and so, instead of kivering our retreat, as he had promised, what does he do but makes up a nice little bag of his own, and makes off with it, without waiting for us or giving us a word of warnin’. Wont I slit his wizen for him if ever we consort agin!”

“ But what’s to be done now, Nobby Bob, if you really can’t go any further?”

“ They’d best not touch me. I shall give them an ugly grip or gash.”

“ Yes, and get lagged for life or sent up the tree. Come, come, none of that talk. It don’t suit my digestion.”

“ Speak yourself, if you know what’s better.”

“ Well, then, stop here among the fern, while

I look out. Take both the bundles. Lie down and make yourself as comfortable as you can till I come back."

Nobby Bob, though unused to be commanded, felt it best to submit. So he lay down and buried himself and the two bundles among the fern, while Gent Rube ran with all the fleetness of a hare on and upwards towards the wood. Noticing with careful eye the positions of the scattered trees, so that he might retrace his route, he got into the wood and penetrated some distance in various directions without seeing a house or shed, or any token of human habitation or of the vicinity of a road. As well as he could guess, he was standing several miles away from the road, which kept perpetually rising to his inner sight as the one along which he had driven Bella Maxfield, a name that he frequently repeated to himself as if out of it he ought to be able to draw the knowledge he so much thirsted for—that is, some idea of the nature and mental life of a virtuous young woman, which seemed as yet an impenetrable mystery to him after his very different experience.

He now began to wander about among the trees, having first again looked to the means for finding his way back to the same part of the wood where he had entered; and, after a search

that seemed fearfully long to him, considering the dangers that threatened him and his comrade, he came to a group of very old oaks, and immediately began to run close round them, eagerly examining their decayed and hollow trunks. At last he found one which seemed thoroughly to satisfy him. Not content with such an examination as the dim light would permit from the outside, he got in and felt all about it with his hands, and then came quickly out and set off on his way back, which he found with perfect ease by the marks he had so carefully fixed in his mind.

The men soon reached the tree. They both got into it, for there was plenty of room; and then, before Nobby Bob knew what his companion was about, he heard him clambering above his head, felt his teeth shaken by a kick from Gent Rube's sprawling legs, and then, amid a volley of execrations from himself, heard the other cry to him,

“Up with the swag! Here's a place hollowed out where we might leave it for a month, and nobody be the wiser.”

“Eh?” said Nobby Bob, while revolving in his mind the propriety of the course suggested.

“Now then, look alive, will you?” exclaimed Gent Rube; but his companion swore that he

must have a look at the bundles first, so Gent Rube descended to witness the examination.

Nobby Bob lighted a little piece of wax taper that he always carried about with him as a part of his stock in trade, and shaded the flame with his hand for a moment till Gent Rube took up a position half in half out of the tree, so that he could prevent the light from being seen in the only exposed direction.

What a sight that would have been for the owner, if only he could have made one of the party. The ground within the tree seemed almost lighted up with the gold, and silver, and gems that those two wonderful bundles gave forth. At each fresh display Nobby Bob took hold of the article, held it up to get as much light on it as possible, and then grunted his satisfaction, while Gent Rube was silent, for him a most unusual thing. There were cups, and flacons, and saltcellars of solid silver and lined with burnished gold; there was a magnificent race cup (a prize); there was a diamond necklace; there was a bracelet of gold set with all sorts of precious stones, which twinkled in answer to the twinkling of Nobby Bob's eyes, who grew at last silent also, and seemingly composed, as if engaged in some mental arithmetic of an absorbing kind.

"Well, Nobby Bob, what's the total?" asked Gent Rube.

Nobby Bob seemed to grow strangely modest in his answer. He "couldn't very well tell. They mightn't all be genu-ine."

"Gammon!" suggested Gent Rube, who knew perfectly well what was coming.

"I didn't say they were sham, did I!" savagely asked the guardian of the plunder. "How much now out of this yer do you expect?"

"Well, I should say, old Levy, the fence master, will give five or six hundred to melt down the plate and reset the gems."

"Should you? Then I shouldn't. Three hundred 'ud be a deal nigher the mark."

"Hundred and fifty a-piece, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And if I let you sell the whole for what you like you'll guarantee me a hundred and fifty? All on the square, mind you!"

"I will."

"Done!"

"Done!" and they both shook hands on it.

And then it was arranged that they should leave the whole in the tree for a week; that they should go off in different directions as far away as possible; and then meet in quite different

dresses at nightfall, at the end of the week, to take the plunder to a railway station twenty miles off, whence they could easily get to London. Once back again in their quarters, Nobby Bob undertook without delay to give his "pal" the agreed sum, and make the best of his bargain and risk afterwards. And Gent Rube, knowing his companion either had or could get "capital" when he wanted, agreed.

"Now then, up with the swag if you like," said Nobby Bob. So the precious articles were again all packed up in two bundles, and with extreme care, that they might not jingle during the carriage. Then Gent Rube mounted aloft and had the bundles lifted up to him and deposited in the hollow he had previously spoken of.

There was a large hole in the trunk on the opposite side which admitted some light, and would, no doubt, in the daytime admit a great deal more, and might thus expose the bundles to observation if any one got into the tree trunk and looked up. So Gent Rube descended and went outside to look about him. He found a strong sapling growing within two or three yards, which sent out branches that reached and partly enveloped the old oak. Leaping up, he caught one of the longest, and managed, after two or three trials, to force the end through the hole



and get it so well in that he found it did not come out again even when he shook the sapling and bent it to and fro as much as any ordinary wind could. He then went back to the hiding-place and found he could see nothing above. Then he put up his hands, and felt everywhere a complete roof of foliage which must effectually check suspicion of a hiding-place above.

Nobby Bob chuckled a good deal over this dodge, and seemed inclined to be proud of his pupil.

“Ay, my boy, I’ve larned you a thing or two since we first met in that slap-up fashionable square at the West-end, when you were roaming about, a half-starved boy, telling everybody how your mother was just dead, and that you hadn’t no victuals and no home.”

“Well, never mind that now, Nobby Bob. Light your pipe, and let’s have a bit of talk. I’ve got something to say to you.”

They both lighted their short pipes, and, as they began to smoke, the elder man said,

“Fire away, mate, I shall be asleep soon. I always get sleepy when a job’s done, and I feel safe.”

“What made you slip off from that fat giant’s without a word or a nod? When, too, it was so important to keep him sweet on us?”

“ I got a signal from the flunkey outside—and as he wouldn't come in, I were obligated to go out.”

“ And then ? ”

“ I did a little business just to keep my hands in till dark.”

“ And the swag ? ”

Nobby Bob grumbled something about forgetting that—but began to bring it all out of his pockets, knowing such things were points of honour. The moment Gent Rube saw the locket he took it up, beheld the face of a rosy-cheeked, stout farmer, turned it round, and saw a miniature of Isabel Maxfield, evidently recently taken. As he gazed on it as though every moment some new quality in the painting or the fair original struck him, Nobby Bob proposed that his “ pal ” should keep it and the young lady's purse too (which contained very little), while he would take the watch and the other purse (which contained a good deal), Nobby Bob professing it was all a lottery ; for he hadn't, he said, had a chance of looking inside either of them.

Gent Rube smiled, and accepted the offer. Then went on,

“ Well, now, Nobby Bob, listen to me. It's quite true what you've told me a good many times, you picked me up when I was half starving



in London streets, and when I was so miserable I didn't much care what became of me. I wasn't a thief before that, except in little ways, and I stole only of my poor mother—God in heaven bless her! But you praised my skill, tickled my fancy with the idea of all sorts of delights long coveted but never before possible to me; taught me every bit of rascality that could be at all useful; made me in a few months so accomplished, that whether as a wyre, a flymper, a snyde pitcher, a magsman, or a cracksman, you boasted at last nobody could beat Gent Rube. You promised me that in due time I should be a tip-topper, and stand apart as a prince among thieves, doing business only on the largest scale and as befitting a gentleman.

“By degrees I found out that I was profitable to you; and by degrees, Nobby Bob, *you* found out that I began to discover my value, and declined to stand any cockcrowing over me. Still, you must acknowledge I've pulled a good many fine chestnuts out of the fire for you, while you didn't endanger the tips of your blessed fingers.

“Well, Nobby Bob, to make a long story short and let us get away from this tree before daybreak, I've been thinking a good deal of late about the doctrine of chances that you were so

learned about when showing me a few clever tricks at cards. I've been applying the knowledge to my own future; and I must own, Nobby Bob, I don't at all like the prospect.

"I'm clever, you say; and it's a pity such talent should be lost to the profession. Well, but clever men somehow do get on in the world without picking pockets, or thinking night and day how they shall behave in the prison-van, or before the beak, or behind the rue at the Old Bailey. I'm not going to turn canter. I've had no Methodee at me, nor been reading tracts late at night; but the plain truth is, I am tired of this kind of war upon the world, and I'm going to see if I can't conclude a treaty of peace.

"Now remember, Nobby Bob, you promised me before you knew all this, and when you only knew I wanted to be off somewhere to do something or other different, you promised me that if I helped you to work a good put-up job, one better than any we yet had, that you'd help me off without fuss, so that the other fellows should think me dead, or transported, or emigrated. Now's the time. I've done my last job to-night; and I want you to be a man of your word, and help me. That's it."

"You're a — fool!" was Nobby Bob's first

and slowly-made reply. But, seeing Gent Rube took no notice, he said,

“War! You call it war, what you’ve been a doin’, do you? Young ’un, hearken to me, and tell me this. Which is best, to suck or be sucked?—to make that ’ere blessed thing called society always a fearin’ on you, and supportin’ you well on the very fat of the land, or to go a shiverin’ about, poor an’ miserable, trying to be good? O you spooney! And to have everybody for ever a makin’ war on you because o’ your poverty? I’m ashamed on you. I thought you had more sperrit.”

“Well, Nobby Bob, I shall do it.”

“You won’t.”

“Won’t! Come, then, we had best settle affairs on a different basis. I’m off our bargain. You divide the swag into two portions, as equally as you can, and then I’ll take my choice. Or I’ll divide and you shall choose.”

As Nobby Bob said nothing, but sucked away at his pipe at an alarming rate, Gent Rube got up to reach down the plunder; but he was caught round the waist by those short, strong arms, and almost paralysed by the clasp.

“Let go, or” — Nobby Bob, a moment after, felt the point of a knife in his throat, and he let go, with a hoarse laugh.

“What! can’t stand a lark?”

Gent Rube made no answer, but, disengaging himself from the tree, stood outside.

“Now, Nobby Bob, is it too late for a good understanding?”

“What the —— do you want?”

“That you swear to me if I give you up the whole of this night’s work, which I am willing to do out of love of you”—here he laughed—“and which I know to be worth at least twice as much as you told me,—will you then swear that you will treat me as a dead man henceforth, no matter where you see or how you hear of me? Swear that, and I will not look for a single shilling out of all you have now got.”

“And if I leave the swag here to-night what’s to prevent you coming afore the time, and”——

“We must trust each other to some extent. If I fail in my part you are at liberty to fail in yours, and expose me when you can.”

“Put that knife away, will you?—and I’ll do it.”

“Ay, but swear.”

“Did I ever break my word with you?”

“Well, no, not when it was quite certain and beyond all question what the word meant. But I mean to have your word first. Swear, then, you will treat me as one dead from to-night.”

Nobby Bob did swear; and in terms that we should not care to repeat in these pages. Then he added,

“And here’s my bunch o’ fives on’t.”

So they shook hands.

“You’re not going?” demanded Nobby Bob.

“At once. Good-by. You’ll find your way in that direction, as I must in this.”

“Well, it’s nice to leave a pal like this. However, if it must be, good-by, Gent Rube.”

“Good-by, and harkye, Nobby Bob, to a verse of a song we heard once together. Don’t be frightened. I’m not going to make a row.” So saying, Gent Rube hummed, in a low, rich, musical voice, with admirable expression, a verse from a flash song, running thus:—

“A cross cove\* is in the street for me,  
And I a poor girl of a low degree;  
If I was as rich as I am poor,  
Ye never should go on the cross no more.”

The last two lines he seemed to repeat two or three times with peculiar unction.

“If I was as rich as I am poor,  
Ye never should go on the cross no more.”

“Good-by, Nobby Bob!”

\* A thief.

## CHAPTER V.

### DIFFERENCES OF OPINION.

As Gent Rube took his way through the wood, and Nobby Bob sucked his pipe in the tree with increasing vehemence, a somewhat noticeable difference of opinion on recent transactions characterised their cogitations; and it may not be altogether useless to bring their inward comments together, very much as they would have been heard if any human faculty could have listened to both at the same moment of time.

“The mean spirited hound! to take all and let me go naked into the world after what I have done for him,” thought Gent Rube.

“The varmint! to bring me all these miles away from home, and leave me here with the swag, and make off with his precious carcass to a place of safety,” muttered Nobby Bob, as he took his pipe out of his mouth, and pushed the burning tobacco further into the bowl with his hard, unshrinking finger.



“It was well I had made up my mind to give up all if I saw him cantankerous ; for it is plain now that that was the only bribe that would have quieted him and made him consent to let me go,” thought Gent Rube, as he stopped on reaching an open glade, wondering whether he had best take the right footpath or the left, but determining on the former.

“If I’d known he’d been so sharp with his knife I’d a larned him another wrinkle to stick on to them as I larned him before,” thought Nobby Bob.

“Well, you are as poor as a rat to begin your new life. That’s an ugly fact for you, Master Gent Rube, particularly after the pleasant little arrangement you made for beginning so very snugly, with a few pounds in pocket, and a good many pounds hidden away, but come-at-able whenever wanted. Yes, that little delusion’s over. Poor as a rat ! And no chance that I can see of helping myself for a pretty long while. It’s no use being a fool, and expecting what won’t happen. It’s hard work, and no indulgence just now, and no mistake.” Thus continued Gent Rube in his thoughts, making a new stop as he saw he was drawing near the edge of the wood.

“And what’s the varmint arter, after all ? He goin to live on the square ! Ay, about as much

as I am. No; I know what's o'clock as well as he does. He want's to get away from me—the varmint! That's what it means. Ay, and most like he has got another put-up job in view, so good that he can afford to play his high mightiness about this one. What a hidiot I was not to think of that afore! Stop a bit! Can't I join in that ere game, or spoil his if he pervents? O' course I can. If he lied about what he was goin to do, that's enough to clear up all the pints of honour about which he's always been so precious noisy." Such were Nobby Bob's discontented and suspicious views. Meantime Gent Rube continued thus:—

"Well, the job's done; and now to see what I'm worth. I don't pretend to humbug myself. I don't pretend to be honest, but I am inclined to take a favourable view of Master Gent Rube's desire to know by experience what honesty means, how honest people feel, and whether it is really practicable in this old England of ours (which nurses us all, honest men and thieves alike) to live and develop one's talents, if one has got any, without what the law so unpleasantly calls robbery. Yes, I'm glad it's come to this, though I own I shiver a bit at the prospect when it begins to look real. Come, here ends the wood; and so farewell—a last farewell—to thee my own jewel



of a 'pal!' Farewell, thou lying, swindling, mean-spirited, base-hearted scoundrel, who hast done so much to make me discontented with my calling! Farewell, once more, my Nobby Bob! Thank goodness, I have got rid of you!"

"Yes, he's a nice un, for a young un, sartinly! The varmint! Now I sees it all. What an ass I was! Why, he's doing me in style every way; and o' course he's 'charmed,' as he says sometimes, with my exceedingly accommodatin' disposition. I leave the swag here safe while he goes to another and better job, and as soon as that's performed he comes back, afore the week's out, and saves me all further trouble about the disposin' of things! Well, for a young un, he is sartinly tiptop! Stop a bit, my covey; larn a bit more from Nobby Bob afore you gets out of the go-cart and forgets your time o' lollypop."

Nobby Bob pursues no more the unconscious dialogue in which he has been a sharer, for he is, to his thinking, better employed. With a grin on his face, which would not improve it to any bystander if there were light enough to do it justice, he is climbing up for the treasures overhead; and, though he does manage to get the bundles safely down, he grazes face, fingers, and knees so badly in the process that he lets fly a volley of oaths loud enough to have brought the

police on him had they been at all nigh. But his movements are undisturbed. By the light of his curling wax taper the grim smile again is seen playing over his face as he writes with a pencil a word or two on a scrap of paper, and rolls the scrap carefully round a piece of stick, and then rolls that up again neatly in a handkerchief, so that the package, when deposited in the hollow, shall not accidentally escape the hand or eye of the searcher who may hereafter come to the tree for the plunder.

Nobby Bob laughs to himself a good deal in his low sniggering way at this part of his labours; and, when he has made up his package and pushed it through the roof of leaves from the crossing branch (which Gent Rube had forced in through the hole in the trunk) till it rested in the hollow in place of the green baize bundles, he begins to prepare to move off by binding the bundles together, so that they may be slung across his shoulder, one hanging in front and one behind, as he goes. And then he waits impatiently for daybreak. It arrives at last faint and fair. As soon as the robber can see and distinguish objects fifty yards before him, he rises to his feet. But before he leaves his place of shelter he has an important business to go through, which deserves the respect of a new chapter.

## CHAPTER VI.

### NOBBY BOB'S TOILET.

You would not have thought, to look at him, that this worthy and estimable gentleman ever troubled himself much about his personal appearance; but in so doing you would have done him great injustice. It is quite true that a dirty complexion, dirty-looking, frowzy hair, both unpleasantly suggestive of a dirty mind, were his ordinary characteristics; but as artists when they paint a portrait consider it only right to take a man or a woman in their happiest moments, and consider it no flattery, so we will study Nobby Bob's conduct in matters of the toilet at the only time when he thinks them worthy of attention. Clearly such is the case now. He takes off his glossy silk hat, looks at it a moment savagely, then with his two strong meeting hands crushes the sides together, till the hat becomes almost as flat as a pancake, and presents a picture that would make anybody but the unfortu-

nate owner smile; then opening it out, he sets it on the ground; and plants, suddenly, one heavy foot upon it, and produces a different kind of flattening, but one equally amusing in its result to any but the gentleman who paid four shillings and ninepence for it in a lane running out of one of the chief London streets a few days before. He now looks forth from the tree, spies a little muddy hollow where water had settled during rains, hunts about till he finds a stone, which he drops into the ill-used hat, and then drops both into the pool, where they disappear.

A little flannel cap is now brought forth from some secret pocket in the coat and put on the head; and while it seems to suit the head better than the hat had done, it is scarcely a paradox to observe that the ill-favoured hard countenance seems now brought out into bolder relief than ever by the new head-gear.

The coat is next taken off, and the sleeves turned inside out, which are lined with white flannel. The trousers and waistcoat undergo exactly the same process of turning inside out, and in two minutes the genteel black has altogether disappeared, and Nobby Bob stands there in light-coloured trousers and vest, and white shirt sleeves, already a greatly altered man.

And now he takes forth from another pocket

in that extraordinary coat a little mirror, and thoughtfully surveys his image in the glass.

“No barbers, I suppose, in this here neighbourhood. Must do the best I can.” he says to himself; and with manly decision he sets to work clipping off with a pair of scissors the long, starveling, and muddy-looking beard and moustache which he has been carefully cultivating of late (his usual practice before a good “put up”). Having done his best to make his face and chin as smooth as possible, he dives once more into the recesses of the coat, which lies on the ground by his side, and brings out a little box, seemingly of ointment or pomade, and scoops out with his thick forefinger an unctuous lump, which he begins to rub over the hair of his face and the hair of his head, till, wonderful to say, they become quite black. Evidently Nobby Bob is master of some valuable secrets for the toilet.

He now touches up his eyebrows, and other weak and shabby-looking places, and then goes to the pool where his hat lies, and, dipping his handkerchief into the water, begins with the aid of his glass, to clear away the black smears from his complexion, till he sees, after repeated efforts, and repeated lookings at his little glass, that he is perfect—absolutely perfect!

Now he puts on his coat, turned inside out;

and we must own that, if we hadn't watched the whole process, we should have been inclined to doubt whether this was after all our own genuine Nobby Bob, so great is the effect of the change from black clothes and light-coloured hair, to extremely light-coloured clothes and jetty locks and beard.

Putting on his cap, and doubling deeply inwards the edges of his cuffs, to prevent the black cloth from showing, he now looks like a jobbing carpenter out of work; and who, you cannot but fear, is likely to remain in that position if his engagement depends upon the attractiveness of his appearance.

Nobby Bob, however, is by no means of that opinion. He takes one last lingering look at himself and his glass before putting the flattering utensil away, and a gleam almost allied to good-humour breaks out on the rough, hard features and high cheek bones; and, no doubt, when a man feels himself well dressed he is inclined to take a less misanthropical view of the statè of things than at any other period. And so it is with our friend Nobby Bob. That's all.



## CHAPTER VII.

NOBBY BOB DISCOVERS, UNEXPECTEDLY, A NEW  
VOCATION.

EVEN Nobby Bob's bag, with prudent forethought, had been made capable of instantaneous change and of becoming less aristocratic in appearance by being simply turned inside out. What before seemed an appendage to the genteel traveller became now, under Nobby Bob's powerful hands, a mere workman's bag for carrying tools, or the dinner wrapped up in a greasy newspaper or handkerchief. Taking this bag in his hand, and slinging the two green baize bundles across his shoulder, he began to move off, after a long and careful look-out through the trees, which had become clearer by the increasing light.

Keeping in a direction different from that chosen by his late companion, he went on through the wood, looking for another tree which should present the same facilities for concealment as the one left behind ; but his search was

vain; and he began almost to repent of his undertaking when he saw the rosy streaks of morning glowing in the extreme distance under the trees; and again he felt with alarm that he ought to be miles away from this dangerous neighbourhood before broad daylight should bring the labourers forth into the field and the travellers into the road, to speculate about his business, or to give information to pursuers about his course.

Besides, he was puzzled about another matter. Skilful as he was in all the lore of his brother rogues, he had not that intuitive sagacity which enabled his quondam pupil to find his way almost blindfold through difficult and little known places. Nobby Bob got considerably alarmed at the idea that he might hide his treasure so well that he would never himself be able to find it again. To guard against that he determined to go on rapidly with his burden till he got to a road, and there, having found some sort of landmark which could not be mistaken, he would go back just a little way to a spot where he might bury the swag in the ground, without being out of sight of his two guiding signs, the road and the landmark selected.

He did just as he had thought he would. He found a blasted oak, of extraordinary aspect, standing within a hundred yards of a high road, which had, on the other side, in a direct line with



the oak, a deserted and ruinous cottage, built of the grey stone everywhere so plentiful on the surface of the ground. These marks could not fail him.

Presently he was on his knees, digging with the aid of a large clasp knife, a great hole for the reception of the bundles, which, with his usual wariness, he hid meanwhile under the neighbouring fern. He became so engrossed with his occupation, which was necessarily slow and fatiguing, that he did not hear approaching footsteps; and it was with a sudden collapse of heart he heard himself greeted with the salutation,

“What’s the matter, mate?”

Nobby Bob, on his knees, and with the knife in his right hand, glared askance as conscious of a foe that must be dealt with summarily, then looking up he saw a man who looked like an artisan on the tramp for work, and who seemed to have a cheerful, good-humoured face, as seen beneath the growing but still uncertain light.

“What’s the matter, mate?” the man repeated.

“Matter! what the —— should be the matter?” was Nobby Bob’s first reply; then, with a happy inspiration, he added, “Truffles!”

“Oh! hunting truffles. I’ve heard of them,

but never saw one, nor tasted one. Early work, mate."

"Yes," grunted Nobby Bob.

"I thought—leastways I know I've been told—that truffles were found generally under beech-trees; now this yer is an oak."

"Ain't it rayther late in life, young man, to begin to teach your grandmother to suck eggs," was Nobby Bob's contemptuous and only reply; made, however, after a considerable pause for previous reflection.

"Well," said the man, laughing, "that's quite true. Of course you know all about it, and I just know nothing—except about soles and upper leathers, and sticking to my last, and don't (as you see) very well understand that."

"Shoemaker on the tramp?"

"Ay, worse luck. I've been sleeping here in the wood all night—at the ruinous cottage over there, across the road—got tipsy at the last village I passed through yesterday, spent every copper I had over the score, and then the shabby vagabond of a landlord wouldn't give me a bed unless I paid in advance."

"Oh, well, I bin in distress myself," said Nobby Bob, "and knows the vally of a shilling. There, mate; pay me again if you ever see me, and have got it to spare."

“Many thanks, old fellow; but I wouldn’t have you rely on getting your shilling back. I shall get help at the next town, and then take rail to my own place, Liverpool.”

“Very well. Leave it to my heirs in your will, if they should ever turn up.”

This produced a laugh, and the two men parted good friends.

“Now,” communed Nobby Bob within himself, as he stood on the brink of the hole which had caused him so much labour, and watched the gradual disappearance of the wandering shoemaker in the distance, “now which am I to do, —find another place and dig another hole, and wait for a less polite visitor to come arter my next reception, or levée, or drawing-room, or go on with this, and get myself off out of this before the whole country’s awake and looking lively?”

He paused, still gazing dubiously after the retreating figure of the man; but when it quite disappeared he went to work once more, and finished the hole to the requisite depth and put in his bundles, and then stopped to wipe away the sweat and to take a bit of quiet thought.

“If I kiver it up with mould the knowing uns ud soon ferret the swag out, and I should be nicely blown.” He gazed about him for a

minute or more, and then went to where he saw a patch of young fern just showing their curling heads above the soil; he drew with his knife a rude circle; dug away along the line thus traced to a depth of several inches, then dug away beneath; till at last he found he could remove the whole mass, which he accordingly carried to the hole. He then measured the depth of the hole above the tops of the green baize bundles, and also measured the depth of the mass of transplanted fern: it was too deep. So he had to pare away from the bottom, then measure again; again to pare and once more to measure, before he could venture to let it into its place. But it was right at last. He had then only to fill in tightly with earth all round to make the hole no longer discoverable to any eye that did not actually know or suspect what was hidden beneath, for he finished off by collecting with his hands a layer of dry dust to lay over the fresh mould.

“There; that’s all right at last. And now, young un, look to yourself if you don’t want me to be a party in your new job.”

## CHAPTER VIII.

EXCITING TIMES FOR "THE TRAVELLER'S JOY."

"GLASS of mild ale, young woman!"

"Here, my lass, you forgot the pipes!"

"Sixpenn'orth of brandy-and-water — cold, without!"

Such, incessantly repeated with all kinds of variations, were the Babel sounds that greeted the ears of the giant landlord as he sat in his old place on the next morning following that on which we introduced him to the reader. But he seemed now quite in his element—calm, methodical, and able to enjoy at once his own pipe and glass, and to share in the general stream of gossip, while warily seeing that no one forgot to pay or was left without something to pay for.

"Here, Molly, my beauty, more chairs! Fetch thine out of the bed-chamber, if that is really the last you can find in the house. Don't be ashamed on it, lass, it'll do for Johnny; he isn't quite so big and heavy as I am."

Johnny—a particularly small young man—almost blushed at this public reference to him, and looked out of the open window near which he had been standing in the hope of a seat sooner or later among the crowding guests of “The Traveller’s Joy.”

It is evident enough from the conversation, what particular influence has brought so many people together; small farmers hob-nobbing with their own labourers; and all talking in a noisy, excited way; it is the robbery of last night. Mr. Thomas Jessop is, of course, frequently appealed to; and then, as he answers the questions put there is an instantaneous hush through the place, every one feeling so much interest in the landlord’s talk about his guests of the previous day, his suspicions, and his views of what ought to be done generally for the good of society, and for the particular ease of the neighbourhood under such unprecedented circumstances.

In the midst of all the hubbub, and while the cheerful black-eyed little wife in the bar, is resting for a moment from her ceaseless labour of supplying the wants of her customers, a boy comes in, and, presuming on the general disturbance of the social atmosphere, ventures to make something like a loud proclamation of an interesting fact.



"Mr. Jessop! Mr. Jessop! There's a man sticking a great bill on your stable gate."

"Run after the man and bring him here. Say I've got a glass of ale for him!" thunders out the landlord, who evidently dreads a general departure and break up for a time if he does not make the attractions inside rival those without.

The boy soon returned with a man who had a bundle of newly-printed, inky-smelling bills under his left arm and a paste-pot in his right hand.

"Here, missus, a pint of the best ale for Billy Gomm."

"Thank you, Mr. Jessop. But I musn't stop long."

"Well, give us a bill, then, and go as soon as you like after supping the ale. That's the way of the world, you know—get all you want out of folk, and then let them go."

The man unfolded his wet bundle of paper, gave a bill to the landlord, took one long draught of the ale and all but finished it, then took breath for a concluding effort; and, when he had drained the jug, looked round upon the attentive auditory, fast becoming enveloped in a dense atmosphere of smoke.

"This *is* a robbery, lads! Never one like it



before in these parts;" and, taking up his paste-pot and bills, he went off.

Meantime the landlord had carefully and lovingly opened and extended the bill, dividing the great black capitals that would stick together through the folding of the paper; and then, as the people crowded round him, and looked over one another's shoulders, they read at the top,

"FIFTY POUNDS REWARD!"

"Read it! read it!" shouted out the less-favourably situated persons in the rear.

"Ay, ay; that'll be best. Well, then, sit down all of ye. Here, missus come nigh. You want to know all about this business, don't you?"

The men made room for the rosy-cheeked, blushing, little, busy wife, who got close to her giant husband's chair, and leaned over one of the projecting sides; and then Molly, who thought her place must be near to her mistress, got behind her skirts; and thus, all being prepared, the landlord hemmed, and began to read:—

"'FIFTY POUNDS REWARD!

"Whereas, on the night of the 15th of March last, the mansion of Clement Gorman, Esq., at Wickham, was broken open and burglariously

entered, and a large quantity of property in plate and jewels taken away, the above reward is hereby offered to any one who will give such information as may lead to the conviction of the offenders. The plate bears the Gorman crest, an antelope couchant.'"

Mr. Thomas Jessop stopped and looked around; and, for a moment, there was an impression he had finished the reading of the document; and exclamations, and remarks, and gossip were all again beginning till rudely stopped by the landlord's heavy fist on the table, making the glasses everywhere ring and rattle as if they had been struck.

"Listen, can't ye? The best of it's coming." And then he read on:—

“‘NOTICE!’

“*Notice!* Mind you,” said Mr. Jessop, looking round, “that’s a heading all to itself, for I thought——”

What did the landlord think? Somehow he stopped, and, taking care not to look at the wondering black eyes of his wife, he read on:—

“‘NOTICE!’

“Two notices, dear?” asked the little wife.

“Of course not. Do be quiet.”

## “NOTICE!

“It is believed that the robbery was committed by one or more persons from London, aided by a servant, who has absconded. Particular attention is directed to a man, who has been seen in a neighbouring inn, about five feet five inches in height, dressed respectably in black clothes, but who looks as though he hadn't been accustomed to wear them. He has remarkably short arms, high cheek-bones, and a very strong, unpleasant expression of face; light, sandy hair, with thin beard and moustaches. He speaks in a vulgar tone of voice, and is evidently a person of no education. He carried, when last seen, a red carpet bag, and is believed to be still lurking about the neighbourhood with the plunder.

“Information may be addressed to James Turle, Esq., solicitor, Hadford, or to Mr. Thomas Jessop, “The Traveller's Joy,” who will be glad to give further particulars.’”

The landlord looked bigger than ever to the eyes of his guests as he finished reading the document, and said,

“There, gentlemen, I think I've done his business for him. Isn't he a beauty? And haven't I drawn his portrait lovingly?”

“O, Thomas!” said the little woman at his

side, "Did you draw up that part of the bill?"

The landlord nodded.

Mrs. Jessop wiped away a tear from her eyes before she smiled her approbation to him, and then turned to Molly, and said,

"D'ye hear, Molly? It was all master's doing."

"Yes, Missus, I heard." And the two women looked on each other and then at him. And Mr. Thomas Jessop began to wonder what people meant when they talked about prophets not being honoured in their own country.

"Speak up, missus, before all these neighbours. Didn't I tell you last night that man was a born rogue?"

"O, he did! he did!" responded the delighted mistress, as she moved back again to the bar to supply more glasses of brandy-and-water, cold without.

How Nobby Bob would have felt if he had listened to the landlord's summing-up, "Isn't he a beauty?" or to the roars of laughter and unrespecting personal comments which the words called forth, we are not prepared to say; but it is evident from these proceedings that that worthy and estimable gentleman had not misunderstood the advisabilities of his case and position when

he made his toilet in the wood, before presenting himself once more to the eyes of his fellow-men.

But there is another remarkable thing. The bill says nothing about Nobby Bob's fellow-traveller. Has the landlord forgotten once more all his suspicions against the younger man? Or is he consciously allowing himself to be a little—just a little—biassed in his proceedings by his liking for the young fellow's face and general behaviour?

Perhaps the explanation may be found in a letter which the landlord received before he was out of bed, and which he takes out of his pocket to read for the third time, after he sees his guests all once more settle down in groups to their ale and pipes to discuss these portentous events in the history of the little village.

It is written on a thick, smooth sheet of yellow note paper, and by a delicate hand, and the landlord opens it with as much care and tenderness as if it were a bank note of almost fabulous value.

Thus the note runs:—

“NORTHOPE, *Friday night.*

“Dear Sir,— My mother is too ill to write herself, so she wishes me to send this to you immediately, so that it may reach you early

to-morrow morning. You will be grieved to hear that as we were slowly driving up the hill, just when we had nearly got to the top, a man—O, such a dreadful looking wretch!—came out suddenly from the hedge, knocked down our poor boy, who was leading the horse, and then robbed us both of our purses, and me of my watch, and mother of her locket with the portrait of my father. She is almost distracted with the loss and the fright. She hopes you may be able to help in discovering the villain, not only for the sake of punishing him, but that she may get back the locket. If she could only get the miniatures—for there are two, father's and mine—she wouldn't so much mind all the rest.

“I'm afraid I can't tell you much about the man, it makes me shudder only to think of him, for I expected every instant he would murder us both. I thought he had very short arms, which gave him a disgusting manner that I can't describe; but perhaps this was all fancy, through my fright and the darkness. I think his clothes were black. If you can help, we shall both be very much obliged to you. Mother is quite ill, and unable to go out to take any active measures.

“I am, dear Sir, yours sincerely,

“BELLA MAXFIELD.



“P.S. I don’t know how we should have got home but for a young man, a music-tuner, who came up a few minutes after, having heard mother’s screams, and who drove us to the half-way house, and was very kind. Mother hopes he will come to see her, so that she may thank him for the great service he rendered us.”

“Hum! ha! Hum! ha!” exclaimed the great man, as he pondered over this letter. “So my young friend in the grey clothes was not with that mature piece of iniquity in the black ones after leaving here! I’m glad of that!—very glad! What a blessing that I kept his portrait out of the bill! I wasn’t very sure I was doing right to be so mum about him to the Squire’s steward when he roused me in the middle of the night and we concocted this affair. No; but now it’s clear! Bless the lad! He had nothing to do with either of the robberies. I’m really glad of it. Somehow, I took to him in spite of myself. And now he has bewitched these poor ladies. I’m greatly mistaken if Miss Bella isn’t managing to say one word for herself among so many for her mother. Perhaps she thinks he may come this way. Well, I wish he would; I’d like to know more about him. Either there’s a deal of good



in that young fellow that's got to come out, or else there's the craft of the old one himself for making people think so. Well, well; I suppose we shall see by-and-by."

## CHAPTER IX.

### GENT RUBE'S MISGIVINGS.

WHERE is Gent Rube all this time ?

Well, he is lying at the base of a great rock that overhangs the edge of a hill, and he is looking with sad and dreamy eyes upon the beautiful valley spread out before him : those eyes, unconsciously to himself, are tracking the windings of the silver stream that they see at intervals for many miles, but which at last disappear where a great mountain spur comes from the other side of the valley and conceals all beyond.

Yes, he is sad and inactive just when he had meant to be full of spirit and energetic deed. Somehow, the serene beauty of this retired place has affected him almost as with a blow, by the sense of the contrast to his own past life. And the thoughts of what he now sees remind him of what he saw yesterday—of the fair young maiden in her pale pink dress—who spoke so sweetly to

him, and seemed to imagine he was like herself, pure and good.

Fool! What had he now to do with thoughts of the past? Let him look to the present—ay, and with all his might, too, if he wanted to take care of himself; for would not the noise of the robbery be getting abroad, and scores of busy feet be now hunting the robbers?

Well, he would once more look to that. Not many persons had seen the two men together since they entered the valley. He could count them all upon his fingers. The shepherd boy on a hillock watching the sheep, who was reading a paper, when he stopped a moment to look at them; the old woman in the little plantation picking up sticks, who had curtsied to "Nobby Bob" and got a penny from his "honour;" the landlord of "The Traveller's Joy;" the drover who had come in about feed for his cattle in the paddock; and Molly:—these were literally all the persons they had seen since they entered the valley by a by-road the previous evening. And of all these the only person who might have been dangerous—the landlord—was a fixture by his hearthstone, and therefore not likely to be an instrument for convicting Gent Rube of participation in the late affair.

But then there was the flunkey who had ab-

sconded with a part of the plunder. If he were overtaken, would he not be able to point out the burglars? "Yes," as regards Nobby Bob; "No," as regards Gent Rube. The former alone had negotiated the whole affair with the servant man; who by his own unexpected move at the last moment had prevented himself from seeing the burglar's accomplice although he had known quite well some extra hand would be required, and would come.

Lastly, as to Nobby Bob and the plunder. The latter was safe, but even if it were discovered in the tree, that mattered little, unless one of the men who put it there was discovered at the same time. Certainly, that would not be Gent Rube; who by no means intended to justify his comrade's suspicions of his good faith by going to the tree again under any circumstances. But would "Nobby Bob" be equally safe? Could he get away from the country in time? and would he do so if he could, while so much treasure was waiting only for his eager hand to clutch it?

And, supposing him caught and unable to clear himself, would he then have honour enough to hold his tongue about his comrade, or would he peach in the hope of some selfish advantage? Gent Rube grew hot in the face as he speculated on these matters, and then wondered what ailed him—to be for the first time in his career so

cowardly and apprehensive. A bad beginning, he thought, for his new life ?

No doubt what he ought to do was clear. He should get away to some place as far from this as this was from London, and which should be equally remote from busy life or the haunts of his old companions. Yes, that was what he had got to do before it was too late; before a hue and cry might be raised that would effectually bar all exit.

And, why then does he lie there, looking wistfully in the direction of that little village, almost a town, some mile or so distant, in the bottom of the valley?—there, where he sees a grey stone bridge spanning the wild stream; a grey stone church, with pointed spire, standing out on an elevated moor beyond the houses; and where his eye keeps busily scanning the features of one homestead, with tall trees standing about it, and whence he can hear the cawing of rooks from some of the black spots hovering above ?

The village is Northope. There, probably in the elm-shaded house, one gable end of which looks dark, as if covered with ivy, live Mrs. Maxfield and her daughter; and to Gent Rube just now there seem but two possible questions of interest to humanity: shall he fly from this neighbourhood while he can, and so be secure for the

career he meditates, or shall he risk discovery and exposure—even to *her*—by descending from this rocky height, and going on to yonder village and claiming the hospitality that had been offered ?

He is a long time undecided ; and, worst of all, there is an uneasy, undefinable, but very depressing, sense of coming danger, paralysing his will, that irritates while it alarms him.

He almost thinks he will fly, but only after he has had one nearer view of the place where she lives. So he begins to descend the hillside. He gets nearer and nearer. He can see now right down the slope of the road between the chief houses. He can see a window in that grey stone ivy-covered house, which has a box outside with snowdrops and crocuses in bloom. But his mental views get no clearer, but rather more and more perplexed. At last he says suddenly,

“No matter ; I will risk it, and see her once again.”

And then he walked boldly on right into the village, determined to ask the very first person he saw to show him the way to Mrs. Maxfield's.

## CHAPTER X.

### GENT RUBE IN HIS FIRST HONEST HOME.

PASSING from the high and heathy ground downwards into the quiet village street, with its solid-looking houses of grey stone, Gent Rube met a woman who replied to his inquiry as to the whereabouts of Mrs. Maxfield's house by pointing to the one he had already, while afar off, mentally selected as her abode. It lay a little back from the street, and seemed to occupy a good deal of ground. A gate opened into a narrow walk, formed with leafless but picturesquely-branching fruit-trees, having here and there between them large evergreen plants of the double furze just beginning to show blossom. This walk led straight up to the end of the house, which was covered with ivy and had only one window, which was glowing with the double splendour of the afternoon sun, and of the glow from the box of crocuses and snow-drops. Below the window was a square, solid, old-fashioned porch of stone, with deep stone seats.



To the right a thick shrubbery came up close to the house, and shut off, in that direction, the sight of any other objects. On the left appeared a great farmyard, with a long black barn, roofed with thatch, stretching right across the space; the black surface here and there mended with white boards that it had not been thought necessary to paint. Cows were standing knee-deep in straw, and looking with their usual placidity towards Gent Rube as he stopped in the walk to gaze about him. Pigs were also burrowing in the dunghill in the corner, and starting off every now and then with a grunt or squeal of discontent as some intruder—perhaps a dog—disturbed them. Across the farmyard there was a glimpse of an adjoining paddock, with several fine stacks of hay, and in which Gent Rube saw the grey mare which had drawn the vehicle of his new friends.

He had plenty of time to note all these signs of homely prosperity, for he felt unwonted trepidation come over him as he thought of himself and his true position, and of the meeting that he had come to seek. But he was startled from his hesitating reverie by a sound so unusual—so like the clang of some trumpet that had been changed into a live bird or animal that he looked round in sudden astonishment. He saw then on the porch-roof a pea-

cock, displaying for his satisfaction all its gorgeous magnificence of tail ; and then again it set up its trumpet scream as if desirous to warn the inmates of the house of the approach of a dangerous visitor. Gent Rube laughed as this thought crossed his mind ; but in a moment more he was standing in front of the porch, with his hat off, and something very like a blush on his cheek, for there, within the porch, at the threshold of the open door stood Bella Maxfield, her face flushed with pleasure, and her hands white with flour, which she held up laughingly, as if to say, "I can't shake hands with you, but come in."

And Gent Rube went in after her, and crossed a long and rather dark passage, then stopped when she stopped, went up some steps, passed through a door, and then descended by more steps into a room that seemed almost magical in its sudden beauty both within and without. A very wide window, or combination of windows, extended from the floor almost to the ceiling, which had great oaken beams across ; and through the window Gent Rube saw a sloping lawn, a brawling but joyous stream, and a fine wild piece of heath or common, with slender pines, on the other side, gently nodding to the breeze, while the sun was sending rich golden gleams of light through them across the shadows on the ground.

A bird—a canary—was in a gilded cage which stood on a little table in the centre of the window, while over it drooped from a pendant basket the long, thick, cord-like stems of a kind of cactus, covered with sharp spines.

Gent Rube's training had accustomed him to take in more from one glance at a place than most people can get from a dozen, so that when Bella left him to fetch her mother, though it was but a single minute, he had surveyed every nook and corner of the place, studied all its characteristics, and put by the result in his brain for future reflection and use. There was a kind of museum in a cabinet in one corner with stuffed birds and animals, every one of them collected in the district, and most of them testifying to the vigour, skill, and tastes of the deceased Mr. Maxfield, whose gun was slung across the wall over the mantelpiece. There was a piano opposite to the cabinet, and Gent Rube asked himself, a little nervously, did he really know enough of the instrument to support properly the character he had assumed. The walls of this old-fashioned room were panelled with oak, and upon them Gent Rube noticed three or four pictures, water colour, in gilt frames, that almost looked as if they were recent enough to be the handiwork of the young lady. Of their quality he was no judge,

though he was inclined already to think them marvels of artistic skill. But what chiefly puzzled him was reading the titles of the books (most of them handsomely bound) in the glass bookcase. Shakspeare's plays and a few other volumes of that kind he understood, he thought, perfectly well; but all the rest—cyclopædias, and popular religious books, and books of poetry by authors whose names were on the back—were each an enigma to him that he fancied he ought somehow to be able to solve, if only for appearance' sake. Among his pals of the thieves' quarter he had won the appellation—half contemptuous, half respectful—of the “bookman,” on account of his large acquaintance with the musical and dramatic literature of the day. But now he felt only his ignorance, now that he had come into a new world, where the humours of “Box and Cox” would be unknown, and flash songs clearly inadmissible.

“So you have come to see us,” said Mrs. Maxfield the moment she entered the room. “You are welcome. Pray sit down. Give me your hat. There, take the arm-chair by the fire, and amuse yourself with looking about at the birds or the books while Bella and I get tea ready. Our servant has gone out for an hour or two, so we must wait upon ourselves.” Thus saying, she was

going away, when she stopped just inside the door and added, "I quite forget your name, if you told it to us."

"My name is Reuben Polwarth," said the personage who has been hitherto known as Gent Rube; and, as he ought to know the truth best, we will for the future call him so. He uttered these words slowly, as if they had been carefully weighed beforehand, and yet as if he now felt a kind of hesitation about letting them from his lips. Was it, after all, that he was not truthful, and that he was falsifying in making the present statement? or had he quite other reasons for his reluctance in thus assuming a rightful appellation, as the fitting accompaniment of a worthier career than had distinguished the name of Gent Rube? Perhaps he may enable us to answer this question at a future time better than now.

It was not long before Reuben found himself sitting between the two ladies at the tea table, and striving hard to break the icy barrier that he felt to exist between his desire to make himself agreeable and the fear that he should only commit himself, and, possibly, shock them outright by giving way to his naturally joyous spirits and abundant flow of talk. What had they in common? he asked himself. Their lives so innocent, his so guilty in the world's notion of things: they



so simple and inexperienced, he so old in worldly lore, and in a sense so worn out with the premature indulgences of his evil life. So, for a long time he did not talk, except in a "yes" or "no," or an "indeed;" but that did not matter, for Mrs. Maxfield talked enough for all three; and Bella seemed to perceive nothing of the silence of his lips in her almost painful consciousness of the activity of his soft bright eyes, which continually surprised her by their light and glow; and which, whenever they happened to meet hers, sent the blood rushing to her cheek so violently that she grew angry with herself, and managed to turn away, that he might not notice this foolish habit, which she found it impossible to cure.

But now the tuning of the piano began to be talked about, and that led to a comparison of musical likings and dislikings, and though there were not many things known in common to both, still they got on very well indeed. Reuben rapidly became enthusiastic on this his favourite theme, and told them of the operas he had witnessed; described in rapid and vivid language the story of each: dwelt on their exquisite melodies; and so warmed that at last, in answer to a question from Bella if he knew a certain air he had been praising, he began to sing in a low,

mellow, and extremely pleasing voice a song from "Norma" with such taste and expression that Bella sat there gazing upon him with eager eyes and rapt face, her whole soul in a tumult of wonder and admiration at the strange chance that had made this young man render them so great a service and then come to their very house as a guest.

Reuben, too, sang so low and unaffectedly, and with such an instinctive avoidance of display, that it seemed even to the cautious Mrs. Maxfield as nothing more than a pleasant way of answering her daughter's question.

Air followed air; one opera succeeded another; and still mother and daughter sat there while the twilight drew on, and then while the stars over the pine trees appeared, and then till the moon rose in glory; and it was not until a long and profound silence had fallen upon them as they sat there in the darkness watching the gleaming play of the firelight upon the polished oaken walls that they noticed the striking of the clock, and became conscious of the lapse of time.

"Ten o'clock, Bella! Dear me! Well, certainly, Mr. Polwarth, you have made us pass the evening very pleasantly. Dear me, we have been sitting all this time without candles! We are early people, Mr. Polwarth; we go to bed at ten.



and rise at six at this period of the year, and at five in the summer. To-morrow is Sunday. You will go with us to church?"

Reuben looked alarmed, then checked himself, glanced aside at Bella—who was lighting a bed-candle—and muttered something about he should be very happy; then shook hands with the young lady, who wished him good-night; and was led off by the mother to his bedroom.

This was another quaint, old-fashioned room, also with steps down into it, and portraits of beauties and statesmen of the last century mounted without frames on the plaster walls. There was a gigantic wardrobe on one side, and a window on the other looking out into the farmyard, most of which lay buried in deep shadow, with a strip of white light along the front.

Mrs. Maxfield set down the little candlestick on the dressing-table, and said,

“Excuse my asking you one question——”

“What on earth can it be?” thought Reuben; but he only said, “Oh, to be sure.”

“You don’t read in bed at night, I hope?”

“Well, I have done it, I must confess,” said Reuben, laughing; “but I promise you I won’t here.”

“Thank you. Fire makes me very nervous. We once had a narrow escape. Good-night. Oh!

I wanted to ask you—did you hear anything about the man who robbed us that night?”

“No,” said Reuben.

“I wouldn’t mind if I could get back my husband’s miniature. I can get another of my daughter, but his is gone beyond remedy if I don’t recover the one in the locket. I suppose I must give up all hope of it.”

“Yes, yes; I quite think so.”

“What wretches there are in the world! Well, good-night. I hope you will sleep comfortably. We breakfast at eight. Good-night.”

“Good-night.”

As soon as she was gone, Reuben stepped lightly to the door, turned the key, tried the door, which was quite fast, then sat down upon a chair in the centre of the room, and appeared suddenly to lose all his buoyancy of spirit, and collapse in body and mind, as if he had just come out of some terrible and exhausting expedition. He moved his lips as if his tongue were dry; he felt his palms and bent his fingers about, as if to get rid of their clammy perspiration; then he glanced round and round the room in a furtive manner as if desiring to make sure that no one was peering in upon him, and yet to conceal his own movements from the watching eyes, if any such there were.

After a while he rose and began to walk about. Then he opened the door of the wardrobe, and closed it again nervously, as he saw it was full of clothes and articles of value. He went to the window and saw Bella crossing the corner of the farmyard, as if she had been to attend some of the animals there, or perhaps simply to see if all was properly closed. Her dark form moved across the white streak of moonlight that lay beyond the projecting shadow of the barn—then disappeared.

Again he sat down on the chair. He took from a secret pocket in his grey jacket the locket and the purse that Nobby Bob had given to him, and he gazed at them long and earnestly. At last his thoughts shaped themselves into a kind of inner speech, which may be thus put into words:—

“Ay, I have only to show her this, and there’d be a pretty hue and cry after the mock gentleman and real thief. Thief! Thief! Thief! Yes, I begin to understand at last something of the true meaning of the word. Not much as yet, I dare say, compared with what I shall have to learn.

“Well, then, why do I submit? Why allow myself to get enthralled by these idiotic dreams of a return to innocence, purity, honesty; of

making myself a fit husband, some day or other, for such a woman as this?

“How beautiful she is! There ought to be a different name for such as she is, and for the ‘women’ I have hitherto known. Can they both belong to the same common nature?”

“‘What wretches there are in the world.’ I could laugh to think how I might have astonished the pious old lady by a few words on that text. Perhaps it would have been the wisest thing to do. Perhaps, even now, the best plan would be to show her these things, give her one look and laugh of defiance, and fly back to the old scenes, the old dangers, the old excitements; out of which, at all events, I did get a fierce kind of enjoyment. Yes, I think I’ll go back, and begin again by knuckling down handsomely to Nobby Bob. The vagabond!

“Well, no, Nobby: not yet, I think, either.

“Come, then, how are things to be? I must play one part or the other, I’m quite sure of that. If I am to be a rogue for the rest of my life I’ll be a rogue at the top of the ladder, not a rogue at the bottom. And if I’m to turn honest I’ll do that too thoroughly.

“Yes, that’s easily said, not so easily done. Now, about this purse and locket, and these portraits. It’s very clear I mustn’t keep them; ’twill

be too dangerous. Let me see. What if I destroy the purse and pack up the locket and send it by the post, addressed in a false hand, from the nearest town? Yes; and I'll do it at once, so that if an unlucky accident occurs it shall be the packet that is found; and I can but invent a lie as to my getting it. I'll say—provided only it's after I have had a chance of seeing anybody out of this house, so that I mayn't contradict my own statement to her to-night—I'll say somebody put it into my hands in a mysterious manner and disappeared—knowing, of course, I was staying at the house here.”

Reuben now began to do as he had said he would, but seemed to find it hard to cease looking at the miniature of Bella Maxfield, which was exquisitely true to the rosy freshness of her face and expression. More than once he put it by, then again began to look at it, and at last he said,

“It's a risky business, I know, but I'll keep this. It's the father's portrait they think so much about. And if I keep the miniature why shouldn't I keep this pretty netted purse, which I'll be bound she made for herself?”

The miniature of Bella was therefore taken out, and wrapped up with the green silk purse in a little tissue paper, and put away in a secret

pocket in the lining of Reuben's vest, and he smiled—not altogether contemptuously—as he thought how near his heart he had happened to place them.

Then the locket with the other miniature was done up in paper, and then he was puzzled how to get pen and ink for the address. At last he bethought him a pencil would be better, as seeming more suited to the peculiar difficulties of Mrs. Maxfield's anonymous correspondent. So he wrote in a disguised hand her name with a pencil which he always carried about with him, and then replaced it in the secret pocket till he might be ready to dispose of it through the post.

And then again his thoughts reverted to that idea which had previously so disturbed him, though he had not yet directly acknowledged it. Now, however, the truth came out:—

“I never was a coward till now. But I feel as though I could turn suddenly white in the face, and begin to tremble in the knees if I were unexpectedly to face my own shadow. What does it all mean? This isn't the state of things I calculated upon.

“What have I to be frightened about here, so far from London, and in a place which required all the genius of a Nobby Bob to find out as a fresh one for our operations? And, though he



was right enough in his choice, he will know, and the coves about him will all know, that he has spoiled the ground for many a year to come. No danger, therefore, of my being discovered, if only Nobby Bob were once safely away. But will he get away undiscovered with the swag? He won't go without it. He'll stick to the neighbourhood, spite of a thousand dangers, till he's caught or is successful.

“Yes, that's my danger. I wish I could see how to get rid of it. What's that?” he exclaimed suddenly, a moment later, as a large map on the wall caught his eye. He almost leapt across the room to see if it was what he had fancied. “By Jove! this is luck! Map of the district all about here. There's the wood; there's the Squire's. Ay, and I can now follow the very direction we took as we ran away. All the main roads through the wood quite clear! And there, ay, there's the very one he ought to take to get away in a different direction from the one we came by. It leads to a town, and from the town he easily gets to the rail. I'll trace it, and I'll steal off as soon as they're all asleep, go to the tree, put in this very useful piece of information for the selfish vagabond, so that he may find it when he goes for the swag, and get back before anybody's stirring in the morning.



“Eleven miles there, eleven back—twenty-two. Say five hours, and no allowance for stoppages. Start at half-past eleven; get back at half-past four. That’s it. What’s the time now?” Reuben looked at his watch, an uncommonly handsome one of gold. “Eleven! Half an hour to spare for the tracing and for the look-out to see all still before the start. If discovered? Oh! I’ll say I couldn’t sleep—beauty of night, beauty of neighbourhood, or any other lie that comes readiest to hand. Now then, to work.”

Putting a piece of paper (the blank half of a sheet of notepaper) upon a book, he stood before the map and sketched with rude but vigorous skill the chief roads running through the wood, noted all objects that might serve as landmarks, showed to what places in the distance each road led, put a circle round the name of the town to which he thought Nobby ought to go; and then, having carefully verified every particular item, he sat down, deepened all the lines, and then folded the paper very carefully and put it into one of his waistcoat pockets.

He then unlocked his door, listened awhile in intense silence, heard the servant, who had come home late, moving about overhead; heard some one praying rather loudly near him, doubtless Mrs. Maxfield at her evening devotions; could

not hear anything about the only other inmate of the house, Bella Maxfield; and then he slid down the stairs, making no more noise than a ghost might have done. Feeling carefully with his hands along every wall, touching as he passed every door, making clear to himself at every step whereabouts he was, he reached the sitting-room, which he had previously noticed was without shutters. The blind was still up, and the moonlight was so bright as to alarm him. He undid the fastening of the window, which opened like a door, got out, then drew the glass door to again and fastened it by thrusting in a little bit of stick between it and the framework at the side. He was then free. For, keeping close to the house and turning round to the right, he was in the shrubbery, and from that he had only to climb over a wall to stand on the heath.

Cautiously keeping within the shade of the wall, he managed to get quite away from the house, and then he found cover from the bushes. And then, seeing the course clear, he bounded off with a speed and elasticity of limb that promised to shorten very materially his estimate of the time required to accomplish so many miles.

## CHAPTER XI.

NOBBY BOB IS HIMSELF SURPRISED, WHEN HE HAD  
ONLY MEANT TO SURPRISE OTHERS.

SURELY there must have been greater sympathy, after all, between Nobby Bob and the pupil he had known as "Rube" (which the thieves had first lengthened into "Gentleman Rube," and then again shortened into Gent Rube), for how else could it have happened that both of them should have taken it into their heads to visit the wood the same night, and so long before the time when any visit was to have been made? But certainly the fact is, that about half-past one on the morning of Sunday—that is, an hour and a-half after the midnight of Saturday—both the men appeared at the same time in the wood, one on the high road, with a truck very like a London costermonger's apple truck, which he pushed before him; the other gliding rapidly through the trees. For a time they were quite unconscious of each other's pre-

sence in the same neighbourhood. Let us follow Reuben's steps first.

Although puzzled for a while and constrained to trace and retrace the ground for some half-hour before he can find the tree, he does find it, and he gets into the hollow trunk, feels the leaves above him just as he had left them, but he does not find the green baize bags.

"Gone! gone! The infernal scoundrel! He didn't believe me! Thought, I suppose, I should be here first and leave him in the lurch. Well, I might have spared myself this long run if I'd only had a bit more sense—a bit more knowledge of my worthy, old master. He'll be hung yet, that's a comfort. But what's this he has left behind?"

Reuben drew forth the stick with its wrappings, and undid them one by one till he came to the scrap of paper. He could not read the writing on it till he had lighted a bit of wax taper that gentlemen of his late profession commonly carried about with them. Then he made out in Nobby Bob's great, sprawling characters the following words:—

"Get up a little earlier, young un, next time when you want to steal a march on

"NOBBY BOB."

Reuben could not help laughing as he burnt the scrap of paper, extinguished his light, and set out on his journey home.

Home! How the thought tickled his fancy, even while it troubled his judgment! However, he was not going to dwell on that now. He would get to his home, or whatever else he might call it, with all possible speed, so as to guard against any accidental discovery of his absence.

But, as he is running lightly along at the easy pace that he finds he can longest keep up without exhaustion, he hears some inexplicable sound. He stops and listens, but cannot understand. He stoops and puts his ear to the ground; then he rises and goes off cautiously in a direction slightly different from that he had been pursuing.

He is evidently not running from the sound, but towards it, for he gets more and more careful of his movements as he progresses. At last he sees, through the dim light let into the wood from the moon, the object he seeks. A man with a truck covered with canvas has just stopped on the high road, in front of a ruinous cottage which stands on the far bank. He pushes the truck into the shade of the bank, takes off the canvas cover, and reveals a medley of things which puzzle Reuben to make out. And the man puzzles him still more; but for the dress, which is

quite strange to him, he could have sworn it was Nobby Bob. Suddenly the man makes a gesture, while moving about his truck, that causes Reuben to exclaim,

“Nobby himself! Carrying off the swag, I suppose!”

Yes, it is Nobby; who presently, leaving his truck uncovered, goes off with the canvas in his hand on the side of the road where his late companion is hid, passes within a few feet of him, so that Reuben, from the depth of a dense bush, can look right into his very face, and makes for a blasted tree that the latter sees not far off. He begins to understand now what Nobby had done—removed the plunder from the tree the very night of the robbery to some other hiding-place, to which he was now going.

Reuben drops lightly into the road in order to look at the contents of the truck. He finds, to his immense amusement, a collection of children’s toys, children’s sweetmeats in packets, and children’s gay balloons of all colours, which seem to have been Nobby’s special favourites if one might judge by their number.

“No doubt because they were so light to carry—the idle vagabond! I suppose he has bought all these affairs at some market town in order to evade suspicion while carrying off the swag. If



so, where does he mean to put it?" Reuben stooped and saw a square well below projecting down from the centre of the truck. "Oh, of course! Very clever, Master Nobby! Come, my old master has something in him after all. But I must see the play out."

Like a cat, Reuben sprang up the high bank and set out after his late companion; very cautiously, however. He sheltered himself every instant behind some tree or bush, till he saw Nobby Bob stop at the blasted oak, throw down his piece of canvas, and begin to dig. "There then is the treasure!" thought Reuben, greatly amused by the whole business in spite of his irritation at the idea of the bad faith imputed by Nobby against himself in the precautions taken.

But what's the matter with Nobby? He stops the digging process, looks up for once towards the heaven he ordinarily cares so little for as if in a mute appeal wrung from his very soul against some atrocious wrong; then scratches his head with his fingers violently and viciously; then mutters a deep and terrible oath, the very reverberations of which seem to linger in the air, and come towards Reuben as though he had some particular share in the awful event.

"What is it?" asks Reuben of himself, more and more interested. He must get nearer. So



he runs round till he gets to the other side of the oak; he climbs up; he lies at length along a thick, horizontal branch; creeps on—on—on, till he is almost above Nobby's head, and only a few feet distant.

“My eyes and limbs! The swag's gone! Is it the young 'un? Did he see me that night? Or is it that blessed shoemaker who caught me digging truffles, and that I giv a shilling to, to send him away in a hangelic temper, and with a hangel's faith in what I said? What's that?” Nobby stooped to the empty pit, put in his hand, took up something, held it to the light, and he would have again spoken but he could not. His heart was too full. He knew all now, *it was a shilling—his own!*

The honest debtor had returned to pay his debt, and had either taken away the swag as a kind of reward for his honesty, or else had gone to seek out the true owner. Anyhow the swag was gone, and here was Nobby Bob on his knees, gazing, in mute fury and inexpressible desire of vengeance, on the shilling.

## CHAPTER XII.

MRS. MAXFIELD MAKES AN ALARMING DISCOVERY.

UNLUCKILY for our hero there was one inmate of Mrs. Maxfield's house who took it into her head to do exactly what he had only proposed to say he had done if his absence were discovered. Bella was too excited to sleep. This stranger had opened new worlds to her. In vain she tried to force herself to lie quiet in bed, and make believe that she was going to sleep. Fragments of melodies sung by him stole into her ears; visions of the theatres he had described seemed to expand like so many earthly Paradises. The characters and incidents of the operatic stories he had narrated seized her and held her fast, one after another, till she felt it was useless to struggle against this mighty influx of emotion, and thought, and imagination; so she leaped up, determined to go down stairs, and perhaps out on to the lawn if she saw all quiet.

But all visions vanished in a moment when she

found the window unfastened and giving way to a slight push. She ran back upstairs to her mother, waked her, and told her in alarm of the discovery she had made.

Her only reply was to ask,—“Where is the young man, Mr. Polwarth?”

“Why, in his bed and asleep, of course, mother. What makes you ask so strange a question?”

“Well, dear, I’ve been thinking we’ve been a little incautious about this stranger. There now, Bella, don’t fly at me! I don’t say anything against him. I like him. But he is a stranger. So I shall go up to his room, and, if he is there, we will tell him about the window, and say how alarmed we are at the circumstance.”

“Yes—yes, that will be best. He can help if there be any danger.”

It may be conceived how blankly mother and daughter looked in each other’s faces when there was no reply to their repeated knockings; and when, on going into the room, they found it vacant, and the bed evidently in the same state as it had been left the previous evening.

“Oh, Bella, we shall be murdered!”

“Mother!”

“What’s the time?”

“A little after two.”

“Would you mind, dear, fetching Mattie to spend the rest of the night with us?”

“No, mother, if only you won’t be so ungrateful as to forget the service Mr. Polwarth did us.”

“No, no; nobody need know why I send for Mattie. Say I am not very well. The neighbours are quite aware how often he has slept here before when we felt uneasy. His wife frequently wonders why I don’t have him here always, seeing the place is so lonesome with only the boy.”

“Then you won’t let him suspect anything against our guest, will you? Think how inhospitable we should be if”——

“No, no; run along. I’ll keep all fast till you come back.”

A few minutes later Bella returned with Mattie, a sort of confidential farm servant, who went to his accustomed place for taking an occasional night’s sleep, and soon forgot he had been disturbed. Mrs. Maxfield also went to bed, and Bella seemed as if she did the same, but continued, hour after hour, to walk about restless and alarmed, but steadily keeping to the faith that the stranger could not possibly be capable of harming them or anybody else without sufficient provocation.

The village church bell was sounding slowly

one—two—three—four—while Reuben was getting over the wall into the shrubbery, and beginning to fancy from the quiet that pervaded the house that his absence was undiscovered. But the first touch of the glass door from the lawn undeceived him. Not only was it fast but the blind was down. His blood ran cold. He was half inclined to turn and fly for ever from this place of promised shelter, but which now threatened to be a place of unendurable punishment.

Gradually he satisfied himself that they could not disprove his statement if he were to say he had been sleepless, and won by the beauty of the night and the strangeness of his situation to go out upon the heath, and try to walk himself into fatigue and fitness for rest.

Should he, then, boldly knock? He thought that would be the best, but he had not the courage to do even so small a thing. So he resolved to walk about on the lawn and along the banks of the stream till they saw him, and they themselves got the idea that he was merely giving way to some poetical eccentricity.

It was an ingenious thought. When he had made some half dozen turns up and down the bank of the water, Bella saw him and ran to inform her mother. Both then took another good

and long look at him, as he seemed to be wrapped in contemplation, while lazily picking up stones and throwing them into the water to make great circles.

Bella could not help laughing at last at the absurdity of his conduct, wandering about in that fashion at four o'clock in the morning; but she secretly guessed there might be reasons, judging from her own experience of the night, why Mr. Reuben Polwarth might indulge in such a freak, and yet not be altogether a case for an asylum. Mrs. Maxfield, too, seemed to feel all her doubts die out as she said,

“ Well, Bella, go off to bed, and I will let him in. Oh, nonsense! don't you mind me. Of course I shall put on my large shawl, and I shan't take a candle. There, get along! ”

Bella did go, but managed to wait about to hear her mother undo the glass door in the window and cough loudly to attract his attention; then a moment after she heard his quick step on the gravel, and his frank, cheerful laugh and explanation—

“ Really, I am most heartily ashamed of myself to give you all this trouble; but I couldn't sleep, so I thought I would walk, and I was in hope not to have disturbed you.”

“ Well, well, I don't mind for once such un-



seasonable hours and ways. Can you find your way up?"

"Oh, yes! Good night! But pray excuse me."

"Oh, to be sure! to be sure! Good night! for the second time, or rather good morning! for it'll be daybreak soon."



## CHAPTER XIII.

### SUNDAY AT NORTHOPE.

REUBEN slept well after his exertions of the night, and on waking he was greeted by the distant and pleasing sound of the church bell, calling the people of Northope to Divine service. He leapt out of bed, looked at his watch, saw it was nearly eleven o'clock, and began hurriedly to dress, almost wishing the ladies would go without him, and yet wishing at the same time to study his new acquaintances under every possible aspect, while at the same time endeavouring to learn how honest and reputable people generally behaved under circumstances and in places so unfamiliar to him.

As he had not yet discovered the necessity to shave—his lip, on account of his youth, exhibiting only a soft yet manly down—he was not long in dressing. Descending to the parlour or sitting-room, with its wide and high windows, and beautiful landscape beyond, he found there the

two ladies just starting for church. Bella smiled her greeting; then blushed as if with the fear it had been too warm, while her mother said—

“We thought we would not disturb you, after such a poor night’s rest.”

“I am ready now.”

“But you have had no breakfast.”

“Oh,” said Reuben, gaily, “that matters very little; I’ve been accustomed at times to eat only one meal a day.”

“Well but, mother, there’s a cup of coffee left in the coffee-pot quite hot.”

“Thank you, that will do capitally with a good thick slice of bread and butter. I’ll swallow it in two minutes.”

“Oh, you needn’t scald or choke yourself. The carriage will take us to church in five minutes. We don’t generally drive there, but I feel unwell this morning,” said Mrs. Maxfield.

As soon as Reuben had swallowed his hasty breakfast, he went out to the little by-road in front of the farmyard, where the vehicle was, and where the ladies were already seated, waiting for him. Bella wore the same pretty-coloured muslin he had first seen her in, though the straw hat was exchanged for a bonnet matching the dress in colour, and with a graceful feather winding about it in some way that Reuben didn’t under-

stand, but thought inexpressibly beautiful. He sat in front with the lad, who was somewhat recovered from Nobby Bob's violence; while the ladies occupied the principal seat behind.

"Can this be Gent Rube," he inly said to himself, "the burglar of scarce a week ago, now going with innocent and confiding ladies to church in the very neighbourhood that has been clamorous with excitement about his and his late companion's doings? Where is that hard-headed gentleman now? Has he gone back to London discomfited, to tell the story of his success in so great a robbery, and of his subsequent loss of all the fruits of his achievement, or what?"

Reuben could not help these uneasy speculations coming into his mind between the intervals of dreamy pleasure he felt in looking back upon Bella's face, in exchanging every now and then a word with her, and in listening to the music of her tones, always so brief, as though she dared not trust herself to much speech. But he was again to be rudely wakened even now, when he so little expected it. As they passed through the village they saw some labourers collected round the wall of the village pound, busily pondering the contents of a bill pasted there. Mrs. Maxfield had a certain share of curiosity in her character, and so she asked Reuben to stop, that

they might learn what the bill was about. That lady, having a chronic fear of murder, had jumped at once to her usual conclusion that some awful tragedy was here first announced.

“Would you, Mr. Polwarth, see what it is, and tell us?”

“Certainly; with pleasure,” said Reuben, jumping down quite unsuspecting of the unpleasant surprise that awaited him. What he felt as he read the NOTICE that had been concocted between the giant landlord and Squire Gorman’s steward we need not describe. Not, of course, on account of the notice itself, but that he should have to read it in *their* presence, speak of it to *them*, describe as the bill described his own fellow-burglar for *their* satisfaction and edification.

Again he was alarmed to see how all his old courage and presence of mind seemed to have oozed away during these last few days. A week ago he would have felt a kind of malicious pleasure in reading this bill to a crowd of wondering rustics in the very neighbourhood of his and Nobby’s achievements. Not so now. This maiden, sitting there in the phaeton, looking with such artless wonder towards the bill, and with such almost girlish pleasure upon him whenever he spoke, seemed to have taken all the fortitude,

all the manliness out of him, instead of giving increased strength to such qualities, as Reuben knew well ought to be the case. He did not need so much to ask himself why this was so, as why it ought to be so. He knew that his past life was hourly growing more hateful to him, but he could not understand why he could not, by an exertion of his will, change it, forget it, and then only think of the promise of the future.

As he went back to the vehicle he was quite aware that his voice would tremble, that his face was already pale. However, he made the best of it, and managed to talk without looking at them any more than was absolutely necessary:

“It’s a bill offering a reward for the very man who robbed you. It seems he has broken into some Squire’s house.”

“Squire Gorman’s?” asked Mrs. Maxfield, with fixed eyes and parted lips that showed how the subject excited her.

“Yes, I think that was the name. He has carried off a great deal of plate and other valuable property.”

“Oh, Bella, what an escape we had!”

“Yes, mother, we had indeed;” and Reuben knew that she was mentally finishing the sentence by some kind of grateful thought about him.

“Do they think the wretch is still in this neighbourhood?”

“Yes; the bill does say something of the sort,” replied Reuben.

“Well, I do wish he may be caught. I shouldn’t like to hang him, but it would be a mercy to get such a character sent out of the country. Don’t you think so, Mr. Polwarth?”

“Eh? I beg your pardon—yes. Of course I think so.”

They were now at the church, and Reuben tried to forget, in the novelty of his situation, the new and all-engrossing alarm he felt at this public warning about Nobby Bob’s proceedings, person, and supposed haunts.

They went to a pew which was the property of the Maxfield family, and as old-fashioned as everything else belonging to them, where unmodified by recent feminine and youthful taste. It was very high and large, and almost excluded observation from any other part of the church, except from the reading-desk of the clergyman and the still higher pulpit.

It was a fine old church, built in a pure Gothic style, not much ornamented, but beautiful, with a kind of severe beauty, from the graceful forms of the slender pillars, the pointed arched windows, and the open woodwork of the oaken roof.



But the one object that from the first attracted Reuben's eyes was a painted window. He had never seen one before, except from the outside of metropolitan churches, and the dingy, dusty aspect of such windows so seen had never tempted him to go inside. This window in Northope Church seemed, therefore, a kind of revelation. He had a sensuous love of colour as well as of sound; and these gorgeous tints, those dazzling crimsons, and yellows, and cerulean blues—so contrasted and yet so blended—gave him an almost painful sense of something rich, wonderful, inexplicable. He tried to make out the subject, but of course could not, for he knew as little of the Bible as he knew of the habits of honest folk. But he saw there aged men and beautiful women all looking up towards heaven, and seeming to have shed upon them as they looked some kind of heavenly glory. What did it all mean? What had such men and women (if they had ever really lived) felt to make them look like that? He had fancied he had got to a tolerable knowledge of humanity as he had found it in the thieves' quarter, and in the persons and minds of the victims of the "war" in which he had been so promising a soldier; but he did not ever remember to have felt anything that could ally him even for a moment to those wondrous



beings. And yet, somehow, when he turned and looked on Bella's face, and saw the sunlight gleam upon it as she was singing with all her heart and voice (for the children in the gallery above rather waited for her to lead them), he did seem to see some kind of connection between her and those wonderful maidens with the small harps in their hands that he gazed on so frequently in the window.

Bella sat between him and her mother, and as a consequence Reuben's dreadful ignorance as to what to do with the Prayer-book Mrs. Maxfield had handed to him on entering the pew did not attract that lady's attention. Certainly she would have been shocked and offended, perhaps irremediably so; but Bella, who instinctively knew how much he was at a loss, while not seeming to think anything about it, found every place for him, and, indeed, almost appeared to enjoy his obvious helplessness and dependence upon her.

When the singing came, Reuben could no longer be silent. Perhaps it was simply his native love of music that moved him. Perhaps it was the first dawning of a new and spiritual life. But whatever it was, he waited only to catch the tune by the experience of the first verse, and then lifted up in clear brilliant notes a voice that rose to Bella's like a skylark to its

mate in the sky, and there so mingled with it that Bella, in her very delight and wonder, began to falter, while the tears rushed into her happy eyes. Reuben saw those tears, and was troubled; he knew not what they meant.

A passage in the Morning Lesson startled him. It was the pathetic and sublime promise to the wicked in Isaiah i. 18. The very blood seemed tingling through his ears as he followed word by word the earnest utterance of the minister repeating the promise of the Prophet—

“Though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Was this meant for him? Did the clergyman know anything about him? There surely could be no other man in that congregation to whom such awful and yet comforting words could apply? Was Bella looking at him just now? He dared not raise his eyes to see. At last came the sermon. Reuben's head drooped lower and lower as he listened. He wondered if the preacher was about to make any use of the words that had so appalled him.

But he soon ceased to attend when he found the sermon was so generally applicable as to concern no one in particular; and then his thoughts reverted to the solemn words of the

Lesson, which seemed to him at once the most winning, and yet the most fearful he had ever listened to. Were there many such sayings in this book which Mrs. Maxfield had reached to him at the time the text was given out? He almost wanted to go home and amuse himself—only amuse himself—for an hour or two in reading the book he had often laughed at, but never read—never till now.

Again at the close of the sermon they sang, but it was Reuben's voice now that faltered. He felt irritated by this new emotion, which so overmastered him, and then the music no longer pleased. There was a discord in his soul which made the whole fabric begin to seem hateful. A cry seemed to ring in his ears—"What dost thou here? This is no place for thee. Fly to thy kind, and thy fate. Pollute not God's own house."

"Well, he did not want to be there," his rebellious soul seemed ready to cry out.

His trials were not yet over. It had been settled that the carriage was not to come for them, as they were to walk home. Passing through the village, they came upon a little ale-house that was not a hundred yards from the pound which bore that alarming bill on its walls. It so happened that the ladies were in front,

picking their steps through a muddy piece of road, while Reuben, looking very pale and absent-minded, was following. As he came towards the public-house, his quick eye caught the peculiar movement of a blind at the window that was on a level with the passers-by in the road. He knew in a moment, while attaching no particular thought to the matter, that some one was holding the blind so as to be able to look out or obtain concealment at pleasure. Old habits of caution suggested to him to take no notice in passing, but to turn suddenly when he had just got past. He did so, and there was the face of Nobby Bob looking at him as he had never yet seen him look. It was but for an instant the eyes of the two men met, for the blind was instantly dropped, and Reuben went on his way.

Usually, Reuben could eat and enjoy a good dinner, and on the present occasion there were special reasons why he should do so. He had eaten little breakfast, and the dinner was very much to his taste—roast chicken, with a ham, home-cured, of unrivalled flavour and juiciness. This, with Brussels sprouts, and potatoes like balls of flour, surely was enough to make a wandering music-tuner bless his good fortune that placed him in front of such good things, with a lady on each side of him, and one of the two the

most beautiful girl that the whole county perhaps could produce.

Yet Reuben ate little, and was at the same time just as little inclined for talk. It is true, he made a feverish kind of spurt now and then, but it came to nothing; for, forgetting it was Sunday, he began once to speak of topics that made Mrs. Maxfield look grave, and reduced him instantly to silence.

After dinner Mrs. Maxfield retired to take her customary nap, and Bella went away with her. The weather was unusually warm; so Reuben, when they were gone, threw open the glass door, drew a little arm-chair near to it, and began to smoke a cigar, which he had been formally invited to take if he so pleased. He was glad to be alone. He wanted to think about this sudden appearance of Nobby Bob in the very place to which he (Reuben) had retreated for shelter, and for an introduction to a new and better mode of life.

Was it accidental, Nobby Bob's presence in the village? If so, what a cursedly unlucky chance it was that he should have happened to look out from his covert just when he (Reuben) was passing. But *was* it accidental? In trying to answer that question, Reuben could not forget the scene in the wood last night, and its probable



connection with Nobby's presence here. In the fury of his disappointment about the plunder, and which would only be the more maddening that he had lost it all by his own excessive precautions and want of reasonable faith in his pupil and late companion, would he not be apt to recur to the idea of striving to make Reuben go on upon the old basis, or of exposing and ruining him if he declined to resume the partnership?

Would it not be best for him to go boldly down to the public-house, get hold of Nobby Bob without any one knowing that they were not strangers, and learn from his own lips what he was after? No; to do that would be only subjecting himself and Nobby Bob to increased danger—to possible quarrels; and for what? to evade an evil that had, perhaps, no real existence. Nobby Bob might be just as desirous to remain unknown where he was as Reuben could possibly wish him to be. Of course, he must have seen the bill. He could not have reached the public-house without passing it.

He determined finally to do his best to ignore his old master's presence in the neighbourhood, and see if he did not presently move off. At tea-time the ladies consequently found him more cheerful. But this change was of short continuance. Happening to cross the room to fetch a



book that Mrs. Maxfield had just been recommending to him to look at, he saw a man moving about among the pines on the heath beyond the little river; a second glance told him it was Nobby Bob on the look-out—perhaps for him.

Once more Reuben's appetite was effectually spoiled.

After tea a walk was proposed, and Reuben, of course, agreed, but took care to express a wish to ascend the heath towards the hill, so as to keep them from going in Nobby Bob's present direction. But while they were all seated on a rock high up the slope, and Bella was timidly indicating the characteristic points of the beauty of the scenery, Reuben saw dimly a figure hovering about the house he had just quitted, and grew almost beside himself with suppressed passion and fear. Did Nobby Bob intend to rob these ladies once more? Had he heard of their supposed wealth? Did he know how unprotected they usually were? Reuben's teeth set hard, and his eye blazed with an almost savage light, as he thought of these things, and watched the movements of that distant figure, which he could only see at intervals, and which, in spite of all his attempts at self-persuasion, he felt sure was that of the hard-headed, merciless-handed burglar.

When they got home a new kind of experience

waited Reuben. The blinds were let down in the sitting-room, the lamp was lighted and placed ready on the round table, and near it was a big, handsomely-bound book, which Reuben knew must be a Bible. His thoughts instantly rushed to the idea—would they want him to read in it? He hoped not. The mere fancy seemed to bring out a cold perspiration all over him.

“Mr. Polwarth,” said the elder lady, “we don’t usually go to church on a Sunday evening, but, instead, we read a chapter in the Bible, and have prayers afterwards. You won’t object to join us?”

What could Reuben say? He simply bowed his head.

“Would you like to read the chapter?” Reuben coloured—hesitated, then turned to Bella, and said, without exactly refusing—

“Perhaps the young lady wouldn’t mind”——

Bella also blushed at this appeal, but took the book, and read the first chapter of the story of Ruth. When she had finished, Reuben said, to her surprise—

“Would you mind reading a little more?”

So she read another chapter. Then, seeing how rapt her listener was in the story, she said—

“Would you like me to finish it?”

“Very much.”

“There are but two chapters more.” She finished these, and then there was a silence for some minutes. At last the mother’s voice said—

“Let us pray.” And she and her daughter both knelt. Just for one moment Reuben seemed to rebel against this fresh entanglement. What had he to do with praying—yet? That might all come in good time—when he had grown up into respectability and honesty. But he knew that if he did not kneel there must be explanations, trouble, and probably a speedy departure from Northope. So he knelt, with a strange kind of protest in his soul, partly directed against the idea of submission, partly against the self-imputed charge of hypocrisy, which Reuben did not feel inclined to plead guilty to.

He knelt. And Mrs. Maxfield prayed. First for enlightenment as to all duties; then for grace to perform them; then for her daughter, and self, and neighbours; and then came some words which touched Reuben to the quick—they seemed to suggest something so absolutely new to him. These were her words:—

“And do thou, O Father, look down upon this stranger whom Thou hast brought into these unfamiliar places and ways. Quicken in him the

good seed Thou hast sown to-day in his heart. Repay to him, through Thy bounty, the debt we owe. Prosper all his righteous undertakings; but all in Thine own good time, and only as Thou wilt. Amen! Amen!"

Reuben heard the soft sigh near him that followed this prayer in his behalf, and felt for the moment as if he would have given worlds to be able to ask them yet to stay as they were, if only for a single minute longer, while he, borne up by their strength and goodness, might venture also to put up his appeal, not for himself—he felt that was yet far, far off—no, but for them. He could almost have prayed audibly for them if he had known how—or dared to try.

But the mood died as rapidly as it had sprung into life, and he rose seemingly cold and impassive; and but for the warm, lingering pressure of his hand as he wished them both good night—a pressure that was even more marked for Mrs. Maxfield than for her daughter—they might have fancied him almost offended by the allusion to himself. And, as Bella was herself startled, almost pained, by her mother's obvious reference to his previous inexperience in religious matters, or utter indifference to them, she concluded he might be even more unpleasantly affected. But

there was no mistaking that warm, lingering grasp.

Reuben went to bed, resolving many things, and feeling altogether more truly miserable than he had ever yet felt before in the whole course of his life. He was so engrossed in his own trouble that he forgot for a time the danger that had recently threatened through his late companion.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### PUPIL AND MASTER IN A NEW RELATION.

Hour after hour Reuben walked about his room trying to think, but getting only more and more confused under the incessant stream of new ideas, new dangers, new notions of his past, new despair as to his future. To change his life had seemed till quite recently but a very simple affair, a balance of probabilities and proprieties, in which, when he had made up his mind, he had only to go to work and speedily reach the goal. He began dimly to see now how exquisitely absurd, how profoundly ignorant such notions had been. He had evidently undertaken a dreary and almost hopeless task. Should he ever, for instance, meet with kinder people than he had here met with, yet how would they look upon him?—where would be their kindness if they only knew the truth? Would they keep him in their house?—and if they would could he bear to be in it? Must they not be for ever secretly speculating on the risks they ran; ever fancying



a double meaning in his words and actions; ever anticipating some kind of outburst or explosion which for that very reason would surely come in so overcharged an atmosphere?

Hark! Surely he heard a noise? No, it was only the creaking of a newly-planted young tree, as it was swayed about by the breeze and rubbed its trunk against the supporting stake. He had noticed it during the evening.

Well, he will go to bed, and try if sleep will bring back to him his old resolute and cheerful spirit, for he is sadly shaken one way and another; perhaps through the long midnight run of the previous night, and the very short period of subsequent rest.

Hark! Again the noise, which is certainly not now the creaking of the young apple-tree. It is more like the wrenching of a window-frame out of its place in the sitting-room below. Carefully avoiding to change the position of his light, or to touch the blind, or to let his shadow fall upon it, he steals to the window, and peers through the slight opening left at the side of the blind into the outer darkness. For a time he can see nothing but the stars faintly gleaming in the water. He hears, however, only too plainly the continuance of some operations going on at the window below.

“He’ll come out a little from the wall of the house to look up before long, if I am not mistaken,” thought Reuben to himself, as he waited, hesitating in thought whether he had time to wait safely, or whether he ought not instantly to give warning. But he had rightly guessed. The man, who was wearing crape over his face, did just glide out from the house a yard or two to look up, and was at once recognised by Reuben, who himself remained unseen.

The latter lost not a moment. He opened his door—ran towards Mrs. Maxfield’s door—then stopped as if changing his mind—went to Bella’s—tapped lightly, and as much like her mother would tap as he could. The door was opened, and Bella appeared half undressed, but with a large shawl thrown over her shoulders. She stared, and was almost ready to scream with the sudden fright, having believed it was her mother who had knocked.

“Dear Miss Maxfield,” said Reuben, in agitated tones, “don’t be frightened, but I fear there is a man trying to get into the house.”

“O mother! mother!”

“I thought I would warn you first, that you might warn her. We must be absolutely silent. There is no time to seek fresh help, nor is there

any need. If you will only be calm, and place trust in me"——

"Trust—Oh—with our lives!"

"Very well. Keep in this part of the house. Let no sign of movement be visible outside. Is the gun I saw loaded?"

"No, no."

"And you have no means of loading it?"

"Certainly."

"Quick, then; even before you wake your mother. Come to me, outside the parlour-door. Don't trust yourself within, or your mother, whatever may happen. He is there now, trying to force the window without noise."

They instantly separated; Bella going for the ammunition, of which her father had left an ample supply, properly guarded against deterioration; and Reuben, throwing off his shoes, stealing down the stairs to reach the scene of Nobby Bob's new undertaking.

He opened the door softly; the room was very dark; and, as the passage behind him was still darker, he was in no danger of being seen by one coming from the window, unless, indeed, the burglar was already in the room, and waiting, with murderous weapon in hand, to strike the first person who entered. But he was not in. He was still outside, and at work at the glass

door; and, as the blinds had been drawn up after prayers, that they might look out into the garden and upon the night, Reuben saw the man's form distinctly through the window, and understood Nobby Bob's difficulty. The glass door was just one of those slight obstacles that could have been removed by a mere rude jerk, if such directness of operation were practicable, which it was not, for every attempt, however slight, made a noise, which suggested only too plainly the danger of much greater noise—perhaps a crash of glass, if the difficulty were not tenderly handled. So Nobby Bob tried to prise it open little by little, in all sorts of places, but no matter how much it gave way in one place it seemed only to hold tighter in another, and spring back quite vivaciously when he let it go. Reuben could hear Nobby Bob grinding his teeth after two or three failures of this kind.

He now stepped back into the passage to receive the ammunition from Bella, and to whisper to her,

“Warn your mother now; but be sure to keep her quiet, and to keep away from here both of you. I will guard you with my life.”

Bella fled, too much agitated to speak, and Reuben again passed into the room to get the gun.

It was a bold thing to do—that going right across the room to the mantelpiece while Nobby Bob stood outside and possibly with his eyes at that very moment directed towards him, doing their best to penetrate the obscurity of the room, in order to guard against interruption. But Reuben walked as coolly across, and gazed as defiantly at the burglar the while, as if it did not matter one jot to him whether Nobby Bob knew or did not know of his movements. But Reuben was inly saying to himself,

“One minute! One minute!—that is all I want. If the prayers will do that for me I shall begin to have faith.”

He got his minute, and it was remarkable that Reuben expended every one of its sixty seconds with as much sang froid as if time were precisely the element in which he just then abounded. We mean that he took unusual precautions in loading; partly, perhaps, because he knew he had not had very much experience with such weapons; and still more because he had a distinct impression that his own life would probably be the cost of any mistake or inefficiency with regard to the business in hand. He finished the loading precisely at the very moment that Nobby Bob thrust open the glass door and stepped inside.

“ Shall I shoot him, and so have done with him? He will not then harm these women. Come, come, Gent Rube, don't gammon yourself. Shall I shoot him, because it would be uncommonly convenient to me?”

There was a pause—one of fearful significance to one of the two men. But Reuben did not fire; he spoke, instead, to his old companion, in a suppressed whisper.

“ Hush, Nobby Bob!”

“ Ha!”

“ Hush! You know me?”

“ The young un?”

“ Yes. What do you want here? Speak softly.”

There was a low, brutal laugh in answer, and it was the only answer.

“ Nobby Bob, you had better answer me.”

“ Well, then, t'other swag's gone; I been done brown, and lost it all. These are rich, comfortable ladies, I hear. No doubt you'd like to do it all on your own hook; but, honour bright, pals is pals, and I must have my share.”

“ You think then I came here to—to—rob these people?”

Again, a brutal, low laugh was the only reply Nobby Bob condescended to give.

“ You are mistaken both as to me and them.



They are not rich, and I'm not here to rob. I told you my mind and purpose in the wood."

"Well, it'll go hard with you, young un, if that be true, and I blows up the whole business."

"But why should you?"

"That depends on the valley received."

"I have no money except a few shillings and that which was in the purse you gave me. You shall have the contents of the purse if you like, if you will go quietly away, and swear to me never again to cross my path."

"Out of the road, will you? Now, harkye, young un, did I ever larn you that kind of game? What's one pound, fifteen shillings, and sixpence ha'penny? I counted it well before handing it over; you may be sure o' that. What's that to me? Why, I ha' spent a fortin' in coming down here, and I mean to have some of it back. Do what you like. Go snacks, and go off together; or you stay, and let me manage as I like."

"Nobby Bob, I don't want to hurt you; I don't, indeed!"

"In-deed! Young un, mind this! You were sharp lately with your pointed knife. No more tricks. Hear that?"

Reuben heard plainly enough the click of a revolver, and his heart, in spite of himself, began

to beat tumultuously, though he still felt master of his brain and will.

“Nobby Bob, you are a dead man if you move a step further!”

Nobby Bob's only reply was to rush forward, intending, perhaps, to grapple with Reuben with his strong left hand, while he reserved in his right the power to fire if he should see occasion or necessity; of course he did not want to rouse the house if he could help it.

But in that instant there was a flash in the dark room, an explosion that made the glass of the windows rattle violently; then another with like effects; and then prolonged screams from some other part of the house burst forth.

But though no art, no entreating could induce Mrs. Maxfield to go to the parlour, Bella found it impossible to keep away. When she reached the door of the room with a candle, she called out,—

“Mr. Polwarth! Mr. Polwarth! speak to me.”

“Come in,” shouted Reuben. She went in, and saw lying there, bathed in his own blood, which was pouring from his mouth in spite of his attempts to stay it with a handkerchief, the same ruffian that had stopped her and her mother on the hill and robbed them; while

Reuben, pale as death, was standing over him, looking down sadly, yet sternly, with the terrible weapon of death half dropped by one hand listlessly to the ground, where it rested, though still feebly held in the trembling fingers, while the other hand and arm hung as if broken or paralysed by his side.

“Dead? Is he dead? O God!” exclaimed Bella.

Reuben did not answer. He still watched the dying man, whose face changed every instant its livid hues, and whose lips were moving in a vain effort to speak. At last he managed, by gesture, to show he wanted Reuben to listen to him; who, instantly throwing down the gun, knelt by his side and put his ear to the white, coarse lips, now covered with bubbles of blood and foam, and said,—

“What is it? I will do anything I can for you if you will but speak.”

“The chick—the little baby.”

“A child of yours—a boy?”

The dying man nodded.

“How shall I find him?”

Nobby Bob tried to move his hand towards his vest, but could not.

“Direction in your pocket?”

Again there was a drop of the head, either

through mortal weakness or in token of assent. Then, as if in an expiring effort, Nobby Bob hoarsely murmured, "Billy Marks."

"Knows where your money is? No? has got it himself?"

The dying man seemed to assent, and Reuben said,—

"I'll see him. I swear to you I will, if he's to be found. Anything more?"

The burglar started as if again shot, rose on one knee, glared frightfully at Bella and Reuben, and then fell back stiff and heavy on the ground.

"Let me take you away. He is dead." Reuben could not but add within the depths of his own soul, "And I, O God, am free at last!"

## CHAPTER XV.

### MR. JESSOP ON TRUFFLE-HUNTING.

NOTHING is more remarkable in the phenomena of life than the way in which events, seemingly having no sort of connection with each other, are really but links in an unbroken chain of cause and effect. Thus Nobby Bob's tragical end would certainly not have happened in the way it did, if only that unfortunate gentleman had not found the "swag" disappear so strangely from its hiding-place at the foot of the blasted oak in the wood. It was that fact which preyed so deeply on Nobby Bob's mind, as to make him disregard his sworn promise to his young pupil and companion never to molest him again; and which made him equally oblivious of the personal danger he ran into by once more crossing his late partner's path. Those two bags full of plate and jewels, which had been obtained and carried off with so much skill, courage, and danger, were lost to him; and the knowledge half-maddened Nobby Bob's brain.

And how was it that Nobby Bob had incurred this disappointment? Had he not (as he had thought) most skilfully thrown the stranger—the tramping shoemaker—off the scent when the latter came upon him so suddenly that early morning while he was on his knees digging away at the hole? “Truffles!” Surely that was an explanation as sufficient as it was ingenious? What right, then, had the tramping shoemaker to suspect anything false in the statement? Had not Nobby Bob, with characteristic caution, kept the bags concealed all the while he was making the hole by placing them under the fern? These were the questions that the discontented Nobby Bob had asked himself; and, being unable to obtain a satisfactory reply, his thoughts and desires for vengeance all turned the more keenly towards Gent Rube, whom he looked on as the true author of his disappointments, and who he persisted in thinking was separating from his “pal” only to do better for himself alone.

Let us, then, clear up the fact that was so mysterious to Nobby Bob before we again revert to the tragical scene that closed our last chapter.

It was on the Saturday morning preceding the Sunday night of the conflict in Mrs. Maxfield’s house that Mr. Thomas Jessop, the big landlord of “The Traveller’s Joy,” when he took up his



usual place of bodily repose and mental activity for the day—the great armchair—found a man drinking a cup of coffee and eating an enormous slice of bread and butter, which the kind-hearted landlady had set before him on his first coming in and saying he was cold, and asking if she could let him have something to warm him up a bit, for he had been out all night; and therewith he told his story, the same that had been previously told to Nobby Bob.

Although there was nothing particular in the story, still the warm-hearted little woman repeated it to her husband—who was, it must be observed, a bit of a gossip—and he, too, found it sufficiently interesting, if only because it seemed to show he mustn't expect payment for the breakfast that was being furnished and devoured with so much gusto. But the man noticed the air of half-resignation to inevitable loss, and the condescending tone of the remark,—

“I dare say, Missus, he could drink another cup of coffee if you were to offer him one;” and he at once said, with an honest flush upon his face,—

“No mistakes, Mister. I can't pay much for what you give me; but I do pay.”

“Eh? Why I thought you said you hadn't had enough for your bed, and so was turned out?”

“Ay; but I had a bit of an adventure in the wood where I walked this morning, after my cold bed on the ground in that stony and windy cottage.”

“An adventure—lor!” exclaimed the little black-eyed wife, doing full justice by her tone to her expectation of something exciting to come.

“An adventure—eh?” observed the landlord, with more self-control, but looking towards the good-humoured face of the tramp with a certain cheering twinkle of the eye, as if to say, “You may go on.”

“Well, for me it was an adventure, because it put me into funds for paying for my breakfast.”

“Aha! Come, then, let’s hear all about it,” said Mr. Jessop, always glad to make the most of everything in the shape of adventure that came across his ordinarily uneventful life.

“Well, I was looking about for a pool of water that I had seen gleaming from the high ground in front of the ruined cottage; for I wanted to cool my head and wash my hands and face, and make myself a bit decent-like after my night’s debauch. Oh, don’t look at me, pray, missus; it’s too bad on me, I know. I won’t be such a fool again in a hurry, you may be sure of that. Well, I got down the bank, crossed the high

road and ascended the other bank, and went towards an old tree that seemed to have been struck with lightning some time or other."

"I know it well; we call it the blasted oak. Ah! it was a night when that oak was split in two and twisted about as you now see it, and its great branches shivered into bits small enough for tooth-picks," said the landlord.

"Suddenly, as I was treading on the soft fern, I was pulled up all in a minute by seeing a man on his knees digging a hole."

The landlord looked at his wife, and she looked at him, every bit of colour flying out of her cheeks at the bare apprehension of what that hole might be for.

"It was a queer thing to find a man doing almost before it was light, wasn't it? In such a place, too?"

"I should think it was," said the landlord.

"'Had he murdered somebody, and was he going to bury the body here?' thought I to myself. And then I said to myself, 'Now, don't be a fool. Does he look like a murderer? Wouldn't a murderer be looking about him every minute?'"

"I know I should if I were to go about such jobs," observed the giant landlord.

"Lor! Thomas. As if you could murder any-

body!" interposed the landlord's wife. "Why, he won't kill a fly if he can help it," added she, addressing the remark to the tramp.

" 'Wouldn't a murderer be all of a tremble?' I asked myself."

"Well, I wouldn't like to trust my limbs on such a business if they mustn't tremble. I wouldn't answer for 'em under any such conditions and regulations," responded the landlord.

"Go on!" whispered, almost breathlessly, the landlady.

"So I put my hand on his shoulder, and spoke to him," continued the tramp.

"Was he surprised?" eagerly asked the landlord.

"Well, I thought at first he was. He took just a sudden look at me, then turned to look at the hole again, and seemed making some queer movements; but then he turned quite round and looked me full in the face, and told me he was truffle-hunting."

"Truffle-hunting!" echoed the landlord.

"Truffles, Thomas?" questioned the landlord's wife.

"Well, I won't say but I have heard of truffles in that wood; and there used many years ago to be a man who got his living in that way. But

he died, and I never heard of another taking to his calling in these parts."

"Well, I told him my night's adventure, and he was kind enough to lend me a shilling, though I warned him it would likely be a long time before I paid him back. That's my adventure, and there's my shilling; out of which please to take pay for my breakfast."

"Nothing particular, I suppose, about the appearance of the truffle-hunter? He didn't hunt truffles in genteel black clothes?"

"No, indeed; he was dressed like a jobbing carpenter, in white flannel, or something of that kind."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr. Jessop, with a short and careless tone, as if he had suddenly lost all interest in the subject.

"But this I will say," added the man, laughingly, "though he proved himself my friend and benefactor, and therefore I oughtn't to say it, that I thought—I mean before he lent me the shilling—that I'd never seen a more villanous-looking countenance."

"Light coloured, pig-like hair?"

"I couldn't see very well, it was so early."

"Grating voice?"

"Decidedly."

"Short arms?"

“ Well, now you ask me, I do remember something odd about his appearance in the upper works, which might be owing to partikarly short arms.”

“ Missus—quick—that bill !”

Off went Mrs. Jessop, and presently brought back from the recesses of the bar a large poster, the one already familiar to the readers of this history.

“ Read that ‘ NOTICE ! ’ ” said Mr. Jessop, letting his hand fall with most impressive weight and sound on the hollow table.

The tramp read the bill through ; then put on his hat, and said,

“ Would you mind trusting me till I come back ? I might want, you know, to repay my benefactor his shilling.”

“ All right ; only do come back, if it’s only to tell us how you find matters. I’ll forgive you the breakfast.”

“ Good-bye, then, for a bit, master landlord. I’m not going stealing other people’s property, mind you that ; bear me witness as to that. I’m only going, in the interest of my betters, truffle-hunting.”

Both the men laughed. And off went the tramp, leaving the little hostess gazing with widely-parted lips after him, and the landlord



muttering something very like an imprecation upon his rotundity of body and limb, that he couldn't run off on the same interesting business, that he saw was in all probability about to be done.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE STOLEN TREASURE.

THE man walked fast, certainly, as he quitted "The Traveller's Joy;" but he did not run until he had left the last vestige of human beings or human habitations behind; but then, when he saw he was quite beyond observation, he started off at what seemed the very top of his speed, but which got faster and faster as his excited thoughts began to revel on the dawning prospect.

"Here's a chance for a poor fellow, if only—if I'm right, and if only I'm the first! But I am such an unlucky devil! It'll be sure to turn out all a mistake; or else he'll have altered his mind after seeing me; or else he'll have come back again before me; or else somebody else may have been watching who wouldn't be so green as I am. Never mind, I'll know all about it. Lord! Lord! If it should be there still! All the Squire's plate, and most precious jewels! He must do something handsome for me, if I take them all to him. Will they be too heavy to

carry, I wonder? By Jove! but it'll be a very heavy load indeed, if I don't manage to get along under it somehow!

"I'm getting out of breath; never mind, if I'm only getting into cash. What a start this may be! If only he was to give me fifty pounds! Why not? I'd go home and show all the money to my wife—make her believe I'd robbed somebody, and the police were after me; and then, when she'd got to be thoroughly miserable, tell the silly fool the truth, and buy her a new dress to begin with, before setting up on my own account, and making her my 'cashier.'

"There's the tree. I don't see anybody about. No; all's quiet. Now, then, am I to be lucky this once, or not? If I am, I'll swear never to get drunk again, but go home and turn respectable, and go to chapel every Sunday, and do lots of other sensible things. But if I'm unlucky, I'll give the game up, and say, as I have often said before—Oh, I know—my usual luck! What's the use of trying?

"Let's see, it should be hereabout. I don't see any signs of new earth. I couldn't have mistaken the place, surely? It seems to me it was just here, where my foot now is. But this fern doesn't seem to have been disturbed. Let's try if it gives way at all."

After a few tolerably strong stampings with his feet, the tramp got upon the little clump of fern, and it sank—not much, it is true, but just enough to tell him he was in the right place. Having no tools at hand, and being too eager to try to make any out of the fallen timber and sticks lying about, he fell to with his hands. The lump of earth with the fern growing on it was soon felt to move, soon got out, and there lay the treasure—in the two green-baize bags, just as Nobby Bob had deposited them.

The tramp did not long pause in his gloating survey of the contents of the hole. Having dragged the bags out, he hurriedly refilled the hole, carefully placing the shilling in a little hollow, and saying to himself, with a laugh,

“Won’t he be mad when he sees that? He ought to take warning by it, and never tell lies again. Truffles, eh!”

He next slung the bags over his shoulder, and set off walking, as fast as he could under such a burden, back towards “The Traveller’s Joy.”

Wonderful, indeed, was the excitement he produced there when he entered an hour or so later, bathed in sweat, his face heated to a crimson glow and his limbs trembling with fatigue and excitement.

“Here they are,” he shouted out as he crossed

the threshold. "Here are the truffles I've been hunting up for the Squire! No, no; hands off! All respect to you, Mr. Landlord, but I don't mean to let anybody open these bags till the Squire himself does it."

"Quite right—quite right," said Mr. Jessop; "you're in luck, old fellow."

"It ain't often, then, I can tell you. Come, missus, a pint of your best ale just to refresh me, and then I'm off again."

While he was drinking the ale, the landlord began to think to himself he ought to make quite sure the Squire's property did not again disappear now that it was so happily recovered. But the tramp spared him all anxiety on that subject by saying, as he wiped his lips after drinking the entire pint of ale at a single draught,

"Master, can you send anybody with me to show the way?"

"To be sure. Here—Molly!"

"Oh, I'll go," said a guest who had dropped in.

"And I!" echoed a second guest.

"And I!" added another.

"Come, then, be off all of you, if you're so very inquisitive, and fond of helping," said the landlord, with just a touch of ill-nature because he couldn't himself accompany them.

And so once more the tramp started on his journey, with the Squire's treasure on his back, and his escort increasing at every step of the way.

The Squire, an aged man, was sitting gloomily alone—his lady being ill—over a late breakfast in his study, for he had just been told by his steward that, in spite of all his activity, all his offers of large reward, there was nothing yet known either of the burglars or of their spoil.

“Of course they've got safely off,” he muttered to himself, as he put down the *Globe* newspaper, which he had been trying to read to make him forget his vexation. “Of course they've got safely off; and by this time my plate is all melted down in some of the back slums of London, and my jewels, torn from their settings, are being handed about among the Moseses, and Levys, and Abrahams, to see who will give the most for them! Could I only catch the villains! If only I could!

“The prize cup! I shall never win another, and I have no children of my own to make up the loss. It almost looks as though a grand sweep was to be made of all one's heirlooms before I die, just to remind me I've no further use for them—no son and heir, not even a



daughter, who might bring me an heir to inherit my name and estates!

“There’s my hopeful nephew, it is true, who has just now come to visit me. He would fain persuade me I needn’t desire a better son or a truer gentleman. But I haven’t a bit of faith in him. No, Lieutenant Polwarth, if you do get all I have got to leave it won’t be for love, I promise you. Oh, here he comes.”

Lieutenant Polwarth was a man of about forty, of handsome face and person, but with a something unpleasing, almost sinister, in his expression. He came in hurriedly, saying,—

“Good news, Sir!—at least, I hope so. There’s a man with a pair of green baize bags on his shoulders just arrived, and half the village at his tail. He won’t let any one know his business—not even me. He will see you, only you.”

“Quick, quick, Polwarth; let him in.”

The Lieutenant turned, left the room, and presently came back with the tramp, who, scarcely looking at anybody or anything, was content to know he was before the real Squire at last; and whose first use of the knowledge was to lift the bags gently and lovingly from his shoulders, put them down, and begin to wipe his streaming and grimy face.

“Your property, I suspect, Sir!” he said, as soon as he could draw breath to speak with due solemnity to the great man.

The Squire ripped open the bags with his pen-knife, and out they came in rich profusion and confusion—silver cups, and jewels, and silver forks and spoons, and his stately and much-prized race-cup, which he took up and looked at carefully all over, to see if it was injured, but found only a small dent in the side.

“Am I right, Sir?” asked the tramp.

“Quite right, quite right! And I am very much obliged to you—very much, indeed.”

“Not at all, Sir; not at all,” responded the tramp, who was by no means a mercenary spirit.

“Come—come—tell us all about it.”

The tramp told the whole story through, which was of course listened to with the greatest interest. When he had done, the Squire said to his steward, who had come in with the tramp—

“Compare these articles, Miles, with the list.”

Mr. Miles did so, and found, wonderful to say, not a single thing missing.

The Squire grew more and more radiant with satisfaction.

“Well, now, my man, what can I do for you?”

You're an honest fellow, and I should like to give you a lift."

The tramp scratched his head, and kept his good-humoured face fixed wonderingly on the Squire, who had put the matter in a shape quite unexpected.

"Oh, whatever you think best, Sir," he said at last, with a faint sense at his heart that his hold of the expected gratuity that was to have set him on his legs for life was vanishing.

"What do you want to do?"

"Set up in business on my own account."

"What as?"

"A small master shoemaker."

"And where?"

"Wherever it pleases Heaven and my luck to fix me."

"Well, if I may step in between the two things you have so oddly put together, and say, there's room for a careful shoemaker in the village here, and that you shall have the custom of my family to begin with, what think you?"

"I'm very poor, Sir," was the reply.

"What! You mean you couldn't give me a year or two's credit, I suppose?"

The tramp looked at the Squire, and could not help a laugh as he saw the Squire's latent smile, but he said—

“To tell you the truth, Sir, I’ve been a bit unsteady; and if I’m to have a chance to get on better, and not disgrace your honour’s patronage, I must have my wife here, and get things a bit comfortable; and then I do think I could settle down and become a decent sort of man.”

“Oh, but I see you want a fortune to begin with; and I can’t promise that.”

“Yes, Sir,” said the tramp, sadly; “there’s a deal of money wanted to fetch the wife and clear up where she is, and buy leather and tools, and pay wages if I gets more to do than I can manage myself.”

“What sort of a workman are you?”

“Well, Sir, though I say it as shouldn’t say it, I could undertake to turn out as good work as you can get in London itself.”

“Ay, but the cost—the cost of the whole affair?”

“Well, Sir, if it’s too much, never mind. I can but go on as I am; but I don’t think, to be honest, I could make a good job of myself under thirteen pounds ten shillings, as well as I can calkelate.”

“What’s your name?”

“John Plackham, Sir.”

“Mr. Miles, pay John Plackham fourteen pounds at once, and if he chooses to come and

settle here, and behaves himself to *your* satisfaction, I authorise you to advance him, from time to time, up to fifty pounds."

Poor John Plackham, as he heard, did not throw up his hat in a transport of joy, nor did he drop down on his knees in a heartfelt burst of gratitude; he simply began to tremble, while the tears came into his eyes, and his lips quivered as he strove to speak.

"There, there, I understand," said the Squire, holding out his hand, which John Plackham shook with startling vehemence, then stood aghast at his own boldness, but finally managed to say—

"Well, Squire, you have made my poor wife a happy woman to-day; as to myself, I'll say nothing. Least said soonest mended."

"Good-bye!"

"Good-bye! and God bless you, Sir!"

## CHAPTER XVII.

### MR. THOMAS JESSOP UNDERTAKES A JOURNEY.

THE giant landlord had scarcely settled to his usual post on the following Monday morning, when his ostler and lad-of-all-work came running in in a fearful state of excitement.

“Oh! please Master, there’s been such a robbery and murder at Mrs. Maxfield’s, at Northope.”

“Robbery! murder!” echoed the big landlord, aghast.

“Well, I don’t know the exact rights and wrongs of the matter myself; but the man in the mail-cart told me as he went by at the cross roads that a man had tried to break into the widow’s house at Northope, and that he had been shot by another man that happened, all promiscuous like, to be in the house.”

Before Mr. Thomas Jessop could come to a clear result as to the meaning of this new story, which he felt instinctively related to his two visitors, he received a summons to a coroner’s inquest, to be held that very evening at Northope.



By-and-by a servant came in from the Hall, where a messenger had arrived to the Squire requesting him to favour the coroner with his presence, as they believed they had found the robber of his mansion; and he was particularly desired to send any person who might be likely to identify the man now lying dead at the little beer-house at Northope with the burglar who had broken into the Hall.

“Easy to say a thing, Mister Jessop, but not allus so easy to do it. The Squire don’t know any of us as can identify the vagabond.”

“Well, but the tramp could,” observed Mr. Jessop.

“O’ course he could! I’ll go back to the Squire directly, and tell him. Happen he’ll send somebody to fetch the wandering shoemaker if it ain’t too far.”

While the servant hurried back, Mr. Jessop pondered on the weighty problem now offered for his consideration—how was he to get to Northope? If it had been one mile, instead of fifteen, he might just have managed it by walking. Such an undertaking was just within the range of the possible on an occasion like this. But a mile was about the outside that he ever dreamed of accomplishing nowadays in his most enthusiastic moods. How, then, was he to reach

Northope? He remembered nobody in his neighbourhood who had a vehicle at all large and strong enough to bear him, and manageable enough for him to get into. Then he be-thought him of a small platform for his chair, that he had had made a few months ago, with the view that he might be wheeled out into his paddock to get an airing, see to his property, &c. This platform was nothing more than an excessively strong square box of wood, about six inches high, supported on very solid wheels, and having a guiding-wheel and handle. Mr. Jessop had soon ceased to use it—the awkward business of getting the chair on and off the carriage and himself into and out of the chair—its liability to glide away suddenly and treacherously on smooth ground while he was just stepping on to the platform—and the obvious dislike of the lad to the hard work of drawing his master about—all this had soon disgusted Mr. Jessop with his “toy,” as he called it, and induced him to put it aside.

But now the lad himself, seeing his master’s puzzle, said,—

“Couldn’t some on us draw you there, master, in the chair?”

“What! fifteen miles, and up the hill, too, a part of the way? And then down the hill,

which 'ud be worse still, for there you'd let me go, and I should break my neck."

The lad acknowledged there were difficulties, but undertook to find a safe man to go with him.

And so, in the afternoon, Mr. Jessop set out, amid the congratulations of the village, at seeing him once more abroad. He sat boldly up in his easy chair, guiding the course of his chariot-wheels, while the two youths behind pushed with a will, and cleared the village in so fine a style as to promise well for their success in the more arduous task of getting him up the steep where Mrs. Maxfield and her daughter had been robbed.

There, however, the expedition from "The Traveller's Joy" would have come to an untimely end, but for the welcome aid of half a dozen navvies who were travelling that way towards a new line of railway that was in progress of erection. These undertook, for a pint of beer apiece, to give him a hoist.

"Hold on, maister!" one of them cried out, as they stood all ready, clustering about behind.

"Ay, ay; all right!" cheerily responded Mr. Jessop. And away he went up the hill, very much as though it had been down hill, and he began to fear that in the very exuberance of their

strength and gaiety of heart they would decline to stop when they turned the crest, and would insist on seeing what they could do on the other side. So he began in good time to call out, with gradually increasing vehemence of tone,—

“Gently, boys; gently! There, that will do, I think.—Do you hear? What the —— are you after? I say! Hold!”

And, as they paid not the least attention to him, he began to speculate on how he could best and most safely bring the whole affair to a sudden and timely stop, when they paused of their own accord, had a good laugh all round, and then waited for their pay, which Mr. Jessop gave with a good grace.

“Three cheers for the giant!” said one; and the navvies, to the landlord’s inexpressible vexation, began to shout. However, they went away at last, and left him with his own more trustworthy charioteers to make the long descent, with scarcely another interruption of rising ground, right down into the valley.

And so the gigantic landlord made the first half of that journey which became a subject of gossip long years after in connection with the attempted robbery at Mrs. Maxfield’s.

The very first person Mr. Jessop met in Northope was the man of whom he had been

thinking all the day—the young piano-tuner—with one arm, the left, in a sling. And delighted, indeed, he was to see him. They shook hands after a hearty laugh at the oddity of the vehicle, and then the eager landlord began,—

“ Was it you who shot the man who tried to break in at Mrs. Maxfield’s ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And was it *that* man ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Goodness gracious ! How wonderful ! Do you know, I couldn’t help fancying once you two were connected.”

“ Oh, I saw that plain enough ; and very sorry I was,” said Reuben.

“ Well, well ; I’m sorry for the mistake, and I hope we shan’t be worse friends.” Then the landlord added, “ They’ve summoned me to the inquest.”

“ Yes, I supposed they would ; and I told them I had met this very man at your house.”

“ That’s right ! Allus, young man, be straight-forrard ! It’s a thousand times the best in the long run.”

But, to look at him, Reuben did not seem just now to have much faith in the virtue of the frankness so strongly recommended. He was pale—absent-minded—could not be still a single

instant—would look suddenly round, then relapse into an almost unnatural quietness of mood.

“ So, you’ve found your way to these ladies ? ” continued Mr. Jessop.

“ Yes; they asked me so very kindly I didn’t like to refuse.”

“ Which of them ? ” asked the landlord, roguishly. But Reuben did not seem to notice the jest, and, as he walked down by the side of the vehicle towards the little alehouse where he had seen Nobby Bob’s face peering forth on the Sunday morning, and where now lay the remains of the late burglar, he could not avoid letting Mr. Jessop see something of the cause of his present anxiety.

“ I am apt to be a little careless and unthinking when I get into society, and I must have been so all those hours I was waiting at your house, in the hope of seeing the servant from the Hall who might satisfy me as to the likelihood of a job. But it’s hard—and deucedly unlucky too—if such a chance meeting as that is to injure one’s character and prevent one’s getting on. Don’t you think so ? ”

“ Why, of course I do. But why need you be afraid of anything of the kind ? ”

“ Afraid ? That isn’t much in my way ; but I shouldn’t like other people—people, I mean,



without your good sense and kindness—to hear what you said to me a little while ago.”

“Of course not. I should be ashamed of myself to give utterance to any such thought. In this world, lad, one is often obliged to speculate upon things and to get wrong; but then we are not obliged to treat our speculations as facts, or let all the world know what fools we are at particular times.”

“I suppose you don’t think it would be best to say nothing about my being at your place that day; for I feel a little sensitive about these ladies and what they might think, if——”

“Harkye, I don’t understand you a bit. You said you had told the people here that you had met this very man at my house.”

“No, no. Excuse me. I said I intended to tell them.”

“Intended! O——h!” And the landlord began to look grave. Seeing what he had done, Reuben began to retreat,—

“I am sorry you misunderstood me.”

“No misunderstanding at all, young man,” interrupted Mr. Jessop, with some temper.

“Well, well; there is an end of the matter,” said Reuben. “To tell the truth you made me feel ashamed of my being so hail-fellow-well-met with this poor wretch before I left your house,

and I was weak enough to wish that that bit of the business might be glided over."

"Well, well; we'll see what can be done. But allus, young man, stick to the truth; that my grandfather used to din into me; for between ourselves my poor father didn't much matter the rule—says my grandfather to me by word of mouth, and through innumerable copy-books, where it was his favourite top line, 'Tell truth and shame the devil.'"

And Reuben, concluding that he had laid himself open to the admonition, was silent.

Before reaching the alehouse Reuben told Mr. Jessop the particulars of the late attempt, keeping as close to the truth as he could, while carefully suppressing every word or incident that might suggest to the listener's mind the old and dangerous idea that his two guests had been, when they met at "The Traveller's Joy," companions in crime.

Reuben left him at the door of the alehouse, saying the inquest would not be held yet for an hour or two, as the Squire, he heard, had sent for an important witness.

On his way back to the farm-house Reuben reflected more and more gloomily on the danger of his connection with Nobby Bob being discovered. He could not conceal from himself his

vexation and alarm at finding that he could neither trick nor persuade Mr. Jessop to conceal the meeting at his house. And although the landlord had quite dismissed his suspicions, Reuben could not but fear that some ugly and unanticipated fact would start up that evening and convict him, and ruin alike his new career and his old one. For they would arrest him, try him, perhaps convict him. And if they could not prove him guilty of the burglary, they might do what just then, in the view of Bella Maxfield's home, seemed to him immeasurably worse, they might treat him as a common rogue and vagabond, and so make an end to the late dreams.

Well, he could but wait and see what was to happen.

“If,” murmured the unhappy Reuben, “if only one of the persons who saw us come together into the valley should recognise me to-night, my fate is sealed.”

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE INQUEST.

As Reuben, accompanied by Mrs. Maxfield and Bella, made way through the village towards the little alehouse where the inquest was to be held, he could not but forget for a moment his own individual thoughts and feelings in noticing the commotion visible among the peaceful inhabitants. Every few yards they came upon a group of people collected together at some house door, all eagerly engaged in discussing the late fearful event, and all revealing, by their low tones of speech and the awe that appeared on their faces, the depth of their wonder that such an event should have happened in their quiet village.

“Not for more’n half a century,” said an aged and cracked voice, “has there been such a thing in this neighbourhood. No; not since the jewel-pedlar was murdered and put into the limekiln up there upon the hillside.” The listening group seemed to feel a deeper horror come over them at

that reminiscence of their local history, and there was a great hush upon them as their faces turned towards the limekiln ruin. Just then the Maxfields and Reuben passed, and all eyes were upon them, not, however, rudely nor painfully, but with a kind of sympathy that did not prevent a good deal of inquisitiveness. The gossippers did not speak to the party as they moved slowly along, but the men put their hands to their hats and caps, and the women curtsied, all except one very young woman, who was so struck by Reuben's appearance that she forgot her manners in her admiration of so beautiful a hero—for such he seemed to her unsophisticated eyes. But, as the party passed on, Reuben's quick ears—watching for every sound that might warn him of danger through discovery—overheard the whispered remarks:—

“That's him! Isn't he young? He's gotten his arm in the sling, you see. And how white he looks! A'most as fair as a woman!”

“Who would think he could have been so brave—so howdacious—as to confront that black-muzzled robber in the dead of the night and kill him?”

“Ay! and what a mercy, wasn't it, that he should have been in the house at the very time? Look you, it would ha' gone hard with them two

women only, if the villain hadn't found anybody else there."

"Ah! Well, he's got his deserts at last! He didn't come into our neighbourhood for nothing!"

"No, no, indeed!"

"Well, Jem, I shall go on after them, and learn how things go at the 'quest.'"

"So will I."

"And I'll go along of you both."

And so there was a general movement towards the alehouse of whatever portion of the population of Northope had up to this time remained at home. The bulk, however, had not waited for the sight of the Maxfields to stir them. When the little party got to the place the crowd outside seemed almost like a fair.

Bella let down her veil, Mrs. Maxfield began to tremble with increasing nervousness, and Reuben's face grew dark as he thought to himself,

"What, if before all these people I have again to pass by-and-by as the convicted companion of a dead robber?"

As he gazed for an instant round, moved with a desire to be quite sure that there was no face there he could recognise as having been seen by him while he and Nobby Bob were together in the valley, he could not but notice the stern looks



of the stalwart men that everywhere met him. And he thought to himself,

“Why, if they knew all, they’d think no more of stoning me to death than of stoning a rat; they wouldn’t wait for process of law.”

But he smiled scornfully in defiance, as though it was not them he feared—not their astonishment, and disgust, and rage—but the silent anguish he already in anticipation saw depicted on the countenance of his young and beautiful companion.

At the door of the alehouse they met the Coroner, a kindly but fussy sort of man, who seemed bent on making the most of the excitement of the occasion instead of preserving the even mind and balanced personal dignity so necessary as well as so becoming to the judge, however humble his judicial position.

“This way! this way! ladies, if you please; and you, young Sir—the hero, as I suppose I must call you, of this domestic tragedy.”

“Oh! Mr. Johnstone, is it not a dreadful business?” said Mrs. Maxfield, as she followed the Coroner round the outside of the house towards a little door that led into a back yard, beckoning, at the same time, to Reuben and Bella to accompany her.

“*Very—VERY—VERY* dreadful! And now,

ladies, let me warn you—I am going to take you to see once more a shocking spectacle.”

“ Oh, not that wretch ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Maxfield ; then adding, “ Not that unhappy man ! ”

“ Yes ! only for a minute, that you may all identify him ; and so have that part of the business over.”

“ Courage, Bella ! courage ! ” whispered Mrs. Maxfield. And although Bella’s face blanched to a whiteness that was truly appalling to Reuben, whose eyes were fixed upon her, she tried to smile faintly as she saw Reuben’s look of agitated inquiry, and said (to him rather than to her mother),

“ Come, then ! ”

And so they went into the little backyard, and from that into a kind of outhouse used as a lumber-place, which had no door, but was open to the yard ; and there, lying on some straw, was all that remained of Reuben’s early prompter to guilt—his teacher in all the arts of felony—his hard and exacting taskmaster—then his “ pal ” and now at last the victim to whom he had been compelled to play the part of executioner.

There he lay, and for once in his career Nobby Bob’s face had ceased to be repulsive. It seemed as though that last thought of his before dying, about his little boy—the “ chick,” as he had called

him—and the confidence he felt in Reuben's promise to see that he had his "rights"—such rights as that miserable father was able, in his last hours of agony, to bequeath to him—it seemed as though that thought and that confidence had expelled for a brief time all the long and ever-accumulating series of recollections and influences of a life of villany; and then, before they could return, he was dead, with the natural feeling of a father at the final separation from his child painted irremovably on his face.

The ladies were too much excited to spend any time in unnecessary deliberation; they simply looked and waited for the brief queries of the Coroner:—

"Is this the man who robbed you on your way from the Traveller's Joy to Northope?"

"Yes, I think so," they each said.

"And you are quite sure it is the man who was removed from your house this morning?"

"Quite, quite. That is beyond question," said Mrs. Maxfield.

"Thank you, that will do." And the two ladies stepped out, glad to get once more away from the polluted atmosphere of death.

"Now, Mr. ———, what's your name?" said the Coroner to Reuben, who had stayed behind.

"Polwarth."

“Polwarth? Reuben Polwarth? How odd! Why, that’s the name of the Squire’s new guest—his nephew; he is called Lieutenant Polwarth. No relation, I suppose?”

“Certainly not; at least none that I know of,” said Reuben, smiling, and glad to have his thoughts turned from the dark subject in hand. “He’s a gentleman, of course; I am only a piano tuner.”

“Oh!” said the Coroner, with a sudden change in his manner, as though he felt he had been a little imposed on by Reuben’s gentlemanly dress and easy manner. “Well, now, Mr. Polwarth, do you identify this man as the one who broke into Mrs. Maxfield’s last night?”

“I do.”

“Very well. Now, then, we’ll go indoors and begin.”

They were met, as they crossed the little yard, by a good-looking mechanic, who was hot and breathless, and ran up against the Coroner in his hurry so rudely as almost to upset him.

“Who are you?” demanded the Coroner.

“The man who found the property.”

“Oh, indeed! And you want——?”

“To see if I know the man who has been killed.” He stepped into the little outhouse and at once called out,

“Ay, that’s him. That’s Truffles, sure enough; just as I saw him in the early morning digging the very hole from which I afterward took all the property.”

“Come along,” said the Coroner, swelling with a sense of the value of the evidence that was gathering about him, and needing only his masterly hand to be made to fall into order, and to tell the whole history almost without seeming to tell it. But he was again interrupted by some person who looked as though he were a mere village gossip, but whose conversation left an uneasy sense on Reuben’s mind and behaviour, for the Coroner, after receiving a whispered remark, looked round suddenly, and as if with new interest, on Reuben, and then called out,

“Don’t wait, I’ll be with you in the court directly.”

And Reuben went on into the “court,” thinking he was very foolish to take serious notice of such slight incidents, but only arriving at the conclusion that all his efforts to treat them with contempt seemed to bring them out into stronger relief.

He was overtaken at the door by the Coroner, who, however, showed neither by look nor word that anything particular had occurred, and Reuben then dismissed the matter from his thoughts.

They went into the "court" together, the court being a room in the alehouse—a very small room, though the largest the house contained—and the same from which Nobby Bob had looked out from behind the blind upon Reuben and his new friend as they were returning from church the day before.

Reuben could not, even under such serious circumstances, help a smile at the arrangements. There was the "jury," huddled up together as close as their chairs could be packed, at one end; then, in the centre, there was an arm-chair and a small table with writing materials; then there was a space left for witnesses and audience large enough together to accommodate perhaps a dozen persons, but full half of which was pre-occupied by the majestic presence of Mr. Thomas Jessop, sitting there on his own domestic throne, and almost seeming, to the Coroner's rapid and sensitive eye, disrespectfully dominating over the whole assembly. But he was friendly to the giant landlord, so he nodded to him in passing to his own seat in the centre. The window of the room was open, and a perfect sea of heads appeared outside. The jury were all busily drinking and smoking when the Coroner entered, but he put a stop to these indulgences.

"Now, gentlemen, you know business is



business, and not either pipes or ale. As much as you like of that sort of thing after we've done."

"Hear, hear!" said one of the jury, who not being able to smoke, was getting very uncomfortable at his personal prospects for the next hour or two. So the pipes were laid by, the glasses were rapidly emptied and dismissed, the Coroner sat down and looked pompous in his arm-chair, and the sexton, who officiated at the door, shouted out,

"Stand back, can't you?" to the dense crowd that lined the passage; while outside there rose a murmur of—

"They're going to begin!" and then they did begin.

We shall not attempt to follow the forms of the inquest; for at Northope they didn't much trouble about forms, and were quite content if only they could get at what they supposed to be the substance. Neither shall we dwell on the evidence, the facts of which are already known to the reader, except where we see special reason for doing so. We may remark, then, that the story was completely brought out, and in tolerably due sequence; namely, the appearance of Nobby Bob at the Traveller's Joy—his sudden disappearance a little before the departure of the

ladies—his stopping them on the hill—then, on the same night, the alarm at the Hall—the discovery that burglars had broken in—that one of the servants had run away, who was supposed to be in connivance with the robber—then the discovery of the concealed treasure by the tramping shoemaker—the identification of the dead man with this burglary by the digging of the hole where the plunder was found—then his first appearance during the shades of evening on Saturday at the present alehouse, and his staying there, where he had been assuming the part of a wandering joiner seeking work—his breaking into Mrs. Maxfield's the same night—the meeting between the two men—the deadly conflict—and the fatal shot. All this the Coroner managed to get out very neatly, and with as little of repetition and circumlocution as the case permitted.

Of course he had his interruptions and difficulties: the course of coroners' justice does not run very smooth in small country places. When, for instance, the Squire's horse was heard outside, there was a decided stop for all other evidence till he had come in and condescendingly given his evidence, and bowed graciously when he had done, in answer to the Coroner's,

“Very much obliged to you, Sir. We will not detain you any longer;” and so he rode off.

Generally the Coroner managed to impose a kind of ceremony upon the witnesses while giving their evidence; but that was out of the question with Mr. Jessop, whom no one ventured to ask to get up and stand near the Coroner while speaking; so, after a dubious look at his person, he was permitted to say what he had to say from his seat where he was, and then he spoke in so perfectly easy and conversational a manner as to irritate the Coroner by his seeming insensibility to the dignity of office.

However, on the whole, they got on very well, notwithstanding these and similar little rubs; and they were not much disturbed even by the comments outside, which now and then raised a laugh over the faces of the jury, and called forth a threat that the window should be closed and the blind let down if there was not silence.

All this while not a single dangerous countenance had Reuben perceived in the room or outside, nor did a single fact start up to alarm him; for the chief witness who might have seriously compromised him—the big landlord—spoke so carefully and well of what passed at his house that the impression was left on every one's mind that the meeting between the two men, though remarkable, considering the results, was perfectly accidental—every one's mind, at least, except the

Coroner's, who, to Reuben's alarm, began to do something very like cross-examine him when he had finished taking all the other evidence.

"Reuben Polwarth you said, I think, was your name?"

"Yes."

"Always known by that name?"

"Good God!" thought Reuben, "what does he mean by that? Has he or any one overheard Nobby Bob call me Gent Rube?" But his reply was instantaneous,

"I don't understand your question."

The big landlord looked approvingly on the youth's open face and generous glow of indignation; but what he would have felt if he could have known the truth, and the promptness of the young hero at lying, we can only venture to dream of.

The Coroner did not repeat his question, and great was Reuben's relief thereat. He then thought that it must have been only a fit of ill-temper or personal dislike that had prompted the inquiry, not actual information received.

"Are you a friend of this lady?" asked the Coroner, looking at Mrs. Maxfield, who now sat with Bella close to the judicial side. "I mean, were you acquainted before these events occurred?"

“No.”

“Do you know any one in these parts who can speak to your antecedents?”

“No. I left London only a few days ago, being desirous of seeing a little of the country, and paying my way by the exercise of my vocation—that of a tuner of pianofortes.”

“And I understand you to say that till the meeting—the *casual meeting*—at the “Traveller’s Joy,” you and the man whom you subsequently killed in defence of this lady’s house never met?”

Just for one moment Reuben again hesitated in the belief and the terrible fear that the Coroner knew something that would contradict his (Reuben’s) evidence, and perhaps altogether discredit it; but he felt he had no alternative but to reply, “Never!”

There was a general hum of assent, almost of applause, which seemed to annoy the Coroner, as if intended to reprove his unreasonable suspicion. Suddenly he said, in a loud and sonorous voice,

“Call Tommy Larke, the shepherd.”

“The shepherd!” thought Reuben, and in an instant he remembered the shepherd lad he had seen on the hillside who was reading when he and Nobby Bob were advancing together through the solitude of the valley towards the spot where

they had agreed to separate, in order to meet again as strangers at the "Traveller's Joy."

Bella looked at Reuben, saw the sudden pallor upon his face, but saw also the equally sudden smile which drove it off as he met her eyes, and she wondered what it was that had frightened her so.

Tommy Larke came in—a dull, sheepish-looking youth, in a smock-frock, and with his crook in his hand, and stared at the Coroner as if seeing nothing but him in the whole place.

Tommy having been sworn and made to kiss the book, which he almost forgot to do in the intentness of his gaze upon the Coroner's face, was told, after some preliminary questions, to look round the court. He did so, and his eyes at once fixed on Reuben.

"Have you seen that young man before?"

"Y—yees!"

"When?"

"On Friday morning last."

"Where?"

"On the side of our great field—the Ten Acre."

"Was there anybody with him?"

"Y—ees; another gentleman."

"How dressed?"

"In black clothes."



“Have you seen the body of the man who is now lying dead in the yard?”

“No.”

“Go, then, and take a careful look at him. Martin,” said the Coroner to the sexton; “go with him. Let nobody speak to him.”

The two went out, and there was an almost awful silence in the court as the people waited for the return. Reuben did not dare again to look at Bella. He could not venture another lying smile of assurance—not now, when he might within a few minutes be convicted of participation in the robbery of the Squire.

When the sexton returned with the shepherd the Coroner said to the latter,

“Well, Tommy Larke, is that the *gentleman* you saw with this gentleman?”

“N—o, Sir.”

“No!” said the startled Coroner, who had evidently been told by some over-hasty busybody that the shepherd could identify the young man as a companion robber to the old one. “No!” he repeated, wonderingly, while Reuben’s thoughts were flying back to the villager who had spoken to the Coroner just when they were coming into “court.”

“That gentleman had black clothes; this un hasn’t,” responded Thomas Larke, with a kind of

doggedness of tone that argued well for his adherence to his first notions.

“Oh, that’s a trifle. Clothes may be changed. His clothes have been changed. We know that he did wear black.”

“Besides,” said the youth, in the same slow but determined tone, as if, while he felt instinctively the necessity for concentrating all his mind to a point, he also felt able to go through with his purpose when he did so concentrate it, “that gentleman hadn’t black hair.”

“Neither had this one. Mr. Jessop has told us how he must have changed its colour by some dye.”

“Eh?” said the shepherd, with open mouth and wondering stare.

“Don’t you understand that we already have it in evidence that this man, who now lies dead out in the yard, is known to have worn black clothes, and to have had, on Friday last, light-coloured hair, just like the man you saw?”

“Pardon me, Mr. Coroner,” interrupted Reuben, “I did not at first understand the meaning of your question—the assumption that I could possibly be connected with any burglary being so gross—but I beg you to observe that this youth, who speaks so honestly and with such evident good faith, does *not* recognise in the dead robber

the gentleman he says he saw with me crossing the valley."

The Coroner was evidently confused. At last he said,

"Do speak up, Tommy Larke, and like a man. Do you think the dead man is the gentleman you saw with this young man?"

"N—o!" said Tommy; but still a little hesitatingly.

Reuben felt that at the best he was about to be left with a heavy suspicion hanging over him; so, as a kind of desperate throw of the dice, he trusted all to one chance. If the shepherd had noticed one peculiarity of Nobby Bob he could scarcely have forgotten it, or omitted to mention it. He trusted all now to that small hope:—

"Permit me," interposed Reuben again, "to ask this witness, Mr. Coroner, if he noticed anything remarkable in the gentleman's person that he saw with me?"

"Speak, Tommy Larke;" and the Coroner repeated the question.

"No, nought but his good black clothes, which made me wish I had a Sunday suit like 'em."

"You are sure you noticed nothing else?" repeated the Coroner, guessing Reuben's thought as he remembered the previous evidence about the burglar.

“No, nought else, except I thought the hair on his face were getting as white and bald-like as our old sow’s back at home.”

This remark greatly tickled the jury; and, being caught up by a listener at the window, was repeated outside, and raised a great roar, which the Coroner allowed to subside before going on with the business.

“Then undoubtedly there was a something remarkable,” said Reuben, boldly, “for it has been again and again testified to by all the witnesses. When I first saw this man at the ‘Traveller’s Joy,’ it was that that struck me, as it did Mr. Jessop, and Miss Maxfield, and the man who discovered the property.”

“You mean——” began the Coroner.

“The shortness of the robber’s arms.”

“Can you yourself throw any light upon the incident of this shepherd’s seeing you in company?”

“I think I can,” said Reuben. “I did not at first remember, for the incident was so very slight; but as I came into the valley I did, somewhere on the slope of a hill, pass a gentlemanly man, of whom I asked the way to the ‘Traveller’s Joy;’ but we did not walk ten yards together, nor speak for more than a single instant.”

“Tommy Larke,” said the Coroner, “did the

two gentlemen you saw separate after a word or two, as you have just now heard given in evidence."

"Yes; that they did. For I wondered why, if they had come together, they didn't go on together."

Reuben saw his chance, and now followed up his former hit by a new one. With a kind of simple ingenuousness of truth-speaking, he added, "But, to tell you the whole truth, I do not think that the gentleman I met carried any bag such as the robber undoubtedly did when he came into the 'Traveller's Joy'; therefore," continued he with a smile, as he looked round the room, "if the witness swears the gentleman he saw had such a bag, and that he was with me——"

"Had the gentleman in black a bag, Tommy?"

"N—o; I didn't see any bag."

No. Reuben could have told the court that, for he had remembered just in time to venture this bold piece of finesse, that the bag and the tools had been kept concealed about Nobby Bob's person till he should have got into the high road, near the "Traveller's Joy," where he was to appear as a commercial traveller.

That last bit of candour on Reuben's part finished the business. There was a general sense of relief in the court, and of sympathy with the

young fellow's feelings, who, after fighting so bravely for two unprotected women, and bearing at this moment the marks of suffering in their behalf, both in his pale face and slung arm, was himself assailed with the vile and absurd suspicion of being an accomplice with the very robber he had so boldly challenged and killed!

The Coroner was himself now quite convinced, and began to make amends:—

“Very well. I'm glad this doubt, which I need not say was put into my way—which I did not seek—is cleared up. I think, gentlemen, we can now deliberate on our verdict. Let the 'court' be cleared.”

Of course, the verdict substantially was that Nobby Bob had fallen a victim to his own criminal practices; and the court presently broke up—meaning by that, they began to smoke and drink as hard as they could, being helped vigorously in both operations by the Coroner, who threw off his dignity and began to unbend in a regular fire of jokes, and by the giant landlord, who was delighted to find once more the suspicion that had been brought back by the shepherd's statements removed, and his young guest left to enjoy the honours due to his gallantry.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### A ROBBER'S LAST RESTING-PLACE.

WHEN Mrs. Maxfield and Bella and Reuben had shaken hands with Mr. Thomas Jessop, and wished him, mockingly, a pleasant journey back in his airy vehicle; and when they had got a little clear of the houses of the village, and were approaching home, Mrs. Maxfield fell a little behind Bella and motioned to Reuben that she wanted to speak to him apart. He joined her, and she said,

“What will they do with that poor unhappy man's body?”

“Do? I never thought of that! I'm sure I can't tell. Perhaps bury it at the dead of night, as I have heard they do with suicides.”

“Oh! that would be shocking. I shouldn't like that. Surely he can have Christian burial?”

“As far as he's concerned, I don't think he'll mind it much,” said Reuben, but was stopped

by the evident displeasure of Mrs. Maxfield's tone.

"I should think you would be glad for your own sake to know that all has been done that can be done for him. It's a dreadful thing to have the blood of a fellow-creature on one's hands."

Reuben was almost prompted to ask whether she would have preferred that the "fellow-creature" should have had his (Reuben's) or her (Mrs. Maxfield's) blood upon his hands, since she was so dissatisfied with the result; but he had already learned that he was often, when thinking thus, only displaying his ignorance of Christian-like dealings, his inexperience of honest ways; so he was silent.

"Now, I have been thinking that if the sexton were spoken to he might, perhaps, consult the minister, to see if he would not read the burial service over the unhappy man. I will willingly pay the proper fees. And if you, Mr. Polwarth, would but see to the matter for me——"

Reuben hesitated—in real dislike, almost fear, of the task suggested. He had never realised the idea of death till now. It had shocked and sobered him, this death of Nobby Bob, although with a kind of bravado he tried to throw off the influence it exerted upon him. But here were two helpless women. Could he propose that

they, or one of them, should go running about the village to see to this matter? No; he must do it. So he said, "Very well; I will return and speak to the sexton."

Reuben found him amongst the crowd in the "court" room of the little alehouse, almost undiscoverable in the clouds of smoke that filled the place. He came forth readily enough at Reuben's request, but seemed uncommonly discontented at the nature of Reuben's business when that was explained to him outside. However, as he was a tenant at will for a bit of land to Mrs. Maxfield, he did not care to offend that lady; so he and Reuben went off to find the Curate, who they learned had gone a few miles away to spend the night.

What now was to be done?

After some cogitation the sexton said there was a little cemetery attached to a Wesleyan chapel, and he thought there was an aged farmer who often officiated in an irregular sort of way as a preacher on the hillside, who might be persuaded to do what was required. And that, anyhow, the man might be buried there, and his grave got ready. But here a serious question arose in the sexton's mind:—

"Was the deceased a member of the Church, or would he have objected to belong in death to

a Dissenting congregation?" Reuben thought that the sexton must be jesting; but, on the contrary, the latter was evidently quite in earnest in desiring to be satisfied as to the rights of conscience being respected even in this extreme case. However, when Reuben said that, from the little conversation he had had with the deceased, he was satisfied that the robber would have been quite willing to let any religious body that pleased claim him after he was dead, the sexton went away to prepare the grave, which it was agreed should be done while Reuben went back to fetch the irregular minister.

Two or three hours later Reuben stood bare-headed with the sexton and the aged farmer-minister on the edge of a grave in the little cemetery that displayed its sloping rows of tombstones upon the hillside. The tall poplars were waving to and fro and making melancholy music; the night was dark and cold, though at one side of the sky there was a kind of flush of light, strange and wild-looking, that constantly attracted Reuben's eyes. A lantern, set down on the very edge of the planks, threw its dim rays into the darksome pit where lay the robber in his last earthly bed. The coffin was of the very rudest construction—had no ornament, not even a nail, that could be

seen—and was, of course, without inscription or name.

As the minister read a chapter out of the Gospel of St. John, and put forth a fervent prayer that dealt with the violent and sudden death of a criminal thus arrested in his career, Reuben felt more moved than he had ever felt in his life before. His hatred and disgust of his old “pal” seemed to die out; numerous little acts of passing kindness which had here and there gleamed through the robber’s otherwise unlovely life, were called up; then came thoughts of the kind of career that Nobby Bob had passed through—probably one of crime, or preparation for crime, from his very earliest years; then the scene of the wild, dimly-lighted moor, the night so dark, the fear that his own future might even yet be more nearly like his late companion’s than he had tried to believe; all these things, added to the agitation of the day and the weakening effect of his wound, made him feel no longer master of himself, and, before he knew what he was doing, he was dropping tears into the grave of Nobby Bob.

And when the brief, but sensible and pertinent, service was over that the kind and earnest-minded Wesleyan performed, and Reuben had shaken hands with him, and watched him go

away, he himself still waited as if to see the sexton fill in a few spadeful of earth. But soon he, too, took his departure, saying he could finish in the morning, and Reuben was left alone.

Alone! He sat down upon the dirt-covered planks that formed the rude platform around the mouth of the grave, and began to call up, year by year, month by month, and deed by deed, the whole of his past life since it had fallen under the dead robber's influence.

*Was that his life?* he seemed now to ask himself, with a shudder. Was it possible that he had lived as this man now buried here had lived, by ceaseless acts of fraud and violence? And was it to such an ending that he had been blindly marching, with all his senseless gaiety of soul, until his late determination to change?

He could not fathom what was going on within him; but this he was conscious of: change—daily—hourly—almost momentarily. Was it through the influence of that fair young maiden, whose belief in his innocence almost seemed to re-create him into the very state of innocence that she believed? Or was it that, his eyes having been once opened by her ministrations to a dawning sense of the possible beauty of honesty and virtue, he was able by his own inherent vigour to find food everywhere for the new life?



Certainly he had experienced new sympathies with all sorts of things and men during these three days—with men and things that he would have mocked at before. The giant landlord, whose heart had warmed towards him—Bella—her mother—they seemed to be now all making Reuben's heart yearn in return to do something, or be something, different from what he was, if it were only that he might throw off the constantly increasing burden of hypocrisy.

How Reuben had lied, and with what success, before the Coroner, we have shown. Time was when Reuben would have made the thieves' quarter ring again with the mirth produced by his narrative of the proceedings—by his vividly dramatic imitations of the Coroner's voice and manner; but all this was dead now. And, inexplicable as it seemed to Reuben, he felt growing over him an uneasy consciousness that lying, even to get out of danger, was not the manliest of all accomplishments, not one that he would like to brag of before Bella Maxfield.

Yes, the work of discipline was beginning, though slowly and imperfectly. Meantime, Reuben had warded off for the moment all danger, and stood master of the position. He had rendered a priceless service to his new friends; he was an inmate of their house; would

get to know their friends ; must have chances of earning a creditable livelihood ; and his old enemy, Nobby Bob, was lying here,—no longer able to threaten, no longer able to interfere with Reuben's meditated career.

Why, then, is he so despondent? He cannot tell. He half wishes at this very moment, as he hears the lumps of earth that he has moved with his foot drop with heavy thuds on the coffin, that he, too, lay there, and that the frightful mistake or criminality of his past life may thus be prevented from creating what he fears a long-drawn future of misery and humiliation.

Yes, that is Reuben's fear. Even now, when he thinks of the future, does he see danger and obstacles, none of which he can meet as brave men meet ordinary difficulties, because his difficulties are in their nature base. He begins to see that—to feel that.

At times a sort of wild thought steals over him that he will fly from England for many years, then come back again when his name and deeds must be swept out of all memories, and then again come into this happy valley, and see if he cannot win as a bride this sweet maiden whose image fills his soul. But then he knows well that if he were to lose just now the incitement to virtue that he finds in her face, voice, habits,

home, and neighbourhood, he would relapse, because the magical power is not in him but in her, and comes to him only from her.

But, as he is, will he not be a villain—ay, as great a villain as the robber who now lies dead in the grave here—if he wins this young girl's love only to let her find out by-and-by that she has loved one whose very touch is pollution?

She *must* find that out! He knows not how. He will exert every faculty he has to prevent her finding it out; but he cannot resist the depressing feeling coming over him whenever he ventures to think of the future, that she will be sure to discover his past.

Why, he must tell her himself—if no one else will! Thus he is ready to cry out in despair. Already, rogue and liar as he is constrained to think himself when he confronts the actual facts of the case, he shrinks from the baseness and the folly of seeking to win her with that dread story unknown.

And he begins again to recall all the sad circumstances of his early life, and once more the tears are dropping into the robber's grave. Reuben cannot help some self-pity. He cannot help saying to himself, "If they knew all, would they not forgive, forget, and accept me in spite of all?" He tries to realise the position of sitting

in that parlour, facing them, while he recounts the incidents of the dreadful story. He goes on for a while successfully; but at last he shrinks, and then starts fiercely up—

“No, no; silence is my only hope. They would drive me from their door as they would drive away some noxious beast that had suddenly appeared in the village, if they knew the truth.”

He then stood for a while silent on the edge of the grave, and at last said, “Well! good-bye, old comrade! I wished you good-bye before, but not, I think, in the right spirit. I begin to understand myself too well to be very free of abuse for you. Farewell! If there be a better place, and it be possible for you and I to get there, I’ll wish you as much luck as myself. I can’t pray for you, for I can’t pray for myself. But I wish, old pal, you could have heard and understood as I did the talk of this man to-night over your grave. It might have done you good, as it has done me good, by making you uncommonly uncomfortable. This is the second time in two days that I find myself inclining to listen to talk that I always thought only invented by knaves for the better guidance of fools. Good-night! good-night! I haven’t forgot my promise to you about your boy. Lie quiet, then, old fellow; you are in your last bed. The ‘chick’ shall be seen to.”

Reuben then stole homewards; but managed to get to bed without seeing either of the ladies, though they, wondering at his behaviour, sat up a good while listening to his perturbed footfalls over their heads.

## CHAPTER XX.

### REUBEN'S PROMISE TO NOBBY BOB.

IT was easy enough for Reuben to promise his dying comrade that he would see to the interests of his child, and very natural that he should do so under such appalling circumstances. But it was by no means easy to redeem the promise, as Reuben's own instinct told him almost immediately after he had made it.

It was not pleasant — it was hardly even safe for him to leave Northope and his new friends for three or four days (and the journey and the business in London could scarcely be accomplished in shorter time); for the suspicions that he had managed to allay by his readiness and skill might revive again dangerously during his absence.

But putting that fear aside, another arose which was even more perplexing. Could he be quite sure that if he once got back to his old haunts and associates he would not be



tempted to forget his late resolves and plunge once more into crime and licentiousness? Might he not, when he once got fairly away from this place, find that he had been the victim of a wild though fascinating dream, and that he would then awake and laugh to himself for his prolonged delusion?

No; Reuben was quite clear as to that. He could settle that question very briefly. He felt, on the contrary, that it was his past life that had been the delusion, and that it was the present one that was awakening him to true consciousness. But then he could not deny that his fortitude seemed often failing when he spanned with hopeless eyes and a depressed soul the long, dry, dusty, and fatiguing road of duty that he saw before him. The love of Bella Maxfield was indeed a delicious bit of refreshment for him; but Reuben had too much sense not to see that it would be equally foolish and difficult to try to win her as his wife before he was able to show he could support her in comfort and honesty. He had, however, on the whole, no doubt that he could persevere through a great deal of difficulty if only she cheered him on; and he felt quite certain that no temptation would keep him in London one hour longer than he was compelled to stay.

What, then, was the nature of the obstacles that appalled him in his desire to fulfil his promise to Nobby Bob? It was simply the danger—danger to life, danger to his future career. He had not thought of these things while he saw his late companion weltering in his blood at his feet; he had not had time to do so; but now they pressed upon him with awful force. The position was most serious. He had to go back alone, and say, not only that his comrade was dead, but that he had died by his (Reuben's) hand! For, if he concealed the latter fact, how could he be sure that they might not have already heard of it through the newspapers, or through those more secret and professional channels which they often commanded? Were he to be found out in a clear case of lying of this kind, it would be concluded at once he had played the traitor to his comrade, and made away with him to conceal the fact. Reuben knew very well that his own life would not then be worth the value of the smallest coin that the Queen's Mint had ever sent forth. The "honour-among-thieves" doctrine, however hard of digestion to honest folk, has an undoubted existence and reality among those who have such vital need of it. The "war" against society would soon come to an end if the rank and file who compose the

army of felony could not trust each other while on the march. Mutual confidence within certain limits that are pretty generally understood is, therefore, the first of virtues, as any breach of this law of mutual trust is esteemed the one unforgivable crime.

But he had promised, and he must perform. Reuben approved of the law—he had faith in the honour even of thieves: himself till lately a thief, he knew that no one in the thieves' quarter had ever dared to impeach *his* honour. He had killed this man—in a good cause, no doubt; but still he had killed him. There was now an infant's future depending upon the due fulfilment of the engagement made. But it was useless thinking any more about it; he had better be off at once and get it over, and feel himself safely back again. And there was one thought that quickened his resolve:—Supposing he delayed this business, and he get on well in the village, and he were accepted by Bella, would it not be terrible then to have any kind of communication with the world of thieftom? when she would have a right to ask him where he was going and what he was about to do? Yes, there must be no delay. He must get the ugly business over at once.

Nobby Bob's friend, of whom he had spoken in

his last moments—Billy Marks—was a kind of thief trustee or treasurer—that is to say, a man who, though originally himself a thief and a pugilist, had, somehow, dropped out of both vocations and become a publican, whose house was visited only by the better sort of thieves; men who would submit to the rules of discipline imposed by Billy Marks, or if they didn't, would, at all events, bear submissively the knock-down blow with which the ex-pugilist fortified all his arguments in the last extremity. But he soon became known among them for his good temper and his unimpeachable honesty, and his popularity was immense. His house became a kind of thieves' savings bank; and no stranger ever ventured to doubt with impunity either the solvency or the good faith of Billy Marks. Reuben had often seen and spoken to him, though he had not encouraged much personal acquaintance, for the very sufficient reason that Nobby Bob looked upon Billy Marks as *his* particular friend. Reuben had for a long time past done his best, in a quiet sort of way, to sever all connection between himself and his tutor that did not strictly relate to business, their tastes and views not being at all in accord. And this very fact had indirectly helped Reuben to keep off some of the worst consequences of his life. It drove him away from

the thieves' quarter to the casino, the concert room, the theatres, and the operas, and to the society of men and women whose life, though for the most part abandoned enough, did not prevent them from exercising unconsciously some moral influence over Reuben's notions of pecuniary morality.

Reuben's means for the meditated journey were not very large. However, he found he could manage, by using the money from Bella's stolen purse, to pay the railway fares each way between London and the nearest station—some thirty miles distant—and have a trifle over for incidental expenses. And, as to other things, if he fell short he had no doubt that, considering the nature of his business, he might safely throw himself upon Billy Marks's hospitality for a few hours, including a night, seeing that if he had rightly understood Nobby Bob in his last moments, the "Treasurer" had funds in hand belonging to Nobby Bob's little boy. He was not sorry thus to be able to dispose of Bella's property, for its possession was a constant source of disquiet to him, though he saw, with rather a blank face at the prospect, that he would be left penniless at his return, and therefore dependent upon what he could earn in an honest way.

He took an early opportunity to mention to

the ladies the nature of the promise he had given to the dying burglar; and, although they both seemed satisfied in a sense with his explanations, there seemed also a kind of surprise and constraint, and which, to Reuben's great pain, seemed to remain the longest time with Bella. But then came the thought that perhaps she had fancied it an excuse for his leaving them; and that thought led to another—that she must feel deeply about him thus to display any kind of feeling; and so, on the whole, Reuben managed to extract more pleasure than pain out of Bella's behaviour.

“And when do you return?” said Mrs. Maxfield.

“Within three days, I hope and trust.”

“Excuse my asking the question, but this is as much our business as yours: can I help you with the expenses?”

“Oh no, thank you; I have quite enough,” said Reuben, in a sort of flash of personal dignity, and then adding to himself, a moment later, “What an ass I was not to take some! I might have spent the purse-money this way and kept what she gave me for my future needs!” However, he had committed himself, and there was no remedy.

As he went off one evening directly after supper, so as to walk the thirty miles during the



night, and reach the station in time for the six o'clock parliamentary train, without incurring the expense of a previous lodging at an inn, he found the ladies had both forgotten their doubts, if they had ever felt any. Mrs. Maxfield was more motherly in her kindness than he had ever yet known her; while Bella seemed alternately in such high and such low spirits—at once so melancholy and so animated, as if she could not help letting him see how sorry she was at his going away, even for three days; and yet how very sure he might be of a genial welcome when he came back. And so, with the best wishes on both sides, they parted; and Reuben was soon trudging along the white road, over hill and moor, gazing every now and then up into the sky, where one very large and beautiful star seemed to shine right down upon him as if for his own special solace, while rather confusing his ideas as to its identity or relationship with Bella. Towards daybreak, when he had completed a good part of his journey, he met a cavalcade, consisting of a kind of light waggon with an awning, drawn by a single horse, and, walking by the horse's side, was the driver and another man, in whom Reuben recognised the shoemaker who had given evidence before the Coroner as to his finding the squire's property. Although Reuben's own connection

with the concealed plunder made it dangerous for him to trust himself into much talk on the subject, his curiosity got the better of his prudence, so he went up to the lucky shoemaker and greeted him as an old acquaintance. Of course he was instantly recognised, and the good-natured tramp began to tell how his wife and two children were asleep in the waggon; how that he had got there all his worldly possessions—furniture, tools, &c.; how he had paid all his debts like a man; and how, with the squire's patronage, he was going to begin the world on a new plan and work hard.

“That's it, my boy! I've found it out at last. It isn't talking about your luck and running about everywhere after it as if you were hunting a will-o'-the-wisp that makes men get on. No; it's sticking like a burr to the first real thing that offers, and so making luck. I don't say I'm going to earn a fortune; but I do say that I'm going to be an independent man and give up tramping.”

“Quite right, too,” said Reuben, who could not help sympathising with the man's enthusiasm about his future lot, and who thought to himself, “It isn't everybody who knows how to use a chance so well. I wonder whether he or I will stick longest to our purpose.”

The shoemaker would not let Reuben go on till they had breakfasted together; so they turned the cart round to go back for half a mile or so to a little inn where signs of an early rising host had been noticed; and, as Reuben felt somewhat faint with his long walk, and was glad to have a good breakfast without paying for it, he consented. By the time they reached the house the shoemaker's wife and children were awake, and Reuben fancied at the first look of the former that he espied a new reason for the tramper's undomesticated habits — she looked so very shrewish. Reuben, however, could not but admire the way in which she got hold of a brown pan of water, and took out a piece of yellow soap from her pocket, and began to rub away vigorously at the two half-sleepy, half-crying young faces till she had brought them to a satisfactory state of cleanliness and lustre. Nor could he help a laugh as he happened to turn from the group and met the shoemaker's eye. That sly but cautious man gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, and ventured a wink that spoke volumes. The matron was, however, very gracious to Reuben when she heard that he was in some remote way or other connected with her husband's windfall; and so, after a capital breakfast off the tea and bread and butter and cold knuckle

of ham, which were produced from a basket in the waggon, and after a squabble with the innkeeper that he was not content to provide an early breakfast for the value of the hot water and the loan of the tea-things, as the lady seemed to think right, they all parted on mutually good terms ; the cart and the rest of the cavalcade going towards the village where Reuben's last robbery had created them a new home ; and that unsuspected robber pursuing his way towards London, to fulfil a promise made in death to his companion in the robbery. How the worthy though indolent shoemaker would have stared if he could suddenly have known the true relation of this pleasant young fellow's doings to himself and his fortune !

## CHAPTER XXI.

### A THIEVES' TREASURER.

REUBEN reached London in the afternoon, about five o'clock, and hastened away from the station towards Billy Marks's house. At first he had been inclined to wait in some retired place near the station until it was quite dark; for he had a nervous apprehension of meeting old acquaintances in the streets and being recognised by them, and perhaps compelled either to offend them (which was dangerous just now) by his refusal to drink, or to lose precious time by giving himself up to their society. But, on the other hand, he knew enough of the habits of his old companions to be sure they would not be collected in any number at Billy Marks's in the beginning of the evening. Those who had been out exploring for the day would hardly return so soon for the enjoyments of the night, while those who, for reasons of their own, had been keeping indoors during daylight would be just at this time ventur-

ing out under cover of the evening shades. Reuben thought, therefore, that it was just possible he might get his business done and himself safely away to some other and distant harbourage for the night, before the thieves' revel would begin ; when, if he were anywhere about, he knew he must join, or be suspected of some grave reason for not doing so.

Billy Marks's house was in that curious region of London which has St. Giles's for its northern boundary and Seven Dials for its centre. It was situated in one of those little and silent-looking narrow streets that can there be found. Although a popular house among its own frequenters, the owner did not seem to share in the tastes which have turned so many gin-shops into palaces. On the contrary, the exterior of his house was chiefly remarkable for its dingy respectability. It almost seemed as though it had never been quite decided whether the house should remain what it originally was (a private one), or whether it should be converted into a public-house ; so that the process of conversion, having been commenced, had apparently stopped half way. The lower portions of the wide and high windows were all filled up with woodwork, so that the glass was almost out of reach ; and the panes that did appear above were ground glass, through which the position of



the flaring gas inside could be known from the surrounding atmosphere, as the nucleus of a comet's tail is known, by a spot of superior brightness. There was no sign; no showy bills of attestation of the merits of stout, pale ale, or gin; nothing but the name, in faint letters, of "William Marks, licensed to sell," &c., in the usual form required by the Excise.

One peculiarity struck Reuben now for the first time *as* a peculiarity—the swing doors, inside the chief door, which prevented passers-by outside from looking into the place, and which enabled the modest and shrinking persons who resorted to the house to step in and withdraw themselves from observation very quickly. Reuben knew well enough that such doors had another use; they might on occasion be suddenly closed and held fast while an escape was going on beyond, though it was part of Billy Marks's system never to quarrel with the police nor allow them to be quarrelled with by his guests. But he was, in the thieves' estimation, "so very good a fellow"—such a "real A 1"—such a "jolly trump"—so true to the very backbone—that they knew they could rely upon him for all reasonable and temporary help to get out of the way when danger threatened, provided only they didn't expect too much.

Reuben found his wife—a little, peevish, querulous-voiced woman—serving two or three lounging customers at the door, and was told that Billy Marks was sitting alone over a cup of tea in an adjoining room, as he had been out on business and came home late. This was capital, Reuben thought. He went to the door indicated and tapped, reminding himself he must not forget an occasional use of the old language which Billy would expect from him, though he didn't use it much himself.

“Come in!” shouted the ex-pugilist.

Reuben went in.

“Ah! Gent Rube, my boy, is that you? Come back at last? And where's Nobby Bob?”

“Dead.”

“Dead!” exclaimed Billy Marks, pushing away the teatray in his astonishment, and then pushing up his hair off his forehead, as if to enable his brain—not a very quick one—to deal with so astounding a fact. “Dead! Bless my soul!”

“Yes, Billy, dead; and I've come to tell you all about it. It's a queer story, and I should hardly expect to be believed, only that you'll see no reason why I shouldn't be believed when you see me here to tell it.”

Billy Marks looked at Reuben doubtfully, as though the fact of Nobby Bob's death did seem

so beyond belief that he (Reuben) must not be surprised at any amount of wonder and incredulity the story might excite.

“Well, you see, this is how it was. We got down to the place nicely, kept ourselves quiet, cracked the case the same night, carried off lots of swag—gold and silver plate and jewels, and had a pretty hue and cry after us. We got safely into a wood, and hid the swag in a tree. And there Nobby Bob and I had some talk. Now, Master Billy Marks, I want to tell you the whole truth on the square, and therefore I shall tell you what the talk was about. I was tired of my mode of life; Nobby Bob wasn't. A difference of opinion, you see. Well, after a deal of chaffing on both sides, I agreed to let him have all the swag, and he was to help me off in my new career by swearing never to interfere, nor let anybody else if he could help it. And so we parted.

“What next followed I know only by putting things I heard from others and things I saw myself together. Nobby Bob, I suppose, got frightened about me—thought I might go back to the tree and make off with the swag—so he removes it to a hole in the ground, was seen doing it, and so the Squire recovered all his property.”

“You don’t say so?” gasped Billy Marks.

“It’s quite true. He’s got it all back again, and that seems to have made Nobby Bob desperate. He found me out at a widow’s house, where I was lodging; but, without any warning, came in at the dead of the night to rob them. I, not knowing who he was, flipped him; and when they brought the light there was my old teacher and ‘pal,’ poor Nobby Bob, lying on the ground dying.

“The moment he knew me he begged me to go to London to tell you, because of his little chick. I told him I would, though I didn’t know before he had got a child. And then he died. And here I am.”

“Well, this is a surprise, Gent Rube!—This is a surprise! And, as you say, you needn’t ‘a come if it wasn’t true, else I tell you flatly I should mistrust sich a story. Here, you two go away together on your lawful—no, I mean on your or’nary business, he the father of a family, so far as this little boy goes, and you his ‘pal,’ and now you comes back without him—says he’s dead—says you killed him, and the swag’s gone. I shouldn’t like you to have such a story to tell at the ‘Bailey, eh?”

“Well, Billy Marks, every word you say is true; and, if it hadn’t been for that child and

my promise to Nobby Bob, I wouldn't have come and thrown myself on your hospitality. But, look at my arm. That was Nobby Bob's doing when we had this unlucky scuffle. You may think that that alone would have kept me from here if I hadn't felt I ought to come."

"Yes; there's something in that."

"Look you, Billy, this is all the money I have left, thirteen bob and a tanner, and I have got to go back again to where I came from. So if you can't draw it uncommon mild for me as to charges for supper and bed and breakfast, I shall be obliged to ask you to give a poor fellow for nothing what he hasn't got money enough to pay for."

"Gent Rube! can you look in my face and say that you haven't made away with that swag, and killed off your pal to cover the transaction?"

"Upon my soul, I can."

"And that that's all the money you've got?"

"Upon my soul, it is."

"Very well. Then say no more about it. You're welcome to have what you like—if only for poor Nobby Bob's sake. Besides, right's right. If what you say be true, and I ain't going to doubt you, you oughtn't to be put to any expenses. Some of the lads have ordered a

good supper at twelve—so you're in luck ; they'll be glad to see you."

"Thank you ; but I'm so horribly tired—for I had a walk of thirty miles before getting into the train—that I'll finish our bit of business and go to bed, if you won't mind."

"Oh, very well—as you like. I should have thought"—there Billy Marks stopped !

"Yes, but as I am leaving the concern, they mightn't like"—and there Reuben stopped.

"That's true again. Yes—perhaps it's best."

"I suppose you understand all that poor Nobby wished in sending me to you?"

"Well, yes ; I reckon he wanted me to cash up faithfully to his chick or babby. Let me see."

And then Billy Marks began to rummage out from his pockets handfuls of letters and documents of various kinds, on which he had placed memoranda, sometimes inside sometimes outside, now in ink now in pencil.

"S'pose you take a pen and a piece of paper ;" and therewith he handed a half sheet of dirty and greasy foolscap paper, ruled, to Reuben, "and set down the sums I tell you."

Reuben took his seat at the table, and got ready to record the items of an account which already, in anticipation, he felt some interest in.



“Now, I can't pretend to give you days of the month, and the months of the year, and all that sort of thing. I don't know as I can always be quite sure of the year without a good deal of bother and trouble. Other people have their ways, and I have mine. I never forgets events. If a man brings a hundred pound or more, or only a five-pound note, and tells me to take care of it for him, and only gives me a hint as to how or where he got it, then, as sure as my name's Billy Marks, he'll have it forthcoming whenever he wants it. They're the fruits of the campaign, and as I'm a sort of Chancellor of the Exchequer to the body politick, why I looks after the fruits, and sticks to 'em. So, of course, I can't forget 'em. Well, now to begin. Write down 179*l.* 10*s.* for Nobby Bob's share of the swag when the jeweller's shop in Oxford Street was cracked by him and Bully White.”

Reuben wrote it down, though wondering when the incident had taken place.

“Well, now write *per contra*, as the wise men say, what that affair cost Nobby Bob. 100*l.* for a good stiff *alibi*. How those two witnesses did swear to be sure! They made me sweat only to hear 'em; and though not a man in the court believed them, somehow they created a doubt, and so Nobby Bob got off,

and loved a doubt ever after. Written that down?"

"Yes—100*l.* for an *alibi*."

"Well, and then 50*l.* for the counsel's fee, and 64*l.* 17*s.* 10½*d.* for other expenses."

"Not a very profitable job, apparently, on the whole, this of the jeweller's?"

"Don't talk, there's a good fellow; I don't want to rob the innocent orphan, and I'll be very likely to forget something if you set my brains a wandering. Well, now write down 350*l.* for Nobby Bob's revenge on the jeweller."

"Which side of the account am I to put that?"

"Why, to his credit, to be sure. And a credit it was to him in every way, I should say. He felt so aggravated about the jeweller's conduct in getting him trapped for the first business, and making it so expensive for Nobby Bob to get clear away, that, six months after, he broke into his house one Sunday night, all alone, and carried off jewels which he exchanged for that amount before he went to bed."

Reuben recognised his old master in that touch; and as Billy Marks went on, he began to recognise some of his own handiwork in the record of exploits he had almost forgotten till the "fruits" began to turn up now as part of the orphan's dowry.

We need not further particularise the items of this strange debtor and creditor account, which told of Nobby Bob's adventures and his ups and downs for many years, though we must remark that one or two things struck Reuben with surprise. The first was, to see how the credit side of the account was growing, in spite of numerous disasters *per contra*; for, when the ex-pugilist came to a standstill, Reuben ran up the figures and found to his astonishment that the orphan was Billy Marks's acknowledged creditor to the extent of above 1100*l.*! No wonder that Billy Marks seemed to feel uneasy when told the total amount. He nodded his head, said there must be some mistake, and began to re-peruse all the backs of his letters, &c., and at last his countenance brightened up with quite an honest smile as he exclaimed,

"I have found it. Here 'tis, almost rubbed out (it was in pencil)—50*l.* that Nobby Bob brought me once and didn't tell me, as it happened, where he got it. Now, put that to the rest and you'll find, I think, just 1192*l.* odd shillings. I know it was 1192*l.*, for I always go on adding and subtracting in my mind when there's any change of balance, and that's the sum I have got put by in a bank for Nobby Bob's boy."

This honesty was the second thing that surprised Reuben. The man's evident and careful honesty when there were no witnesses to dispute his word if he had chosen to deny every farthing of his debt, struck Reuben very much.

He couldn't help saying what he thought; but he was answered by the quiet remark,

"They behave well to me, and I mean to stick to them, honour bright, as long as they do. If they are thieves, what's the use of showing them that there is no honesty in the world, not even among them, or their friends? Will that make them better? Not a bit of it. I never shares, myself, in any of their jobs; I never buys their swag; but I keeps a sort of honest house for their use, and they comes to it; and listens to me with great respect; though I say it as shouldn't say it; and they takes my judgment, and puts their money into my hand, and gives me a good living; and so, though I don't belong to the fraternity myself, I says nothing to them as do, but 'behave yourselves properly whenever you come to me, or don't you come at all,' that's what I says and what they listens to; and so we gets on very well, and they calls me their treasurer and 'friend,' and I am proud of the titles."

"And what will you do about the child?"

“ Ah! that's a ticklish question. I wouldn't, if I could help it, let a child o' mine grow up that way. A man's a man; but a child's only a child, you see.” Reuben quite understood the logic, though it was so briefly and tersely explained, and he said in answer,

“ Of course you think so; that's just what I wished to hear.”

“ Well, I must see what's to be done. It's awkward. The funds in hand will pay well enough for a good school; but, then, even schools will ask some questions, though, I grant, not many, when they've a chance of scholars. It's awkward to say his father was a cracksman, isn't it?”

“ Very,” responded Reuben.

“ Well, well; I must do the best I can. I know what Nobby Bob wanted, and why he kept you all so ignorant about his family. He wanted the mother (a decent creature, though she did take to Nobby Bob) not to be seen by any of the young uns; and so he kept both mother and child far off, on the sly.”

“ Then, at all events, I may wash my hands of the affair.”

“ Yes, all right. But now, won't you stay up to see the lads?”

“ If you will excuse me, I shall be glad; and

shall be still better pleased if you will keep my coming here quite unknown."

"I am afraid 'tis too late for that. My missus see you?"

"Yes."

"Anybody else?"

"Two or three men at the bar that I didn't know."

"Then she'd tell them, and they'd tell everybody else; so, if you don't mean to be in for a night of it, you had better go to bed, and I'll say you were clean done up, and couldn't appear till to-morrow."

"Thank you! That will be the very thing."

"Here, Missus!" The ex-pugilist knocked with his feet, and his wife came in. "Give the lad a bit of supper, up in the No. 3 bedroom, and a bit of breakfast early in the morning. He doesn't want to be visible to-night."

"No. 3?" scowled the wife, and went out without another word.

"After her, and keep quiet. Good-night, Gent Rube!"

"Good-night, Billy Marks!"

Reuben was then led up the narrow stairs to a dirty-looking and ill-smelling room, that seemed to express the character of his whole past life when contrasted with the exquisite cleanliness



and purity he had found at Northope, and which seemed to invite him to so different a future.

Although greatly fatigued, he could not sleep. He had done his mission satisfactorily, but felt he was in a dangerous neighbourhood. To be sure, there was the protection of Billy Marks, who was evidently satisfied, on the whole. So he tried to believe there was no danger. Still he could not sleep. The odours of the place were overpowering. He heard the hours strike one after another—ten, eleven, and twelve—while his busy thoughts were recalling into vivid life the early days of his training under Nobby Bob. Again he saw the hard-headed robber stand as he stood in giving him his first lesson in pocket-picking, praising his every success and black-guarding him for every failure. Again he remembered that hour of triumph when Nobby Bob, having said, probably without exactly intending it, that if he could get his gold watch away from his pocket without his—Nobby Bob's—knowledge, he should have it; he had artfully managed to turn his teacher's thoughts and eyes in quite another direction, and then had produced before the burglar's wondering eyes the glittering prize. Again he was reviewing the first robbery they did together, when he, the half-frightened pupil, was caught and the master escaped; but

when, just as Reuben's heart and eyes were alike giving way to grief and alarm, he saw a respectable gentleman come up, who "knew him so well," and spoke to the policeman, and handed the latter his card in token of respectability, and then, as the gentleman and the boy went off together, the former whispered,

"Run when you get round the corner; I shall." And so he knew that the gentleman himself was only a messenger from Nobby Bob.

Again—but there his recollection stops, for he hears steps blundering up the stairs, as though of a half tipsy man. But, hark! there is not one man only, but two, three, four—more than Reuben can well distinguish. He starts up in bed. "Where is Billy Marks?" he asks himself, in alarm. A moment more and the door is burst open, and in they come, man after man, with brutal, lowering, and heated faces; some of them known, others strangers, to Reuben. As he stares in alarm to see the threatening circle that gathers about his bed, one of them, an old enemy of Reuben, who had offended him by his pride and by his keeping aloof from him in their pleasures, said,

"So, Master Gent Rube, we come to give you welcome, since you didn't choose to come to us and receive it." Then, seeing Reuben's eyes

wandering towards the door, "Oh! Billy Marks is in bed asleep long ago. We got him off in quiet. He doesn't care, you know, for any rough work."

"Rough work?" repeated Reuben.

"Ay, we hear strange talk about your pal. There have been people listening at the keyhole who do say he's dead, and that you helped to kill him."

"I have explained everything to Billy Marks."

"How very good of you. Can't you let us into your confidence a bit?"

"Hark ye, Bully White; you know I can't fight you now, for you see I am disabled."

"Ay, that was Nobby Bob's last blow in defence when you murdered him, you treacherous hound!"

"Gentlemen," Reuben began, in an appeal to the others, who were evidently growing more and more excited under the language of their leader.

"Down with him!" shouted Bully White, and himself struck Reuben a blow in the face that brought the blood, but that also aroused in him a determination to sell his life dearly, maimed as he was. He took one leap right out among them, knocking down two of the ruffians by the force of his descent; then, snatching at a water-jug, he

levelled it at the head of a third, who was advancing, and who was at once placed beyond the power of further injury. But there Reuben's success stopped. He was suddenly grappled with by Bully White, and in another instant would have been a dead man but for the interposition of a new combatant in the person of Billy Marks, who, half undressed, came fighting his way into the room with the most wonderful coolness and success, not throwing away a single blow, but punishing his men right and left till he had got to Bully White, who received a blow in the stomach that doubled him up, and left him and Reuben masters of the field.

“Get out of this, all of ye, will ye, my pretty lambs? Oh! you are nice men, you are! Do you want to be told again?”

They did not need anything of the kind, for they disappeared as fast as they had come.

“Warm work, boy!” ejaculated the ex-pugilist. “But they've had a lesson, I think. Go to bed. They won't meddle with you again. Trust me for that. Good-night! once more.”

Reuben and he shook hands, and the latter tried once more to sleep, after washing away the blood from his face, and at last he got off for an hour or so—not more.

He was called by the kind and watchful Billy

Marks to breakfast at four o'clock, ate a good meal, and then was taken by Billy himself to the station, in a cab, for which he paid.

At parting, he said, merely,

“I hope you'll prosper, lad, in your new calling; but I fear I shall have to stick to mine—though I don't altogether like it. Good-by!”

## CHAPTER XXII.

### GLEAMS OF PEACE, HOPE, AND HONEST LABOUR.

A STRANGE lull fell upon Reuben for some days after he had seen the last of his old "pal," and settled the one bit of business that Nobby Bob had left him to do in his dying moments; a lull of which the elements were peculiarly mingled—joy and depression of spirit, pleasure and pain, hope and despair. His wound had been dressed at the time by a neighbouring surgeon; who, after a visit or two, and full explanations to Mrs. Maxfield about dressing it daily, had thought the patient was getting on so well that he need not any longer make formal calls at Northope to see him. But, although Mrs. Maxfield was a good nurse, Reuben was anything but an attentive invalid; and since his visit to London there was a slow but determined tendency in the arm to grow worse. It became gradually more stiff and inflamed, and then again the doctor was called in, and Reuben became more careful, and again there



was some benefit obtained. But it was, in truth, the mind that was injuring the body, rather than the body that was affecting the mind; though mind and body were alike only too well prepared to re-act against each other under the circumstances. This arm was one of Reuben's troubles, though he thought little of it, and suffered by its consequences rather than by its direct action.

But during this same period—that is, the two or three weeks succeeding to the attempt on Mrs. Maxfield's house—other things were going on that also materially affected Reuben's state of feeling and view. He tuned Bella's piano, and tuned it so well that neither of the ladies thought of secretly commenting to themselves on the unprofessional way he went about it, or the time he took in the operation. But when he had done so, and began to hint about the necessity of his departure and looking for other jobs, &c., Mrs. Maxfield not only refused to let him go, but said he must be quiet, and not trouble himself with any duties for the present.

This, however, was irksome to one of so restless a disposition as our hero; so, after he had two or three times begged Mrs. Maxfield to let him be of some use while he trespassed upon her hospitality, she allowed him to cast up figures, make out small accounts of sales of dairy and

farm produce, and, at last, to become at once her unacknowledged book-keeper and clerk. Then, again, she would send him to settle a bill for her in the village, or to make a purchase in the neighbouring market town of Hadford of articles wanted for the farm or household. All these things Reuben did so well when once she made him understand what was expected from him that the widow grew more and more gracious, and at last sent him with Matthie, on a market day, to dispose of above a hundred pounds' worth of hay and corn. It is true Reuben was paid in cheques, crossed for Mrs. Maxfield's bank, so that he could not very readily have misappropriated the money; but still the trust implied sent a thrill through Reuben's heart and almost frightened him into asking, "Can I be safely trusted?" But, somehow, he did not find any great difficulty in coming home with the cheques and handing them to their owner; or, while in chat with Bella over his tea, in forgetting altogether the height of moral virtue and self-control he had that day achieved.

But it was the constant communion with this fresh young maiden that he now enjoyed that gave at once the brightest sunshine and deepest shade to his life. Often, under her magic influence, he seemed to be able to look back at his

own career as if it were some other man's, or, at least, as a something so far off that it mattered little now. But the spell that produced this delusion never lasted long, and was bitterly paid for by the misery and shame that succeeded. At times, in the middle of some conversation, when he was full of animation and laughter, and when the musical tones of her voice seemed to Reuben to linger faintly but lovingly all about him long after their utterance, he would stop as though some hand had been suddenly laid upon his heart, the dew would break out on his forehead, and he would murmur in reply to the changed and anxious face and voice,

“Oh, 'tis nothing; the wound troubles me occasionally—that is all.”

And then Bella's face would darken with anxiety. The tears would stand in her eyes, and she would scarcely know what she said, for the words fell so tremulously from her lips that she was frightened at their sound, and at what they might be supposed to convey.

But then there would be in his eyes no lover-like exultation, no sudden and irrepressible token of reciprocal love. He would more probably rise abruptly and go out for a walk on the wild moor; or, if it were late, go to his bed-chamber, and there begin the ceaseless wandering that had

become a part of his nightly life, and which troubled Bella more than he knew of or guessed.

But in a short time a slight incident began to work serious changes in Reuben's mood.

It was early in April—a fine, clear morning, and with a gentle wind blowing that seemed to exhilarate Reuben's spirits—when he set out to amuse himself by fishing in the little brook or river that ran under the windows of Mrs. Maxfield's house. The spot chosen was some half-mile off, where the stream passed through a charming wood that was a perfect tangle of low-growing trees, wandering branches of blackberry, and other creeping and climbing plants, and where the beautiful wood anemone, and the still fairer flower, so like the anemone—the sorrel—were now in plenteous bloom.

He could not fish. He had no taste that way, and had only accepted Mrs. Maxfield's offer of the loan of her husband's rod and tackle in order to avoid awkward remarks upon his health and spirits; but, once at the spot, he struck the iron-pointed end of the rod firmly into the ground in an inclined position, and let the line and bait float as they pleased in the water, and catch as many fish as they could without trouble to him. He sat down under the curving line of the rod and looked at the float, but saw neither float, nor

water, nor the dark forms gliding about in very mockery of his hook; he saw only that one eternal image which involved for him whatever of beauty or goodness he was yet capable of imagining. So deeply was that image stamped upon his heart after so many hours, and days, and weeks of contact, that he did not need to gaze upon the artificial portrait of her that he carried about him. But there were times—and this was one of them—when he grew irritable by the feeling of the net that fate and circumstances had thrown around him, and which—soft and gentle as was its every thread—held him with irresistible force. And in such moods he would seem to yearn for his old and lawless liberty; and he would pull out the locket from his breast and gaze upon that fair portrait, asking what it was that so thrall'd him, and trying by new examination to get some better answer.

He was thus engaged when he heard a voice, saying,

“What! too idle to take up the fish you have caught?”

Reuben started, looked up, saw Bella, hid hurriedly the locket he had held, and then, remembering her words, he looked towards the float and saw it convulsively rising and falling. He leapt to his feet, tore up the rod, and landed



a fine trout, though it must be owned that it was done a little clumsily. He then prepared to return with Bella, but saw her moving rapidly off in quite another direction, scarcely looking back, and giving no further explanation than a slight wave of her hand.

“Of course she is going further, and doesn't want me, I suppose, to go with her.

“And yet how strange, after the laughing way in which she came upon me and spoke. Is it possible she saw this?” His face visibly whitened as he took the locket from the waistcoat pocket where he had hidden it for the moment.

“Did she see this? Did she know it? And, if she did, did she at once rush to the thought—that I must have been the companion of the man who robbed her mother of it? Did she forget in an instant all her own dreams about me, and know at last the hard, naked, hideous truth?

“Can I go back to the house and to her with this question unanswered? Oh, it is absurd thus to start at trifles! She could not have identified the portrait in that hasty glance; and, if she could, it is impossible that she could think me a robber and the friend of robbers, owing to me what they do.



“But what, then, could she think? That the locket had accidentally fallen into my way, and that I coveted it too much—valued it too dearly to give up my prize? She would forgive me that! Oh, there’s no fear! There can be none!

“I will get home first. I will make myself unusually agreeable to the mother. I will appear in capital spirits when she returns. Yes, so she shall find me. And then, if any momentary suspicion did cross her mind, she will laugh at it and forget it.

“Forget? But will she not, even without any fear of me, mention to her mother what she has seen—if she did see?—and certainly, if she does do so, my possession of it will be challenged.

“What am I to say? That is the question. Stay. Yes, that is what I will do! I will confess that I found it on the floor after my scuffle with the burglar, and that——”

Here Reuben’s thought stopped, in contemplation of a new position—perhaps a new difficulty. He had never yet, by look, word, or act, done anything to draw the mother’s special attention to his feelings as regarded her daughter. He could not even deny that he had played off upon the former a subtle bit of double dealing. He had managed to seem on the whole exceedingly attentive to the widow, and to be simply polite and

genial with Bella. But the explanation he might now be driven to make to shield himself from the danger of discovery in his true character, would have no meaning except as an acknowledgment of love. How would such an explanation be received by Mrs. Maxfield? How by Bella? Most likely, he feared, by a coldness so marked as at once to put an end to all these delusions by which he was trying to bribe himself into honesty, and which would render longer residence here impossible.

In vain did he try to hit upon any other and less serious answer to the question, "How did you get the portrait?" So that he was obliged to content himself with the hope that, after all, Bella had not noticed the locket in his hand, or that, if she had, she would conceal the fact for the present, and so enable him, perhaps, to deal more satisfactorily with the incident that had caused him so much alarm. . . .

He found Mrs. Maxfield sadly worried by some bill of charges that had been sent in to her, and which she was sure was incorrect. She felt quite glad to see him at once begin to study it item by item, till he had found an important error which had been made against her, and the discovery of which put both her and Reuben into excellent spirits just before Bella came in.

But she did not come into the parlour. After a while, Mrs. Maxfield went to seek her, and did not return for nearly an hour, when she seemed quite concerned.

“Poor Bella! She has come home quite unwell. But I have put her to bed, and I hope she’ll be right again in the morning.”

“I hope so, too,” said Reuben, aloud; but in his heart he added, “She’ll never be right again, so far as I am concerned; she knows all about me at last.”

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### DID BELLA SEE THE STOLEN LOCKET?

IF Reuben might live to the age of Methusaleh he would never forget the anxious misery of that first night, when he feared that Bella had begun to suspect his true character. Again the strong impulse to fly from a pain and shame so unendurable tempted him; but it was checked by the consideration that such a flight—which, possibly, might yet be avoided—must be fatal to his last chance with them. Then, again, no moth ever fluttered more helplessly or more persistently round a candle than Reuben felt compelled to hover about this young maiden. Every hope of a better life that had grown up of late in his breast seemed destined to perish if he quitted her side. If there were such things as guardian angels in this world, she was his.

That unfortunate locket! A score of times was it brought forth, in obedience to a kind of

fascination, and then put away again, as if in fear of some secret eye. At last he quieted himself for sleep by saying,

“I will watch her in the morning. She must meet me again then, and then”——and so thinking, he did, at last, sleep.

They met at breakfast, as he had expected. Yet, a moment after, he was unable to say whether there was or was not anything of an alarming nature in her behaviour to him. She smiled and shook hands as she met him, but the smile was more languid than usual, and the clasp of hands more brief. So also she wished him, in the old fashion,

“Good morning!” but then he could not but feel the tone of the welcoming phrase was less genial than usual. Of course that might be through the indisposition of the night before. It must be so. He needed the belief.

Reuben tried hard to eat the savoury slice of broiled ham that Mrs. Maxfield placed before him, and to drink the steaming cup of fragrant coffee that followed; but the one sickened upon his palate and the other burned his throat, and he desisted.

Bella did not once speak to him of her own accord after her first greeting, nor could he obtain on a single occasion that glance which he

had been accustomed to look for and to receive with such eager, though secret, delight.

“Yes,” thought he; “it is clear enough. There can no longer be any doubt. She knows of the locket, and knows me, too, now.”

How heavily the hours dragged on through the whole of that day! Reuben hung about the house, scarcely left it for a single minute—seemed unusually desirous to be busy and to be serviceable—and thus managed to keep up a kind of watch upon the movements of the two women. The fact is that, even in his despair at the thought of Bella’s recent discovery, he could not resist a kind of half-insane fancy that all might not be lost if even now he could only prevent her from speaking to her mother.

He tried, therefore, whenever he caught sight of Bella, to win from her a word or a look that might lead to conversation, and so to his influencing her, if she did at all care for him, to keep in her own breast the perilous secret she had discovered. But it almost seemed as if Bella had on her part foreseen that precise danger and determined to avoid it by declining all opportunity.

Once only, as he sat after tea in deep and moody silence, his arm, through a sudden movement, happened to make him start with a half-



suppressed exclamation of pain; then she turned to look at him, and their eyes met—hers full of an unspeakable sadness, his of an equally unspeakable apprehension.

They parted that night exactly as they had met in the morning, except that the cold hand that was offered to him seemed to tremble more now than before. This gave Reuben new alarm. Was she waiting only for the night to speak to her mother? Had she been silent all the day in order to give him an opportunity to speak to her, and make any explanation that he could as to the fact of his having in his possession the very locket of which her mother had been robbed?

When it was too late—that is, when he had parted with her for the night—he wished he had played a bolder part; had spoken to her about the locket, and, without acknowledging any fear, had let out the explanation he had prepared to give. An indirect avowal of love might, if it did nothing else, have thrown her into such an agitation and disposed her so favourably towards him that she might have changed, or modified, or suspended her opinion, even if it had become what he feared.

But when he saw this was too late he also went off immediately—as if to bed; but, in truth, in order that he might learn by listening if the

two met that night. He drew off his boots, put out his light, and stood listening just within his door, which he had set ajar.

Bella was in her own room; that he knew; for he was so well acquainted with the sound of her steps that he could in thought follow her to any part of the house as he sat in the parlour listening to them, while seeming to be intent on Mrs. Maxfield's business affairs. To-night he had thus been able to overhear her going straight to her own room. But was she not waiting till her mother came up—to go to her—and there confide all she knew or suspected?

As he stood there, listening for Mrs. Maxfield's heavier footfall, he became conscious of the increasing pain and stiffness of his arm and of the great heat which seemed to run from the finger-tips right up to his shoulder, and to throw off burning rays that penetrated his very brain. He tried to cool the growing fever in his blood by drinking glass after glass of water and by bathing his burning brow, so that he might keep himself in a condition of mind to watch all that might be passing, and act as prudence might dictate.

But his hand trembled so violently whenever he raised the glass to his lips: his knees seemed to be so suddenly stricken with weakness

while he stood there trying to listen, and such cold shiverings began to alternate with the hot fits, that he was obliged to fetch a chair to enable him to keep his place of observation. But he did keep it; and, just as the clock gave warning for eleven, Mrs. Maxfield, who had been busy finishing off the trimmings of a new cap, shut the door below, ascended the creaking stairs, and went straight to her own room.

“That, at all events, is some relief!” thought Reuben. “My ill luck doesn’t put it into her head to go to her daughter’s room, and so put them in the way of talking together. If Bella——”

But his thoughts are arrested. A step that he knows now only too well for his comfort is gliding along the passage with a softness that seems almost stealthiness. The mother’s door is opened and rapidly closed again. The two are together; and Reuben’s divining soul, which is just now scarcely less feverish and diseased than his body, whispers to him,

“At last! at last!”

The sense of impending danger roused once more into activity whatever of bodily or mental power Reuben remained in possession of under the fever that was growing upon him and filling his veins as with molten lava. He stepped out

into the passage; listened a moment, to be sure the servant was not still up; felt the chill breeze coming across his face through some window that had been left open, and again seemed paralysed by it and by the conflict between the two opposing influences of heat and cold. He shook as with an ague—felt severe pains darting through his loins and ascending to his shoulder-blades, and could scarcely avoid returning, in obedience to a physical instinct of safety, to his room and to his bed. But he battled bravely with this new and, to him, fearful enemy; for it was not so fearful as the thought that still was leading him on—that he might possibly be able to listen outside the door, where the two were now together, and know all that he most needed to know.

He reached the place, though he was then obliged to hold by the lintels of the door, and risk all the danger of another discovery only less humiliating than the chief one—that of his being found outside—a listener.

For a few seconds he could hear nothing, there was such a tumult of the blood in his own ears; but at last, after long and low murmuring within the room, he heard a kind of smothered cry of anguish, then a shaking of the bed, and then weeping and sobbing. He could listen no more.

He staggered back, like a drunken man, to his room, or rather like one who is doomed, but doomed by such a stroke that it is not even possible to bear up under it with the smallest semblance of manly fortitude and manly self-respect.

He staggers in through the open door of the bedroom; he tries to collect his trifling possessions, but with hands so hot that the mere touch of the earthenware basin sends a shudder through his frame; but his brain reels.

“Where am I? What must I do? O God!”

A moment more and he is spared all further consciousness; he lies on the floor delirious with fever.

Let us repeat the conversation which Reuben had striven to hear:—

“Mother! are you in bed?”

“Yes; but come here. How is it *you* are not yet in bed? Why, child, what is the matter? How you tremble! Dear me, whatever is it? Speak!”

“Oh, mother! I don’t know how to tell you.”

“Nonsense, Bella. You don’t mean ——”

“What, mother?”

“That you have taken a liking to —— Why,

what does possess you, to shudder like that? I declare you are quite frightening me!"

"Oh, mother! can he—can he be a robber?"

"A robber!" exclaimed Mrs. Maxfield, starting, and sitting up in her bed. "A robber!" she repeated. "Who?"

"Why, this—this stranger."

"Bella, dear, are you out of your right mind? Didn't he defend us from that dreadful robber who would have broken into the house?"

Bella sighed deeply and was silent, as if again a gleam of hope came with her mother's words—words that she had said previously so often to herself that they had lost at last all power.

"Mother, he has got the locket."

"The locket? Nonsense!"

"I saw it in his hands when he was fishing yesterday, although he hid it the moment he saw me."

Mrs. Maxfield was now silent in turn, evidently puzzled and uneasy, but unwilling to think ill of one to whom she had given so much of her confidence; and especially unwilling to believe that a young, inexperienced girl could have so much more penetration than herself as to be right in her alarm, even if this story of the locket were true.



“ But, Bella, you are not usually so suspicious. How is this ? ”

As Bella gave no answer, the mother went on.

“ Don't you see that the locket may have accidentally got into his possession, and that he took a fancy to it for some cause or other ? ”

Again Mrs. Maxfield wondered at Bella's silence, but went on speaking herself :—

“ Very likely, after all, he valued it as a relic of us. You know I have been kind to him, and——”

“ Mother ! ”

“ Yes.”

“ I didn't like to tell you before, for it seemed so shocking that I didn't myself believe it—no, not for a minute. But that dreadful night, while I was waiting outside, trembling and listening, wanting him to take from me the powder and ball I had fetched, I heard the two men talking within quite low, not a bit like what I had expected; and the horrible thought came to me that they knew one another—that they were companions—and that, after the older one had robbed us on the hill, the younger one had come up merely to get acquainted with us, and so to do some more dreadful act afterwards. And now they were met in our house, and were talking in low voices together. But just as I was about to

run back and tell you I heard the guns fired, and then I could think only how false and cruel my suspicions had been. And then, when I went into the room, there was he wounded, and standing over the dead robber."

Mrs. Maxfield had during this slid out of bed, and begun to put on her clothes, though her acts were curiously belied by her words, which persisted in expressions of disbelief.

"Why, of course, Bella, everybody felt just that; everybody must feel so."

"Yes, mother. But listen—I have been silent too long; I know I have, and I feel now how wrong it was."

"Do you know anything more?"

"I know, mother," she said, with increasing vehemence—"I know that I have again and again heard him say things that have filled me with doubts and vague alarms; but somehow I could not tell them to you—could not quite believe them myself. You know that the shepherd boy said there were two came into the valley together; you know that Mr. Jessop said he and the robber dined together, and were friendly while in his house; you know that it was he who gave to us the other portrait, wrapped up and addressed, which he said had fallen from the pocket of the dead robber; you know how strange

he often seems, even with us—how he walks about at night——”

“Pooh—pooh, silly girl! You are frightening yourself unnecessarily.”

“Oh, mother, do you—do you think so?” cried the poor girl, almost convulsively.

“To be sure I do. There, go back to bed, and we’ll talk it over by ourselves to-morrow; and you’ll see he’ll give us a proper explanation the moment we ask him.”

But here the speaker is interrupted; for, after a vain attempt at repression, Bella gives one piteous cry of,

“Oh, mother!” and then begins to sob so violently and with such a passion of grief that the mother can no longer misunderstand what is passing before her, but takes her daughter in her arms and kisses her, and quiets her, and at last whispers,

“There—there—don’t cry, darling. I fear I have been very blind. Come, undress and get into my bed; we will sleep together, and pray to God to enlighten us as to what we ought to do.”

And the poor child, who had thus thrown off at last a burden that had become too great for her, and who had obtained what she had yearned for but dared not hope, her mother’s condemna-

tion of her fears, was soon undressed, and soon nestling in her mother's bosom and going off into a happy sleep; for again her faith had revived.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### BELLA LEARNS ALL AT LAST.

BREAKFAST next morning happened to be a little later than usual through these events; there was, therefore, all the more reason for wondering that Reuben was not down when the two ladies entered the parlour.

“The lie-a-bed!” exclaimed Mrs. Maxfield, good-humouredly. “Run, Bella, and knock at his door, and ask him if he knows it is nearly nine o’clock.”

Bella did begin to run, as her mother said, and there was the old vivid blush on her face at the thought of what her mother’s manner implied; but she stopped when she had got a few yards, and determined she would send the servant instead. Then, again, that seemed so full of consciousness of something which Bella felt she had no right to dwell on that she fulfilled the message herself after all. She knocked, but she got no answer.

Presently Mrs. Maxfield, who was pouring out a cup of tea, heard a violent scream. Then, remembering the last night's conversation, she jumped instantly to the conclusion that some practical evidence was forthcoming of the folly of her own confidence in Reuben. The first result was that she ran to a cupboard where she kept her money, unlocked the door, took out a cash-box, opened it, though with difficulty, on account of her nervous fright, and saw all her money safe; then, thinking only of her daughter, she forgot cash-box, cupboard, and everything else, as she ran upstairs, leaving the money ready for dishonest hands, if any such were near, as fortunately for her there were not.

On reaching the passage where Reuben's room was she saw her daughter still outside, but standing there like one who had suddenly been frozen into ice or petrified into stone by an unexpected revelation of horror.

She was just able to murmur,

“ Oh, mother! I am afraid to go in; but he is raving mad.”

And in that condition did the two women find their guest, though he was no longer lying on the floor. He had got up in some moment of comparative sanity and crawled on to the bed, still dressed, with the exception of his coat.



It was no wonder that Bella had stood there resisting every womanly and natural impulse to help one so afflicted. These were the words the mother caught, among many more that were unintelligible, but terrible enough even in their vagueness.

“I won’t have it. No blood! no blood! There never was any yet on my hand, and there shan’t be. Do you hear?”

“We’ll rob him, if you like. That’s all right enough, while we are as we are.”

“Ay, it’s a miserable life after all. Women, such women! They make even a young man feel old and grey in wickedness. But I’ve done with them. But, hush! That’s a secret yet. Oh, I have been thinking about it for a long time, and now I mean to act. Yes, now’s the time. A little extra courage, that’s what’s wanted. Tell him your mind, and have done with it. He’s only a bully at bottom, though he has overawed me so long.”

Then he began to sing,

“ ‘ How the world goes round and round,  
How the world goes round.’ ”

“But, stop! stop! I want to stop, only I’m so confounded dizzy. What was I singing?”

Again he sung. This time it was the verse

from the flash song that he had chanted to Nobby Bob in the forest,

“ ‘ A cross cove is in the street for me,  
And I a poor girl of a low degree ;  
If I was as rich as I am poor,  
Ye never should go on the cross no more.’ ”

“ What d’ye think of that, Nobby? No—no ; don’t be a fool ! Nobody can hear me. Don’t you know we’re two hundred and more miles from the beak and from Bow Street ?

“ Ay, I can tell you—though I don’t care to talk about it—she just is beautiful ! But that’s the least of the matter. Hark ye ! Can you keep a secret ? Listen ! Well, I have found out that there is some sense in honesty and goodness. She’s taught me that.

“ Ah ! If—only—she—knew ! ”

This was said with so much feeling that Bella’s eyes began to overflow, but her mother had heard enough. A few minutes had changed her whole heart towards Reuben. She forgot all he had done or seemed to do for her ; she remembered only the appalling truth. She had brought a robber into her house, into her confidence, and, worse than all, into her daughter’s heart.

“ But, mother,” said Bella, hesitatingly, and

about to say something in pity of his present condition and need.

“Go, I say, and leave him to me.”

And Bella obeyed; and the mother, with stern face and unpitying heart, sat down to listen to whatever else he might say, not from any curiosity—she was too much horrified for that—but in order to enable her to judge better of his condition and think to herself how she was to deal with so extraordinary a calamity as this that had befallen.

It was nearly an hour before the doctor came. During the greater part of the time Mrs. Maxfield could only continue to encourage the anger she felt at having been so grossly imposed upon. Every word that broke from the white and parched lips helped to confirm the truth, so recently discovered, that this young man, whom she had received with so much confidence into her family, whom she had even secretly thought of as a husband for her daughter, and who had, without waiting for a mother's sanction, already entangled the unsuspecting girl's affections, was literally a robber, and in all probability had come into their house with the view to a robbery of them. She understood now clearly the meaning of the facts brought out at the inquest about the meeting of the two men

at "The Traveller's Joy," and the evidence of Tommy Larke, the shepherd. So, also, the possession by Reuben of the locket was explained; and as she thought of these things she grew more and more bitter with the sense of the humiliation, as well as more and more frightened at the prospect of the danger. Well (she said to herself), she knew the truth at last; and she would at all events keep sharp watch now upon him till he was out of the house and the neighbourhood.

Ought she to give him up to justice, and leave it to the law to determine whether or no there was sufficient evidence to commit him for trial? No; she would not do that. There would be too much exposure involved. Besides, she must not forget her poor Bella; who, while glad enough, no doubt, of her escape, would be appalled at the idea of their taking up a hostile attitude towards him. No; they must get rid of him as quietly as they could, and she must address herself with all her care, to lessen to her poor child the consequences of so great a shock.

While she was thus thinking, and letting her angry thoughts flow in a kind of strange accompaniment to Reuben's delirious speech, she suddenly got up from her chair, moved by some impulse, and went towards a coat which she saw hanging on the back of the door.

“It is no time to stand on niceties now ; such a man puts himself beyond the pale of ordinary courtesies. I will see what he carries about him.” She found nothing of moment in the pockets of his coat, and was again hanging it up when she felt, as she thought, a thickening in one particular part. So she felt that part carefully all over, and then could distinguish the shape of something within that clearly was neither the external cloth nor any part of the internal lining. She drew out a pair of scissors from a case in her pocket and ripped up the lining, and lo ! a purse—her daughter’s purse !

“Just as I thought. I thought I knew the shape of it by the feel outside. So he shared, did he, the fruits of the very robbery about which he was so full of hypocritical sympathy ! Oh, the young villain ! And I to be so imposed upon ! No doubt, then, Bella was correct about the locket. But where has he hidden that ? It is not here. He must have it about him.”

After simply taking off his coat the previous night Reuben had thrown himself on the bed as he was ; and, of course, remained in the same state all through his subsequent hours of delirious anguish. Mrs. Maxfield went back to the bedside and gazed upon him. He had turned with his face towards her, and she shrunk in fear as

she saw him look her way. But he took no notice. He did not know her, though his ravings seemed to show that some impressions, partly false, partly true, had been made upon him by her presence.

The pain exhibited in that youthful face did then for a moment overpower the widow's stern resolves with something like pity. She took a handkerchief from her pocket, dipped it in the water-jug, and wrapped it round his burning brow. This evidently soothed him a little—he dropped back, with eyes partly closed, and in a few minutes was in a state as nearly resembling sleep as it was possible for a human being to be with the brain in such a state of morbid activity.

Mrs. Maxfield now looked closely at his waistcoat, and after a time was able, during one of his movements, to perceive—inside it—the opening of a pocket in the lining, some distance from the edge. She could not help trembling as she slid her hand across his breast, under the waistcoat, to reach this pocket, for the act made her feel as though she were herself for the instant a kind of thief. But his unceasing restlessness caused her to draw her hand back in a fright, without having actually got into the pocket at all. She was too much engrossed (perhaps even too much agitated) to reflect that, in his present state, she



might do what she pleased with him, and yet be quite free from the danger of his discovering anything about it then.

But she had a great desire to get back this locket. It seemed to her that while he held it he would be still dwelling upon the possibility of Bella's affection ; for she was inconsistent enough, poor woman ! to believe the sick robber did care for her daughter, even while she continued to reason about him and his actions on the hypothesis of robbery being his exclusive end and aim. Presently she heard the doctor's horse galloping along the hard road, and then she remembered that the doctor might himself discover the locket in its hiding-place, and so guess just what the poor mother didn't want anybody now to guess or speculate upon. Again she slid her hand, but more determinedly, into the inner pocket of Reuben's vest, and drew forth the locket which the young thief had placed so near to his heart.

Reuben just then gave a deep sigh, as though conscious either of some relief or some great trouble ; and the mother could not but feel moved, nor avoid a superstitious belief that he was in some way conscious of her act and reproaching her for it.

But all such reflections were cut short by the

opening of the door, and by the doctor's appearance on the threshold, accompanied by Bella, who had evidently been doing her best to wash away before he came the tell-tale tears that persisted in flowing forth every now and then; but who, while desiring to shun observation, could not help lingering for a single moment at the door, nor casting one most anxious and inquiring glance towards the bed before she retired in the same silent way in which she had approached.

"Why, what's the matter with our young hero now?" asked the doctor. "Is greatness too much for him? The fame of his valour I find is flying everywhere about through the whole valley."

"Please to look at him," said Mrs. Maxfield, evasively. "We found him in this state only an hour ago, when we came to call him to breakfast. He is quite delirious."

"Oh! I think you needn't be frightened. He's a strong young fellow, and not to be knocked over like a ninepin by a rude blow. The wound and the excitement together have no doubt done it all."

While the doctor was thus speaking, and while, after his speaking, he went to feel Reuben's pulse, look at his face and head, examine the state of his wound, &c., all as carefully as he

could, Mrs. Maxfield was hurriedly thinking to herself,

“Shall I tell him what I have discovered? No, I think not. It will be pleasanter for us when he has gone away if no one else knows. Besides, the young man may have intended better things than we give him credit for in coming to us. It would be cruel to deprive him of a chance of living an honest life in future, if that is really what he means. No; I think I'll keep things as quiet as I can, both for his sake and ours.”

No doubt Mrs. Maxfield intended to reason justly, and therefore believed in her reasons when she spoke of doing this partly for his sake; but it is equally clear that she thought a great deal more of the benefit to herself and daughter of the secrecy proposed.”

Presently the doctor began to listen to some of Reuben's ravings with curiosity.

“Oh, it's a bad life! it's a mistake! Give it up!” Then, as if his own words had misled him and drawn him off into another track, he went on: “Yes; give it up to me! Splendid place up here! Make a fine owl's nest, for it opens to the air. I can see the stars through this hole in the tree. If the Squire's plate had been twice as bulky this would hold it all. Don't

you wish we were going to try if it wouldn't, Nobby Bob?"

"Nobby Bob," echoed the doctor, half in amazement, half in wonder.

"Oh, it seems to me that his poor brain has got quite muddled with all the 'stuff we heard at the inquest about the robbery, and the concealing the plate in or about a tree."

"Oh, yes, I understand. Well, well; we'll soon set him right again, I doubt not. Keep that wet handkerchief to his head; it can't do harm and may do good. Change it as often as it gets hot. I'll send you some medicine immediately, and call to-morrow. But I predict this will be a short case, though it's a little heady and furious while it lasts."

"Thank you; we should like to have him better for his own sake, poor young man. You know he's quite a stranger to us."

"Yes, yes; I know. You took him in quite in the scriptural way, and you have been rewarded."

"Yes," said Mrs. Maxfield, drily, for she was thinking of anything rather than what the doctor referred to—the service Reuben had performed in defending the house and family from the midnight burglar.

"Miss Bella doesn't look very well this morning."

“Oh! 'tis nothing—nothing,” hurriedly responded the mother, half divining that the doctor was about to hint something about the connection between her indisposition and Reuben's great danger. But the doctor, whatever he might have desired to learn for his own use or satisfaction, said no more, and so they parted.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### REUBEN THINKS TO EVADE TROUBLE.

ABOUT midnight, that is to say, about four-and-twenty hours after the first attack, Reuben woke to a kind of consciousness. He seemed to himself to have just wakened from the sleep that followed the attack made upon him in the garret at Billy Marks's, so vivid was the impression remaining of all the incidents of that affair. Feeling pain all over him, every limb aching and languid, and a confusion of brain so great that he could not for a long time tell where he was, Reuben did at last realise that he had been dreaming, and dreaming with extreme vividness, of events that had not taken place this night, but some time previously.

In vain he struggled for mental light. There was a kind of stupor over him that seemed to shut out every avenue to perception; he only knew he wanted very much to be able to perceive,



to think, and, above all, to know what was the matter with him.

As he lay in this way for an hour or two, again and again going off into absolute sleep or insensibility, he became aware of some one's presence in his chamber. He heard, or fancied he heard, a door open and close; then a step; and then it seemed to him that some one was actually standing over him, looking down upon him; and yet so great, so irresistible was the stupor, that he could not open his eyes and see who it was. Once he fancied he did at last open them just for a moment, and a thrill of horror passed through him to see nothing, while still feeling there was some human or supernatural being near.

Suddenly he feels an exquisitely grateful sense of something cool passing across his brow, and drawing away as if in innumerable thin streams or threads all the pain of his head. The thick darkness seemed to grow lighter by degrees. If now, he thought, he could only open his eyes he must surely see if there was any one there, or if he were all the while only dreaming on in this terrible way. Again he feels the coolness upon his brow. It is now as if an angel had descended from the skies and breathed gently upon his forehead. How sweet it is!

“Oh, do not fly!” he seemed to yearn to say

to it; "wait for me till I know you again as I knew you once when I was a very little child." And the presence seems to understand the unspoken thought, and to stay, and to smile upon him, and to whisper,<sup>3</sup>

"I will stay. Be patient. You shall know me yet—who I am."

And then for the third time the delicious coolness caresses his brow, and the world grows suddenly brilliant, and his eyes open, and though they are at first dazzled by a glare of light from which they are obliged to turn away, it is only to enable them to see, when again they open, the bending form and fair face of Bella Maxfield.

Yes, Reuben sees that, and sees the glad and brilliant flush of maiden shame that spreads over the fair cheek at being thus unexpectedly surprised while trying secretly to minister to his wants, and he can just hear and comprehend her words.

"You are better. Mother will be so glad; I will tell her." And then, a moment after, she was gone; and, although the candle she had held remained, the former darkness seemed to come round him as if to repossess itself of the whole of Reuben's life—past, present, and future.

He knew where he was now, though for a time he still did not remember his horrible

position. That face, that blush, in his present twilight of mind, carried him back to the days preceding the dread discovery; and made him feel happy, strangely happy, in his bed of sickness, in spite of a consciousness of surrounding gloom, which he had no need yet to examine.

But he was also conscious of intense bodily languor, that seemed to weigh down his spirits and suggest an impending evil. What could it be? She was the same. Sweet and modest as ever, and by no means inclined to forget him. Would she had stayed! He might not have been able to talk to her; but what good it would have done him to have her sit there by his side prattling to him, and allowing him, now and then, to look upon her face.

Ah!—her portrait! Was that safe? He put his hand to his breast outside the vest—feels it is gone; he thrusts the now fierce hand inside; the pocket is empty. Reuben cannot but cry out. And then, alas! he finds himself awakened once more to the real light of day, and to all the cruelty of the actual truth, so different from his late pleasant dreams.

Again he feels the fire, so nearly extinguished, burning up fiercely in his brain, mounting higher and higher with every thought of anguish and despair that comes across his mind.

“I have been out of my senses, and I shall lose them again if I do not take care. Stay, stay, stay! Yes, I remember that I took off my coat when I came in, and then I felt such intense pain—such shiverings and burnings, and then —. No, no; it is all a blank from that time. and yet, a blank in which I seem to have lived over again my whole life.

“But the portrait. Was it here when I came to bed? Yes; I’ll swear to that. And now it is gone.

“To lie down and die will be at once the easiest and wisest plan. I feel three parts dead already. Can’t I help the process? If I could reach my razor. I’ll try; though my limbs don’t seem to belong to me any longer.”

Reuben slid off the bed on to the strip of carpet, quite unable to stand, and began to crawl towards the dressing-table, when a new thought arrested his progress.

“Let me be sure it is as I suppose. If they have searched me, lying in that state on the bed, they have previously searched my coat. The purse was there.”

Reuben reached the door, and got on to his knees, and then was just able to let his hands creep up the coat by holding to it for support at the same time, till they reached the place

where the purse once was, but was now no longer.

“Yes, that’s clear enough. Well, I’ll soon settle all now.”

And as he again crawled towards the spot where he could obtain the instrument to end his miserable existence, he felt himself speculating on his own motives.

“Suicide! I didn’t think to end life that way, either. Nor do I think I should do it if I could get this horrible heat out of my brain. But that, and the seeing them again, now that they know me to be a robber, are enough for me. Quite enough.”

He did not hear the step that was behind him; did not know of the watcher who was following him, wondering as to his purpose, yet half guessing it, and waiting to be quite sure—waiting till the shaking hand opened the little drawer of the looking-glass and touched the ivory-sheathed danger. Then there was a hand laid upon his hand, stronger at present than his own; and for an instant he gazed at the hand as if fascinated by its thin white fingers, not turning his head to see to whom it belonged, for he had fancied it was Bella’s, and dared not meet her gaze.

“Madman! Are you so wicked as this?” demanded Mrs. Maxfield, in a tone of lofty anger,

that, perhaps, was of all things the best calculated just then to check Reuben's mood. "Have you not sinned enough in your life but you would now make your death a still greater sin? So young, can you be so hardened against every thought of God, who intrusted to you this frame for wise and good purposes, and added to it talents that might have made you conspicuous among your fellow-men? Come back, this instant, to your bed, and there, I conjure you, pour out your soul in thankfulness to Him that you have been spared this last and worst outrage."

Reuben had neither voice, nor thought, nor strength of any kind to contend with her. He had only a kind of fear that she would shame him, if he did not obey her, by lifting him as a child back to the bed. So he was got back, he knew not how, partly by his own efforts, partly by hers; and then, when he had sat for a few minutes staring like a maniac towards the window, and wondering what it was this woman was saying to him, he was brought back by the sight of a tear glittering in the woman's eye, and something of nervous sympathy quivering about her lip, and then he heard her say to him,

"Oh, I beseech you, if you are sorry for your past life, and determined to amend it, do not add to our grief—to mine and my daughter's"—she



could not help lowering her voice over that last word, as if to make it pass more easily or altogether unnoticed, and thus only made it seem the more full of significance—"by any rash and evil behaviour. We will nurse you till you are well. Then, all we ask is, that you will go away in peace, with our best wishes, and with your guilt unknown to any but ourselves."

Reuben looked at her, as his feeble mind strove to take in, sentence by sentence, the full meaning of all she said; and at last his lip began to quiver, and then he tried to command his emotion in a manly manner; but he could not, he was yet scarcely of man's years, and he was sorely tried. So he turned and dropped on the bed, giving way to his grief in a manner new to him, and which wrung Mrs. Maxfield's heart, as she heard his low sobs, and saw the rise and fall of his quivering shoulders and frame.

"Come, come, be of good cheer! You are so very young, and therefore have so much time to set things right both with God and man. Now quiet yourself, and I will come in again by-and-by. Only, before I go, if I ask you one request, or favour if you like to call it so, dare you refuse me?"

Reuben shook his head.

"I do not understand that. Do you give me

your solemn promise that neither now nor hereafter you will touch your own life? Give me that assurance, and I on my part promise you in all sincerity mine and Bella's——" she here went back to alter her words, "mine and my daughter's full forgiveness."

"I promise," said Reuben, in a hollow voice.

"Good-by, then, for a little while! Compose yourself. Sleep if you can." And so saying, Mrs. Maxfield went out, carrying with her, as a precaution, the razor.

"Sleep!" echoed Reuben, mockingly to himself, as he turned his face to the wall, and there lay, hour after hour, without movement or sign of life.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE DOCTOR'S STRANGE CONDUCT.

THE doctor was right in his faith in Reuben's vital stamina. He began steadily to mend, though he was at once so silent and so depressed that the doctor was strangely puzzled. Usually he had found such patients recover more than their old animal spirits, from the very force of reaction against the causes that had temporarily kept them down. But the better Reuben's health became, the more gloomy grew his mind. In vain the doctor tried to induce him to talk, either about little incidents of the neighbourhood, which his professional experience made so interesting, or about public events, or about himself, his recovery, his movements, or his friends. Reuben listened—sometimes with interest, always with patience, but always in silence.

Of course some theory was sure to spring up under such mental provocation; and the doctor's theory was that the young fellow was in love with

Bella Maxfield, and that the young lady did not in return care for him. How natural that when the two were thrown together under such exciting circumstances that one, at least, of the pair should be deeply touched by a feeling for the other. The unlucky thing was that the effect was not reciprocal—that is to say, if the young fellow was what he seemed to be, clever, respectable, deserving. How natural, too, that one so young as Reuben should be smitten by the sight of so beautiful a girl, and allow his feelings to get too strong for him, under the circumstances of the case; and so tell her, perhaps, what he ought to have concealed, and then find in what a delusion he had been.

This was the doctor's theory; and although he said nothing about it for some time, during which he paid daily visits to the sick man's chamber, he thought it a pity for the lad to be there, "eating his heart out" for want of a word of counsel. The doctor had known in his younger days a very sharp disappointment of the same kind; and although now, with his buxom wife and his five children, he could laugh at all such reminiscences, he knew well enough that his boyish love-story had been no laughing matter at the time.

But what should he do with his theory?

Reuben was a stranger, and Mrs. Maxfield might be seriously offended by any hint on the subject. Still, he thought he would try at the first opportunity to say something to her; and one morning, just when he was leaving the house, not having met with its mistress, he found her waiting for him at the porch, obviously desiring to speak with him. He was now, in fact, to have his opportunity.

“ Well, Mr. Robson, how do you find him this morning? ”

“ Better, decidedly better—as regards his body. His pulse is good, appetite middling, but his spirits as bad as ever. In fact, there’s evidently something upon his mind.”

“ Indeed! ” said Mrs. Maxfield, but not with the surprise the doctor had anticipated, and which he thought would have been natural. “ And when do you think he is likely to be able to go away? ”

“ Well, that is a very difficult question to answer. I might say—if the question were only to get rid of him—he might go in three or four days; I mean there would be then no imputation on me professionally nor on your hospitality, if it were thought necessary so to arrange it. But——” and then the doctor stopped, looking at Mrs. Maxfield, whose eyes turned from his.

She paused for full half a minute, beating her toe on the gravel, as if impatient of her own silence and his ; and then she said,

“ I should like him to be really able to move about and attend to his business without danger of a relapse before ——”

“ Well, I think that particular danger need not be feared.”

Again the toe beat on the gravel. Why didn't the doctor speak out plainly his meaning —“ that particular danger” ? Was there, then, some other danger that he saw and thought she ought to see ?

“ Come, come, my dear madam, I am a bad one to beat about the bush ; and I think, after we have known each other so long, it scarcely ought to be necessary. I will say, then, that if I myself cared anything about this young man I should not like him to go off in his present frame of mind.”

“ Is he so very miserable ? ”

“ I don't think I ever saw in one so young such persistent melancholy — a gloom so unrelieved by natural fits of hope or gaiety. I don't mean to say he is absolutely immovable. I have made him laugh once or twice ; but it did me so much more harm to see him after it than it could have done him good while



the mirth lasted, that I hadn't the heart to try any more."

"Can you suggest any cause, or throw any light upon the matter?"

"How is that possible? He has not said one word to me, and——" you will not—the doctor seemed to be thinking, as he stopped and looked at her.

"Neither am I prepared to do so," said Mrs. Maxfield, decisively. "We must just do the best we can to get him fairly well, and then, of course, he will depart. As I said before, he was quite a stranger to us."

"Very well. I wish you good morning," said Mr. Robson, a little nettled at his own failure. He didn't think this treatment exactly neighbourly. Here had he for years past been narrating to Mrs. Maxfield, in his quiet, non-committal sort of way, all the gossip of the neighbourhood, to her great personal satisfaction; and yet the first time that she could repay him with interest, and add to his stores for the future, she turns silent and obstinate, and will say nothing.

Of course this behaviour again modified his theory. It was Mrs. Maxfield now that was the obstacle, not the young lady; a fact that was strengthened by what he had observed of the

young lady's countenance and behaviour when he was called in on the outbreak of the fever. It was true that her distress might have been caused by the mere consciousness of the distress that her want of love was inflicting upon him—her and her mother's youthful benefactor; but the doctor acknowledged to himself, on a calm review of the case, as illustrated by all the pertinent facts of life he had ever heard of, that young ladies do bear with wonderful fortitude that kind of distress, and even at times snatch from it a sort of "fearful joy," a proud though secret contentment.

But what was he to do? Of course he could not by word or deed act in an unfaithful way to the mother. On the other hand, he really thought it would be best for all parties if he could get Reuben to speak, and see the hopelessness of his desire (if the doctor's theory were correct), and the necessity for manly resignation to get over the business as soon as possible and have done with it. It needed little penetration to see that if Reuben really cherished a hopeless love for Miss Maxfield, the sooner he was out of the house and far away from the neighbourhood the better for him; so that talking with Reuben might help to promote the widow's object of a

speedy departure, and yet benefit the melancholy invalid himself.

On the very next visit the doctor determined he would try to bring things to a crisis ; so, after feeling the pulse, &c., he began :—

“ Do you know you are behaving badly to me ? ”

“ Badly ! You ! ” echoed the astonished Reuben, who rose on his elbow on the sofa where he was reclining, in the sudden excitement of this unexpected attack.

“ Yes. You make me look like an impostor ! ”

“ I ! Really —— ” Here Reuben stopped in confusion, while the colour began to come to his cheek.

“ An impostor, I say ! You make me seem as though I didn't know what's the matter with you ; or, at least, if I did, as if I hadn't the skill to cure you of your malady.”

“ I—I—do not understand,” said Reuben, strangely troubled, and having a kind of consciousness there was something dangerous beyond all this odd behaviour.

“ Now, I say, I do know ; and that I have cured you ; and therefore, if you don't behave as a man should who is cured, it is you who must be the impostor.”

Reuben's eyes began to flash with a fierce, red light ; but the doctor's tone, and face, and

manner were all so full of good humour, and of a latent sense of fun, that it was impossible to quarrel with him, and not easy to believe he really meant any kind of personal unkindness.

“Come, that’s right! I am glad to see you have a bit of life and energy in you, even if it’s only to tempt you to pitch into me.”

Reuben laughed, then turned away uneasily, wondering in his secret soul what all this was about, and shrinking from explanations that he might have only too much reason to dread.

“Come, now; can’t you rouse yourself to something like a healthy feeling again? That’s what I want to see. What’s the use of making jokes to a deadly-lively fellow like you, that either can’t see them at all, or passes them over in superb contempt; or, worst of all, pretends to laugh very much as one might suppose a spectre would laugh if arrested in one of its midnight wanderings from yonder churchyard, and compelled to listen to a good thing.”

This was too much for Reuben. He did laugh now till he fairly roared again; but at last his mirth subsided, and he began to set his teeth hard, and to look viciously at the doctor for having broken through the pale of reserve and melancholy in which he took a kind of pleasure in obscuring his life.

Suddenly the doctor changed his whole manner. He threw off all affectation of playfulness, and said, in his bluntest and most serious manner,—

“ There’s something the matter with you that you conceal ; and I want to ask you whether it’s either manly or reasonable to let things go on in this way without a proper effort being made. Tell me what it is, and I promise you, first, absolute secrecy ; and, secondly, my best help in counsel.”

“ Thank you, Sir ; but there’s nothing to tell. I’ll get away as fast as I can. I’ll go to-day—nay, this hour, if you think me strong enough.”

“ Don’t be a fool. I understand. You wish to keep your own counsel, however much it may injure you to do so. But there are others concerned.”

“ Others ? ”

“ Yes. You are a stranger here, I understand, accepting the hospitality of a stranger. Once again, I say, don’t be a fool ! And do keep quiet on the sofa. Keep quiet, will you ? Of course I know you can put on your things and take up your knapsack, and walk—right through the rain—for a mile or two, perhaps even for more, to drop down at last, and be picked up by some good Christian on the roadside. But I don’t myself

see much independence in leaving us all that way, after——”

“No, no; and I beg you to understand—*all of you*—that I am truly grateful.”

“Very well. Show your gratitude, then, by your good sense. When you do go, go in a sensible and Christian-like manner. And suppose, before you go, since you won't tell me what's amiss, what do you say to my telling you?”

Reuben's face grew even paler than it now habitually was. Was the doctor about to speak of his past life? Did he, too, know his patient in his true character—that of a robber? Had Mrs. Maxfield told him? Or was it Bella's relations towards him that the doctor was thinking about? And, if so, of course Mrs. Maxfield had not yet revealed her knowledge of his guilt.

Tossing between these thoughts and fears, Reuben said nothing in answer to the doctor's query. That gentleman therefore resumed—

“Come; I was a young fellow myself once, and can understand your case perfectly. Bella Maxfield—eh?”

Still Reuben was silent, though now he could not help listening in a somewhat different frame of mind.

“The young lady *is* very beautiful, certainly; and she's as good as she's beautiful—eh?”



Reuben was still silent.

“And the mother, as is the way of mothers, is cantankerous, I suppose, and nips the budding hopes—eh?”

Reuben was still silent, but looking stern, as if angry, shocked, and resentful that such liberties should be taken with such names, persons, and ideas. They were sacred to him.

“Silence, you know, is always consent in such cases.”

“No, doctor——” began Reuben, with a terrible cloud on his brow; but he was stopped, nor was he sorry to be stopped; for although he did feel really aggrieved by the conversation, his own position in the matter was so complicated, that honest and healthy speech or action were alike paralysed.

“Stop! Hear me out, and then talk to your heart's content. Suppose—only suppose, I say—that things are as I have sketched them, does it follow that you are to lie here eating your heart out”—a favourite phrase of the doctor's—“and doing nothing else? Hang it, man, you can either determine to give her up and try to find another girl as good; or, if that doesn't seem a very hopeful prospect in your present mood, you can determine to nurse a truly heroic resolution—never to worship anybody else; but then you

know you must work, and do your duty, as the catechism says, in the station to which it has pleased God to call you, for else you'll only be a milksop instead of a hero; or, lastly, if neither of these methods will do, can't you say I won't give her up, I'll go away; but I'll come back again rich enough to remove all objections (if that is the objection, about which I know nothing); ay, and I will win her, spite of everybody, spite of the very devil himself!"

Reuben got up, and, forgetting his weakness, began to walk once or twice across the floor, though he soon sat down again on the sofa, made conscious of his weakness.

"Now, don't say *I* advised this, that, or the other. I only say don't pine on in this miserable hang-dog fashion, and make everybody else miserable about you."

"Well, doctor," said Reuben at last, with a sickly smile on his face, and putting out his hand, which the doctor took warmly and shook, "I will promise you *that*, and in the spirit in which you ask it."

"That's right; that's right. I always had faith in you, only you were getting to be such a deuced long time in justifying one's faith that I thought I'd give you a fillip. That's all."

"I would speak more frankly," said Reuben,

with a slight tinge in his cheek; "and I wish I could——" here he began to falter and hesitate.

"So you can. Out with it! 'Twill do you good."

The deathly paleness of Reuben's face at that moment arrested the doctor's confident assertions, and showed him that Reuben's mental ailments were either deeper seated than he had thought, or else that his bodily strength was less than he had calculated on. So, after a pause, while he made Reuben take the medicine-draught that was now due, he said,

"Well, we have talked quite enough for to-day. We understand each other now. And all I have to say is, I shall be glad to help you if I can."

The two men again shook hands, and then the doctor went away.

"Ay," thought Reuben to himself; "he's a good fellow; but even he would be appalled were he to guess what it is I should have to tell were I to begin to speak. He has rightly divined one part of the case. How he would stare if he were informed that that is almost a trifle to the other part, of which he knows and suspects nothing!

"Well, one thing is clear. It is time to be going away. What a prospect for me! Why did

not I finish the business I was about when she stopped me ?

“Tell all! Ay, I wish I could. How many times of late has that desire come over me! Yet, how is it to be done? I could not tell my story to him. I need some motive greater than he can afford me by any amount of kindness for the pain and shame I must endure. No; it is *they* who ought to know. Yet, even if they would listen to me, could I sit before them and look upon their faces, and watch the changes there as I went on? No; that were a torture beyond, I think, the willing endurance of any living man. To fancy one’s self saying, in one’s secret thoughts, ‘Madam, such has been my past life;—does it not entitle me to your daughter? Bella, I love you, and I am a thief; can you refuse me?’

“Of course I shall go over the old ground again—fever, frenzy, and all the rest of it, if I begin to talk to myself in this way. Cease, then, cease! As the doctor says, don’t be a fool!

“What if I were to write my story and leave it, at my departure, for them to read? Would it not give me some occupation to help me over these remaining days that I must spend here? I shall think of the same things, whether I write about them or no; only that, if I write I may

please myself by the fancy of some possible good to my future resulting.

“This is clear. I will not deceive them any more, even if I can do so. I do not know that I could deceive them if I would. But I will not. They know enough to suspect all the rest. Men don't suddenly become robbers and companions of robbers; so that they can easily guess the nature of my past life from what they have known of the recent life.

“Is it mere delusion, or do I rightly think that even now Bella does not altogether hate me? She well might hate me. I begin to understand now the sort of outrage upon her I have committed in daring to love her at all—to think of her at all. I can see at last, and personally realise, how the respectable world sees the proceedings, and how she might and must resent it if she be like the rest of the world.

“God bless her!—If it was indeed she who was bending over me when I waked, and who spoke so sweetly to me before I could well understand what she was saying, and whose voice seemed so much to resemble the voice of that angel who seemed to descend to me in my dreamy sleep or delirium.

“If she were to read a faithful record of my life, saw how I became a—how I became what I

am, and why I have so long had a something within me craving for a different and better life, might she not, by degrees, begin to pity, to forgive, and so at last again to love me ?

“But only if I were myself then worthy of her. I understand that. I could have no other chance with her than that. And could I not work? Could I not toil, and suffer scorn and poverty, and hunger, if only I were once determined for them? And I could be determined if only she gave me hope.

“But she will never do that. No, at least she will not do that now. She cannot, she ought not. Have I, then, courage to go on without, merely to hope that some day she will? I cannot tell. I fear; but at least I will do this thing which I have so often thought of. I will write my story, and judge after it is done how to make it known to them.”

But there was a humble though serious difficulty in Reuben's way—the absence of pen and ink and paper. He shrank from any kind of premature disclosure of what he was about to do. He did not even feel sure he would be able to go through with it, no matter how narrow the limits imposed upon himself.

Should he offer to go on with some of his former duties—preparation of accounts, &c.—



suggesting it as a kind of useful recreation during his days of convalescence, and so get the things he wanted about him in a natural way? No; he was in no position to remind them of their former confidence. He was no longer their friend or their guest. He must rigidly confine himself in all relations with them to an attitude of complete isolation, offering nothing, expecting nothing. Better as it was to say so to oneself, he must not forget he was a robber, for they assuredly would be always remembering it while he was in the house.

He began to look around his room to see if there was anything that would do for the paper. It occurred to him that he might ask for pen and ink without exciting the same kind of remark that would necessarily be caused by a request for many sheets of paper. There was an old wardrobe in the room, which he had looked in on the night of his arrival—his first night here—and well he remembered how he had turned away from it in a kind of fright as he saw it was filled with things of greater or less value, as if he had felt instinctively the necessity to shun the temptation of looking any further.

No danger of that now. Reuben was just conscious of his improvement in that respect, and, in a sense, grateful for it; and the fact coming

home to him thus unexpectedly told him how great a gulf divided his former from his present self. He really felt no longer capable of any kind of pecuniary temptation. The new ideas, new desires, had so filled his whole being with new habits of thought that he, perhaps rightly, felt he might be trusted under circumstances of difficulty to his honesty with untold gold.

He went to the wardrobe, pushing a chair along before him for the support of his hand, and tried to open it. It was locked! The mere consciousness that it was so, and that it must have been locked during his illness (in alarm, of course), was like a dagger driven suddenly into Reuben's heart. When honesty is really growing up out of dishonesty it does so want to be acknowledged!

He was in no mood to continue his search just then.

In the afternoon, when he had dined and when he began to feel a little stronger, he again set out on his search round the room. He found, high up towards the ceiling, a little cupboard which he had not before noticed, or, at least, not with any interest. He got on to the chair to reach it. He could not at first open it, and he began to fear that this, too, was locked. But, at last, by the aid of his knife, he was able to get hold of

the edge of the door and to open it; and there, among many other old and dust-covered relics of bygone times, he saw several large and decayed-looking parchment account-books. One of these he got out, and looked at its leaves. They were all written over, from beginning to end of the volume. He took another, with the same result. But when he came to the last of the series he found a number of blank pages at the end, as though the deceased Mr. Maxfield had altered his plan of book-keeping, and begun with a new set of books.

Those blank pages should be his writing paper. The servant would bring him pens and ink, and he would at once begin his self-imposed task.

An hour later Reuben was accordingly sitting with his little table before him, his writing materials ready, his eyes gazing vacantly (so far as the objects they saw were concerned) out upon the open moors, but with tears gathering as he sat, and thought, and tried to shape his thoughts into words which would not come. He seemed only able to feel, not think, as he strove to begin. But at last the trembling hand—trembling alike with bodily weakness and mental agitation—began to move across the paper: first very slowly, and with many attendant blots and

erasures, but by-and-by with greater speed and facility, as he began to forget the art of expression and give way to the flow of natural emotion and memory. And thus Reuben told his story.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

REUBEN TRIES TO EXPLAIN HOW THE "WAR"  
BEGAN BETWIXT HIMSELF AND THE WORLD.

"IN attempting to give you some notion of my past life, I know very well there are certain preliminaries to be settled. I write this, you will think, in the hope of influencing your judgment and sympathy; nor do I wish to deny that, if I could hope anything, this would be the one desire of my heart. But that hope, if it exist at all, is too weak to bias my course now. *I want to tell the truth*, both for my own sake and yours. I want you to believe it is the truth, and that I conceal nothing that you ought to know—if, indeed, you care to know anything more whatever about me.

"This is my fear—that you will not believe me. Can I wonder at your disbelief? No. I confess to you that I have lived in the conceit that I was skilful in deception—that it was my faith that to cheat the world so skilfully that it did not

even suspect it was cheated was one of the most useful of arts. Why, then, are you to believe me now?

“I cannot answer my own question. I can only say, and, with an anguish of which I have never before had experience, that if you do not believe me you will err, and you will do me the greatest possible injustice.

“But perhaps you will think that, even if I try to tell truthfully so shameful a story, my own habits and want of principle must have unfitted me for such a task. It may be so: I dare not deny the statement. But, on the other hand, I ask you if no allowance is to be made for great changes in our whole being? It seems to me that I am no longer the same man that I was in any way. I have lost much—my courage, energy, cheerfulness of spirits; and sad, indeed, is my case if I have gained nothing in the sense of what is right.

“But why dwell on these things, except to delay what I have wished to perform? Yes; even now I find myself stopping between every sentence, gazing at what I have written, and hesitating whether I shall not tear the paper to pieces and hurry back to my old career. The temptation is often strong upon me. If I finally give way to it, do not wonder—you ought even



to pity me. Meantime, I must at least act on the assumption I have taken up—that I have quitted for ever the world of knavery, and stand like a mendicant outside the door of honest respectability, knocking feebly, and asking without hope of success for admittance and succour. This, then, is my story:—

“In one of the filthy lanes in the neighbourhood of St. Giles’s, many years ago, my parents rented a cellar, at the mouth of which, spread along the pavement, was an assortment of the most heterogeneous articles that can well be imagined. Old boots and shoes, saucepans, workmen’s tools, pocket-handkerchiefs, broken iron, and dingy, coloured prints in maple frames, some grossly indecent, some of the most exalted religious character—a bargain picked up at a sale—were our staple commodities. My earliest recollections of my parents are of a short, thin man, with a patch over his left eye, whose hoarse, surly voice I never heard without an inward shrinking; and of a whitefaced, stooping woman, whose gentle tones still linger in my memory in startling contrast. About eleven o’clock every morning my father would get up and go abroad, seldom returning until midnight, frequently an hour or two later; when, peeping cautiously

above the clothes from my little bed in the corner, I used to see him come rolling down the steps, growling some unintelligible but sufficiently understood denunciations. The tears of my mother in reply to some more than usually harsh expression particularly annoyed him; and not unfrequently his hints that she should give over that 'd—— snivelling' reached her in the shape of the first article he could lay hold of to hurl at her head. But if he had experienced a run of ill-luck at the cards, quarrelled with a comrade, or been balked of his object in his nocturnal adventures, he was sure to knock my mother down on some provocation or other, real or fancied, before he could sit to his supper in peace or enjoy it with any relish. And, to do him justice, when these little enjoyments had been obtained, he would not unfrequently, after supper, be gracious enough to give my mother a kiss, and seat her on his knee whilst he smoked his pipe. And woe to her if she were not instantly and duly grateful for these condescensions!

“Whilst very young I was sent to a school kept by an old woman several streets off; and well I remember the care with which my mother kept me by her side in passing to and fro; how fiercely she kept off other children from speaking to me; and how frightened she always was of

my getting any kind of childish acquaintances among the people about us. When I was quite old enough to go alone to school, still she went with me; or, if she could not, she sent an old man who used to run errands for her, in return for a bit of bread now and then. My poor mother! I knew not then what it meant. I know only too well now. She wanted to keep me from the life into which I subsequently fell.

"The first great blow to her in this hope was the conduct of my father. Happening one day to want the very fourpence which my mother had given me, wrapped up in paper, for my week's schooling, he swore I should give up going to school. What was I to go for? Did I want to be a better schollard than he was? And so, with a few oaths from him and some tears from her, it was settled there was to be no more school.

"I remember crying in the midst of my joy; for I was fond of school and of my mistress; but, on the other hand, I had a strange notion of the new liberty I should get by being freed from school restraint. From that time my daily occupation was to look after our stock in trade on the pavement, whilst my mother was busied below; but this I managed to vary whenever I could by a play with the other ragged and filthy boys of the

neighbourhood, merging not unfrequently into a fight, and this again ending generally in my being unexpectedly snatched up by my mother, and ingloriously borne off amid the shouts of my comrades.

“Of our customers little need be said. They were generally the poorest and most squalid of the very poor and very squalid inhabitants of the parts around, who used to haggle for half an hour with my mother for the merest trifle, the manœuvres on both sides almost invariably coming to the same conclusion—the party seeking to purchase walking away in the hope that my mother would then yield and call after him, whilst she, apparently quite decided, would bustle about among the things, all the while, however, skilfully measuring with her eye the distance of the retreating party, so as to let him go just so far as to be convinced of her obstinacy, and, if he must have the article, return, but not so far but that when that hope failed she might send me to catch him, bellowing lustily all the way, ‘Mother says you may have it!’

“But the parties to whom *we* were customers were a peculiar race. They were of divers ages, sexes, and appearance, but had a marvellously similar mode of doing business. They seemed to prefer twilight; were apparently of a retired,

unsocial disposition, avoiding our lane whenever strangers were bustling about; and, when they did come, appeared merely looking for something they wanted to purchase, until having reached our cellar they would dive down suddenly into its recesses; and if I happened to be there my mother always sent me up to the pavement—a direction I obeyed with glee, as long experience had taught me I might more safely indulge my wandering impulses at such times than at any other.

“ Though pursuing her business, as I judge, with much skill, my mother seems to have had no such ambition for me. To this circumstance it may be attributed that my ideas of right and wrong were not of a confused but simply of a negative character. They were not long to remain so. On an occasion when my mother was engaged with one of these mysterious personages in the cellar, I joined a group of boys standing close by, and found one of them, with an air of furtive exultation and dignity that I still distinctly remember, exhibiting a sixpence as his own—a real silver sixpence! To all our eager inquiries his only answer was to button his sixpence safely up in his pocket and run away, calling me, whose unsophisticated admiration had especially pleased him, to follow. I did so. He stopped at a con-

fectioner's, and regaled himself and me with a variety of delicacies until the money was spent. What a mine of wealth I thought he must be master of! For some time the secret was hidden; but, watching his opportunity, the same boy called me aside one afternoon, and said, 'If I wasn't afraid, he'd show me how to get money whenever I wanted it.' I trembled, partly with expectation, partly perhaps that I *was* afraid. He then pointed out some article in my mother's store (one not likely to be missed) and told me to go and take it; only to be sure that no one saw me. Now, though I certainly had not the remotest glimpse of right or wrong in the matter, I had an instinctive perception, that was not to be mistaken, that my mother, and still more my father, would treat me, if discovered, in a way to make those abstract points of little importance. I hesitated. He called me a coward!—and all the boys did so; and, at last, with an air of the supremest contempt, offered to do it for me. This my spirit could not brook. The danger began to assume an heroic aspect. In one instant the stolen thing was pressed against my panting breast; and in the next we were running—I know not whither—until we stopped at a shop, at some distance, in a part unknown to me, and went in. All around were articles of a similar kind to those my mother



dealt in, but in greater profusion, and interspersed with some of a more valuable kind. An old man, whose smiles did my heart good at the time to think of, and who had two projecting yellow teeth, and a polished bald head, addressed us as his 'poppets,' and taking the article we had brought, gave us twopence. I happened to know that it had cost my mother sixpence. We spent the money, and returned home. Behold me, from that time (why should I now mince the word, however bitter) a Thief!

"My education progressed rapidly. Scarce a day passed but something or other was missed by my mother, who, greatly troubled, and angry, attributed all to dishonest passers-by and to my carelessness. It is the old story: success made me imprudent—I was caught. My mother beat me. Still, to my surprise, she seemed so much more grieved and depressed than angry, that I know not what folly (as my companions would have esteemed it) I might not have been guilty of, but that my father just then returned home. Before she could summon up calmness enough to deceive him as to what was going on, the truth was out. That day was an epoch in my life. He did not merely beat me fiercely and savagely, he well nigh killed me. Long after I had fallen on the ground he kicked my helpless body; and

when my mother, half frantic, endeavoured to restrain him, felled her also to the floor by a tremendous blow. From the blood that bathed me, a red mist seemed to ascend and envelop my whole spirit. I cursed, and had I had strength, could have killed him. Boy as I was, I knew that he had treated me thus, not because of the theft, but because the theft had been perpetrated upon him.

“For months I lay ill; and hour by hour a silent and appalling hatred grew up in my breast, concentrating with every fresh outrage on my mother, against him who, from that terrible day, never heard from my lips the name—Father! There were times when I would have pronounced it; but I felt as though the word would suffocate me in the attempt, and I remained silent. In other respects this was a no less eventful day: young as I was I became a man thenceforward.

“My mother treated me with unwearied devotion; and my feelings towards her would now certainly have made me what she wished—an honest and respectable man. Nay, already I had visions of a time when I should be able to take her away from the cellar to a home of my own, where I would maintain her by the labour of my hands; when, alas! my mother died. *How*, I must now tell you.

"One evening, after I was tolerably recovered and able to move about, my father, contrary to his usual custom, returned about seven o'clock, and demanded some money.

"'I have none,' was the quiet reply.

"With a brutal oath, and a still more brutal threat, which made my young blood boil, he repeated his demand, remarking that he knew she had a shilling.

"'I have laid it out in medicine for Reuben; and this, indeed,' said she, placing twopence on the table before him, 'is all I have left to buy us a bit of supper. But we can manage without it, I daresay.' He stood, and stared in silence, first at her and then at me; his face and brow grew livid with rage; and catching up a knife that was on the table beside him, threw it at me. My mother, on seeing this movement, shrieked, and darted forwards to save me. The knife struck her temple, and she fell on the floor streaming with blood. Horrible as the scene was, and is, I have sometimes been unable to repress a sort of bitter smile at the spectacle of my poor, little, weak, emaciated self, leaping forward, seizing the murderer with my tiny hands, whilst my shrill voice made the neighbourhood ring again with the cry of 'Murder! murder! murder!' The cellar was soon filled with the neighbours. As

for *him*, who had at last consummated his brutality, who saw the gallows preparing for him in the distance, he stood, or rather leant helplessly against the table; some dirty playing-cards falling from his waistcoat pocket, and which were afterwards found on the floor bedabbled with my mother's blood. He took no notice of me, or of my violence. An ashy paleness overspread his face; his knees tottered, and his eyes glared now on the neighbours, now on the cellar mouth, as though some thought of escape crossed his mind. In a word, the dastard soul of the bully came forth in all its nakedness.

“After the first few moments I threw myself beside my mother on the floor, where she lay senseless, and called to her in the most agonising tones, ‘Mother! mother!’ All that I had ever done to grieve her rushed at once to my memory, and—I knew not what I said in words, but my heart was bursting with a thousand promises of repentance. Oh, if she would but live! She recovered from her swoon; but the wound was mortal. A short time before her death she desired the neighbours (whose kindness to her forms one of the strangest, most grotesque, and most beautiful revelations life has made me) to withdraw to a distant corner of the cellar; then, pressing me to her breast with

endless tears and kisses, she asked me if I would do what she told me when she was dead and buried.

" 'Oh! yes—mother—I will—I will,' I cried as soon as my sobbings would let me.

" 'Barrett is not your father!' Her lips continued moving, but not a word more could I catch. My soul was on fire. One moment relieved from the idea that Barrett was my parent, my heart seemed to let loose upon him without remorse my pent-up hatred, and exulted in his probable fate. Then, the wings of my fancy expanding, I flew over the whole range of possibilities as to what and who my father could be. Then, forgetting all but my mother, I wept bitterly over her upon the bed. When she spoke again her voice was stronger.

" 'I'm afraid I can't tell you all I should, but I'll try. I oughtn't to have waited till now. But I was frightened of him, and I was frightened as to how you might take it. Give me some water, Rube.'

" I did so.

" 'And wet this cloth in the vinegar. Oh, please God to give me a little strength, for I've a good deal to say!'

" 'Keep quiet, mother, and speak softly. I shall hear you. I'll keep my ears close to your lips.'

" 'Kiss me, Rube. Oh! my darling, I didn't

think to die like this—I who was a lady born and bred.’

“ ‘ A lady, mother ? ’

“ ‘ Ay, Rube, but I wasn’t what would have been much better for me—I wasn’t a good woman. Before I was seventeen I was led astray by one who pretended to marry me in Scotland, when he thought I had money, and *then*, when he found that I hadn’t, denied that we had ever been married at all. He left me, and then I went wrong. Oh Rube ! boy, it’s dreadful to talk to you about these things, but I must, for I’ve nobody else to talk to, and it concerns you much.’

“ ‘ Oh mother ! don’t mind me ; say what you like, but do tell me all I ought to know.’

“ ‘ Well, dear—But I am growing very faint. Where was I ? Oh ! I know. Yes, Rube, from being an injured I became a guilty woman, and I grew worse and worse, and at last I was punished. He grew tired of my occasional visits to him (for I followed him to London and found him out), and of my appeals for help as I sank deeper and deeper in degradation and poverty, so at last he sold me to this man—my husband.’

“ ‘ Sold you ! ’

“ ‘ Ay, Rube—Heaven help thee—thou canst not understand yet all the wickedness of the world. He sold me—his own wife, if I had had



my rights ; but you may judge of the sort of sale it was when you hear that it was the man who bought me who received the money—a hundred pounds. That was what your father gave to get rid of me—he for whom I had sacrificed my all. That's what he gave Barrett to marry me, and to take care of you, and relieve him from us both for ever. I did not refuse. I had become too miserable—had sunk too low. Any kind of acknowledged marriage, any kind of real home, seemed to me just then better than my state. I consented, and by that very act shut myself out for ever from the power of asserting my first marriage. I ought to have taken better care of you ; but I had become a poor spiritless, broken-down creature, and I had no proof ; so I consented to marry Barrett, who hated you ever after.'

" Here she fell back in a deadly swoon, and in my anguish and alarm I thought she was dead. But after a long delay she again spake.

" " Go to your father, when—say Fanny Coust forgives him—bless you—darling—bless—— "

" " His name ? ' I shrieked out.

" " Polwarth — law-stud — ' She continued murmuring, but I could not catch distinctly another word, for she fainted away ; and, alarmed, I called the women, who endeavoured to restore

her. I had heard no residence, then, nor did I clearly understand my father's occupation. Half wild at the thought of being left thus ignorant, I wished—enough: she revived but for a moment. There was a sudden grasp of my hand, so tight that I should have cried out but that I was restrained by a something that seemed to steal over my mother's face, and which strangely hushed me; then a long-drawn sighing sound—oh, so full of relief—and she was dead!

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### REUBEN'S STORY INTERRUPTED.

“ I MUST pass over the days immediately following my mother's death. They were days of such acute misery to me that even now the recollection of them is enough to make every other trouble seem, for the moment, light, and to dissipate in an instant every thought of joy. I had not a friend or a relative in the world except my father, and him I knew not where to find. And if I did find him I was already, but too well aware that he would, in all probability, disown me and drive me back to my own life and associates with scorn. But it was the loss of my mother that I most felt. Although I had always loved her, I did not know till now the depth and fervency of my love, or of what priceless value to me was her love and sheltering care. I could not then think of the wrong done me by her yielding to a second marriage ; I could think only of her tenderness of heart, of her daily anguish with such

a brutal husband, of her constant hope that I should yet turn out an honest man.

“ She was buried very soon, and well I remember walking the streets hour after hour, almost blinded by my tears, heeding no one, and scarcely heeded by any of the people around, till I reached the dark arches of the Adelphi, where I threw myself down and sobbed I know not how long. Every thought I had in my mind helped to drive me back to her—made me see her in some more and more loving light—till, at times, I grew almost frenzied with my grief, and felt as if my heart would suddenly burst with the violence of my emotion.

“ The few things in the cellar were sold by the neighbours to pay the expense of the funeral and some little debts, and, finally, I found myself without even that home, and with the sum of ten and sixpence in my pockets wherewith to begin the world.

“ But, before I could begin to think of how I was to live, all my time and thoughts were engrossed by the prosecution of Barrett. He was tried, and convicted (chiefly on my evidence) and sentenced to transportation for life, having a narrow escape of the scaffold. He sent for me to the prison. I knew not what he wanted—probably to secure the property left in the cellar ;

but I returned a passionate answer, calling him 'Murderer!' and he made no further attempt to see me. He was transported, and from that time I have heard nothing of him; nor do I know whether he is dead or alive."

We must here interrupt for a moment Reuben's narrative. While he was engaged, as we have seen, in showing how he became a thief, while at the same time endeavouring to fortify all his good resolutions to remain a thief no longer, but change the war against society into a war against himself—*i.e.*, against his own habits and crimes—there was to be offered to him a new temptation that would possibly make all his resolves of little value, and send him back with increased zest to the indulgence of a criminal career.

It was one fine afternoon in May when Reuben finished the first portion of his story, showing how he was left alone in the world by the death of his mother. He put down his pen and began to pace to and fro the room restlessly, while there was a soft moisture in his eye as the recollections of his poor, weak, erring, but loving mother came back. In one of these pacings he happened to stop and look out of the window, when he saw a fashionably-dressed man coming up towards the house, and looking apparently about him with

great interest as he did so. Reuben was moving to draw back, not caring to attract attention, when he saw this man wave his hand in a familiar way towards him—Reuben.

“He knows me! Who is it?” Reuben rapidly questioned himself, but for a few moments could not get any satisfactory answer. But at last he recognised the man, and his face seemed greatly to change as he did so.

“Swell Jack, by all that’s unlucky! What can bring him here?” Reuben hurried to the door, half thinking he would venture down and intercept him, and so get rid of him before he should get into conversation with Mrs. Maxfield or Bella; but, as he listened at the stairs-head, he heard the visitor say, in a loud voice,

“Good-morning, Madam! good-morning, Miss! Fine day. Charming walk across the country from the railway station, though rather long. You have a young friend of mine staying with you, I believe? I saw him just now at the window as I came up.”

Reuben could not hear what answer was given; but presently there were heavy footsteps on the stairs, preceded by the lighter ones of the servant, and then, a few seconds later, Swell Jack was introduced into the room.

He was some years older than Reuben, and



looked much worn by dissipation. His face was good-humoured enough, and had a kind of reckless expression that bespoke the effects of his hazardous calling. "Swell Jack," or "Jack the Swell," for he was called by both names, had been often a companion of Reuben in his walks or visits to public places of recreation; though, on account of Nobby Bob's jealousy of any interference with his pal, no joint business operations had ever taken place between the two.

As soon as the servant had gone he began, in a somewhat lower tone, to speak to Reuben:—

"Ah! my dear boy, so I've found you at last. Heard you were ill—came off directly to see what was the matter and offer you my help."

Reuben could not, of course, help taking the extended hand, though it was done with some reluctance, a fact that did not escape the visitor's notice. Before saying anything in comment, he helped himself to a chair, which he placed by the window, opened it, then sat down on the chair, leaned back, and put his legs out on the window-sill.

"Fine prospect! Deuced fine prospect, though monotonous, I imagine, after a few weeks—eh? And the stairs, so long and narrow, in getting up to it made me think of the everlasting staircase."\*

\* The treadmill.

“Jack!” said Reuben, anxiously; “you might be overheard. You used to make it your pride to show you could talk like a gentleman when you pleased.”

“All right!” said Swell Jack, laughing; “take a cigar?”

Reuben took one in silence and sat down on his couch, wondering in his heart what was to come of all this.

“So Rube, my boy, you’re not glad to see me, after coming two hundred and odd miles to hunt you up?”

“I didn’t say so,” observed Reuben; “but suppose you tell me your business, and then I can better judge, you know, of your dues.”

“Quite right! Quite right! Well, here goes. I say, Rube, that’s a fine girl I met at the door. Now, hang it, old fellow, don’t let your face darken in that sudden way. Well, then, be quiet and listen. I wasn’t one of the party, you know, that pitched into you in such a blackguard fashion that night of your visit to Billy Marks. You know that, I suppose?”

“I don’t know it, but I take your word for the fact. I didn’t see you there, certainly.”

“Well, when I heard all about the row, I had, you see, my own notions about the business. Nobby Bob was dead, and you had killed him.

No wonder. And great luck to you to get rid of your old man of the mountain. I wonder how you bore him so long. My shoulder-bone often ached in sympathy with yours when I saw how he put upon you. So you see I understood uncommonly well why you wanted to get rid of him. But then the story was that you were leaving us all, and to turn *good*! I laughed above a bit at that. Sly rogue, says I, Master Gent Rube! Begins to find his value, I suppose. Wants no pal. Wants to be supposed to belong to quite a different cut henceforward. Sees, no doubt, how to go into things of a much more profitable kind, and on a very much grander scale. All right, thinks I. But, even then, he must need his supports. The boldest captain must still have his lieutenant. And so, you see, I came to the conclusion that I alone understood you. And now here I am to offer my services. If you are going to move a step up in the world, and push along the war gloriously, I'm your man; up to everything, and not above acknowledging my superior. So go ahead, and I'll follow you. Eh?"

"My dear Jack," said Reuben, after a pause, "I'm sorry to have led you into so great a delusion. Absurd as it may sound to you, I really mean to try to get my living henceforward as an honest man."

“Whew!” whistled Swell Jack, after a prolonged examination of Reuben’s face to see if he were serious. “Nonsense! You don’t mean it?”

“Upon my soul, I do; and I must beg you, once for all, not to do me an evil turn and throw difficulties in my path. It isn’t an easy one as it is.”

“I should think not, indeed. Well, I am amazed. Fairly taken in and done for! Utterly flabbergasted! Gent Rube, of all the fellows in the world, to turn milksop!”

“Well, Jack, what do you mean to do in the matter?”

“I’ll tell you what I don’t mean to do. I don’t mean to come over you a second edition of Nobby Bob. Take your davit of that. If you like to go to the devil—I mean if you like——” Here Swell Jack’s logic seemed at fault, and he stopped.

“Not to go to the devil?” interposed Reuben, with a faint smile.

“Well, I’m not going to meddle, though you have cost me a first-class ticket down and up, and no business doing by the way.”

“Thank you for that assurance.”

“But come—explain a bit. What are you going to be after?”

"Haven't the least notion yet."

"Get help here?"

"No; they have found me out."

"Whew!" again whistled Swell Jack; and as he looked on Reuben's face and remembered the look (black as midnight) that had been previously called forth by the allusion to the beauty of the young lady, he began to have some dim idea of Reuben's position and mental state. Evidently his sympathies were touched, for from that time the mocking tone dropped out of his voice, as he went on with his questions:—

"Have you any notion of the sort of hangdog life a fellow must be prepared for who tries your game?"

"I'm afraid I have," said Reuben, sadly.

"Then why the deuce do you make yourself such a fool? However, I can guess. But do you believe that you can ever so whitewash yourself and your prospects as to be able to marry a girl like this?"

"No." And the voice, in spite of the constraint exercised over it, grew still more melancholy.

"Very well. Now, then, I begin to see my way. You give all this up. Go back with me. I'll lend you whatever cash you need till we shape out some good thing. I've got a slap-up lodging.

We'll come out like two blue-blood aristocrats. We're both, I take it, rather handsome ; at least, the women say you are ; and if I'm not, why I feel as if I were, and that does just as well, even among the women. Come, old fellow ! this is all nonsense. You've got a sort of evil eye upon you here, I suppose. Let's get away, and it'll all come right. Why, there's that blue-eyed beauty that you so much admired one night at the Opera, and who disappeared so unaccountably when we waited for her outside after the performance. I have met with her since. By the Lord, she is a lovely creature ! Looks better by day than at night. I managed to get into talk with her, but found she only listened in order to drop a sly question about you. She lives in slap-up style—St. John's-wood—elegant villa—livery servant—conservatory all ablaze with flowers, and all that sort of thing. I asked her if I might tell you of her question. She laughed, showing all her pearly teeth, as she said with something that looked like a blush, 'Please yourself,' and then she got into a pony-phaeton, —two beautiful greys—and drove off, the servant touching his hat the while."

Did Reuben hesitate, say for a single minute, as he listened ? We will not undertake to answer in the negative. With his habits of life, it was a



trying alternative that now offered; hard work, which must be disgusting at first, poverty, perhaps hunger, certainly scorn and degradation; and all to be borne in the mere hope of some haven at last; after, it might be, five, ten, or twenty years of bitter, ceaseless struggle. This was the prospect on one side; while on the other there were his friendly companions ready to help; immediate luxury; and, most tempting of all, the smiles of a beautiful and obviously not too scrupulous woman, whom he had greatly admired. All these things, accompanied, certainly, by dangers, but dangers he had grown accustomed to make light of; and followed by the odium which society attaches to the idea of a thief, but then he had already learned habitually how to shut out from his thoughts all care for the opinions of society, and to be content with the very different opinion of his own circle.

Swell Jack knew his advantage when he saw Reuben pause for a few minutes, as if irresolute, so he went on,

“How's the arm?”

“Nearly well.”

“Can you do without the sling?”

Reuben removed the sling, and bent his arm two or three times as if in exclusive answer to the remark; but he seemed abstracted and to be

thinking of other matters — probably turning over all that Swell Jack had been saying to him.

“And you can travel?”

“Yes; the matter is easy enough so far as my bodily state is concerned.”

“And what have you been writing?”

“My story before I went away.”

“Then you were going?”

“Yes.”

“That’s right. Come along. Stop the story till some other time. I shall hunt up your things.”

“No—no, don’t do that.”

“But I shall. You’ve nothing to stay for here, only to get insulted. By midnight I’ll take you to the arms of that beautiful girl, and by to-morrow you’ll have forgotten all about this nonsense, and thanked me for bringing you back to common-sense.”

END OF VOL. I.

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