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A VISIT TO BLESTLAND

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BY

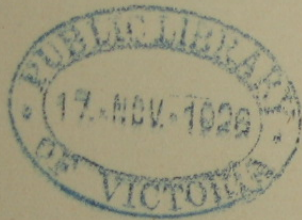
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TO
THE WORLD'S WORKERS

EVERYWHERE AND OF EVERY GRADE

This Book is Dedicated

BY
THE AUTHOR.

A VISIT TO BLESTLAND

INTRODUCTION

“THERE they go again! There go Cringe’s white slaves! Your fellow-bondmen are about to enjoy their customary respite and their mid-day meal, old fellow; so that our own lunch hour must be close at hand. If food for reflection was all we required to sustain life, we need never experience the pangs of hunger while your philanthropic employer’s busy hive is open to contemplation at leisure; but as Dame Nature demands something more substantial, I shall be glad when refreshment is announced.”

The speaker and the person addressed, who happened to be the writer, were lounging on the verandah of a comfortable inn, gazing lazily in the direction of a huge industrial establishment, one of several in the vicinity, from the various outlets of

which workers of both sexes and all ages swarmed with anxious haste.

The silence which followed the delivery of the remarks recorded was presently broken by my friend making certain specific inquiries concerning the factory referred to; and having received the desired replies he proceeded to comment on what I said in an abstracted sort of way.

"Many hundreds of them!" he soliloquized. "To themselves their labour yields barely sufficient to keep body and soul together, whilst to the owner of the hive in which they toil it returns a princely income! How long will injustice so gross be permitted to exist, I wonder? The time will inevitably come when the system which sanctions such conditions will be swept away for ever; but my great fear is that, when it does arrive, the result will be the establishment of some other form of social injustice. The cause of suffering humanity would gain but little, and might possibly lose much, by the substitution of one form of tyranny for another. What think you, Carlo? Could you but give audible expression to your views, old fellow, I have no doubt they would be found to be in agreement with your master's."

The fine retriever to which the thoughtless question was addressed manifested much pleasure at having received this special notice; and wagging

his bushy tail as if to show his concurrence with the tenor of the speaker's remarks, he approached the latter gently, and presented his intelligent head for a coveted caress.

Hearing my friend give utterance to views similar to those which he had just enunciated was by no means an uncommon occurrence, indeed he seemed to derive no mean delight from frequently witnessing the displeasure with which his radical fulminations were usually received by persons of a prudent cast of thought like myself; but notwithstanding my familiarity with his political sentiments, and the fact that I had long made a practice of listening to his observations on such subjects with an assumption of contemptuous indifference, there was that in his latest remarks which riveted my attention with irresistible force. I tried with all my might to banish from my thoughts the ideas which he had cursorily suggested; but do what I would I could not succeed in diverting my attention even for a moment. In quivering letters of blood-red hue, three sentences were continuously marshalled in dignified solemnity before my bewildered mental vision; and no effort of mine could obliterate them:—

"The time will inevitably come when the system which sanctions such conditions will be swept away for ever," grimly led the way. Then came: "My

great fear is that, when it does arrive, the result will be the establishment of some other form of social injustice." And lastly: "The cause of suffering humanity would gain but little, and might possibly lose much, by the substitution of one form of tyranny for another."

Every letter of every quoted word seemed to me instinct with a desire to sear its individual outline on my devoted brain; and I could see no reason to doubt that the object aimed at would in every case be attained.

The short, plethoric landlord, whose political creed was of the sober, conservative order, came upon the scene and endeavoured to engage me in conversation; but I was far too abstracted to respond to his advances, nor did my attention wander in the least degree until it was directed to the approach of a large number of vehicles of various designs whose destination, it transpired, was a sporting rendezvous.

"Here is a fine show for you, gentlemen!" sarcastically cried my discontented friend. "You will fail to find any poverty-pinched faces in this gallant array. You will see no man in this gay procession whose existence depends on the amount of the world's work which he performs. Without a single exception they live luxuriously, directly or indirectly, on the toil of others.

"And foremost in the van I can see Sir David

Muntch, the present owner of my precious self. It is but meet that I should dutifully salute one who suffers me to work that I may live; and although I have reason to believe that my expression of humility will pass unnoticed by the great man, I nevertheless proceed to give effect to my intention."

A mock obeisance, well in keeping with the bitter tone of his sneering remarks, followed; and he immediately went on to further criticize those among the passers-by whom he deemed worthy of notice.

"Here, too, comes the proprietor of yourself and innumerable other bondmen, the grumpy Mr. Cringe," he said, glancing at me. "Does he bestow a single unselfish thought on the hundreds of toilers in yonder hive of his, as he rolls past it in regal state? Not one, you may depend upon it. If he thinks of them seriously at all, it is to ponder on the possibility of abstracting a still greater proportion of their earnings from the unfortunate wretches. When it is borne in mind how immeasurably easier it is to replace a servitor than an employer, one cannot help wondering how it is that the condition of the masses is not even more deplorable than it is at present. That purse-proud vulgarian could dispense with the services of every soul in his employ without diminishing his income for a moment, or otherwise sustaining any serious injury; but should the

workers be tempted by any consideration, however grave, to dispense with the services of a particular employer, we know well the fate that would befall them.

“Old Benny the money-lender, too, is visible to the naked eye; but the resplendency of his jewels renders it unsafe to permit the unprotected optic to gaze at him for any length of time.

“Another prime favourite of fickle fortune approaches — Mr. Craftson, the great city landlord. Public requirement continues to increase the value of this man’s rent-roll to such an extent, and his penuriousness of character is so pronounced, that he must eventually become the possessor of fabulous wealth. And yet neither he nor those from whom he inherited the property has or had any more strictly exclusive right to it than any other individual member of the community! How I wish little Fussi the Leveller was here to inveigh against a system which makes such people possible! It always does me good to hear it vigorously cursed!”

Like myself, Boniface was at great pains to make him believe by certain actions, such as audibly humming snatches of music-hall ditties and so forth, that he was not listening; but that, also like me, he distinctly heard every word that was uttered received ample confirmation from the fact that he rose to his feet with a loud snort of indignation

when the Leveller’s name was mentioned, and retired with all the dignity which it was in his power to assume.

“An excuse might possibly be found for the tenacity with which you cling to the set of stunted and ungenerous political beliefs which you have inherited; but what can be thought of a fellow like that,” he asked, with a contemptuous glance at the retreating figure of the landlord, “who, having been nurtured in poverty, has had years of bitter experience of the injustices and disabilities under which the financially weak and destitute labour, and yet transfers his sympathy to the cause of monopoly the moment he is prompted to do so by self-interest? And the pity of it is that people of the Bulgee type are by no means uncommon.”

This tirade, which bid fair to be prolonged indefinitely, was cut short by the receipt of an invitation to the repast for which he professed to hunger; and no reference to the subject-matter thereof was afterwards made.

When in due course we returned to our positions on the verandah, my friend lost no time in once more burying himself in the work of fiction which he had been engaged in reading during the greater portion of the morning; and this example I earnestly endeavoured to follow, but without meeting with the slightest shadow of success. Jumbled con-

fusedly with certain thoughts that the unstudied comments which I pretended not to heed had called into existence, came the three sentences already quoted to torment me again; and to nothing but their kaleidoscopic movements could I devote the least attention.

The drowsy hum of busy wheels came to me from the distant factories; and this, together with the very pronounced stillness which prevailed in the immediate vicinity, had the effect of soothing my harassed brain after the lapse of what appeared to be a considerable time. Indeed I think I must have been on the point of dozing, when I was violently startled by my companion casting his unoffending volume from him with a loud crash, and yawningly announcing that he could read no longer.

He then proceeded to propose a stroll, and tried to induce me to accompany him; but I felt quite disinclined for exertion, and urged as an excuse that I had certain matters to attend to connected with a projected fishing excursion on which we meant to embark on the morrow, and which was intended to extend over our annual holidays, which had just begun.

Having exhausted his persuasive powers in an ineffectual attempt to prevail upon me to alter my decision, he called upon his faithful Carlo to follow him and walked briskly away. His hand had

barely touched the wicket-latch, however, when something seemed to strike him which caused him to hesitate; and after a few moments' indecision he thoughtfully retraced his steps.

"A circumstance has just occurred to me which I think affords sufficient reason for postponing our departure for a day at least," he said, with gloomy earnestness. "To-morrow will be the sixth anniversary of the awful boating calamity which befell the poor Wingford family; and surely a more auspicious day for setting sail might easily be selected."

Although he who spoke them was unaware of the fact, these words rudely recalled the great sorrow of my life. Had he known of the wealth of undying affection which I so lavishly bestowed on a certain member of the family referred to, the name which he uttered would not have escaped his lips, I know; but he knew not of it, nor of the corresponding burden of grief which her untimely end called upon me to bear, for not even to him, lifelong and well-tried friend though he was, could I bring myself to speak of my great but blighted love for Bessie Wingford. It was too transcendently sacred a thing to be made the subject of ordinary discussion; and besides, I derived a sort of melancholy satisfaction from the knowledge that the existence of the sad memories which I was doomed

to cherish for ever was in no way suspected by any living soul.

Finding that his efforts to obtain my consent to the delay of which he spoke were no more likely to be successful than his endeavours to persuade me to accompany him in his ramble, he again left me ; and I was thereupon free to ponder on the mournful reflections which his latest observations had so cruelly induced.

CHAPTER I

ON a lovely afternoon in the early autumn time, there might have been seen in a picturesque nook on a grand old river which for ever empties itself into matchless Port Jackson, two young men busily engaged in making preparations for what was intended to be a somewhat protracted excursion, judging by the quantity of stores with which they considered it necessary to fortify themselves.

One devoted his attention exclusively to matters connected with the sailing and sporting departments, while the other busied himself in attending to the stowage of the rather numerous camp requirements which he considered indispensable.

A harmless foible noticeable in the character of the latter young gentleman was a firm belief that he was the possessor of special qualifications for the performance of the task in which he was engaged,

although evidence of his faculty for bestowing articles where they would be most difficult to find had been frequently afforded on similar occasions. Nothing would be regarded by him as a more unpardonable affront, than a suggestion that the duty which he was then enthusiastically performing should be attended to by some one else.

A deeply-interested observer of the proceedings in which his master was cheerily engaged, was a beautiful retriever named Carlo, which followed his movements closely as he packed and repacked various parcels, and whose excitement became of the highest when spasmodic incursions ashore had to be made, in order to supply some just-discovered want. With many manifestations of delight, he would precede his master as they went on such occasions; but owing to his being intrusted with something to carry on the way back, his return journey was always made with a dignified gravity which showed how much impressed he was with his own importance.

Before proceeding further, and in order to gratify any feminine curiosity which may possibly be aroused on the subject, it may be as well to state that the men to whom attention is directed were on the sunny side of thirty; neither above nor below the average with respect to the possession of good looks, and, professedly at any rate, confirmed bachelors. They were, in fact, none other than—my friend Mac and

self, lifelong friends and best of chums, who were engaged in making elaborate preparations for a boating excursion such as we annually enjoyed together, and to which we long looked forward with pleasant anticipation.

Just as we were about to set sail, Mac became possessed of a doubt as to whether the locker contained a certain condiment which he very highly prized; and declaring that the want of it would rob the trip of all enjoyment, he proceeded, against my wish, and in a wild flurry, to institute a search for the article in question. This necessitated the displacement of a great number of parcels of various dimensions; and as the confused heap had to be replaced—a task which was rendered all the more tedious by the packer's anxiety to complete it—all was not in readiness to cast off for nearly an hour after the time at which it was intended we should sail.

When at length my friend announced himself as ready to assume the post of helmsman, Carlo received an invitation to board the boat, to which he was not slow to respond; the moorings were deftly undone, and a voyage which I shall never cease to remember had just begun.

Out on the gleaming river, where the shimmering wavelets danced rapturously and winked roguishly at our approach, as if to show how exceptionally glad

they were to see us on that lovely afternoon. The favouring breeze, of which we were so slow to take advantage, soon urged us along at a merry pace, and the faster we sailed, the more rapturous became the delight of the silvery fairies who welcomed us so brightly.

Carlo lost no time in constituting himself look-out; and that he might perform the duties of his office with the maximum degree of efficiency, he took up a position at the prow, where, with head erect, he sniffed and blinked contentedly at every moving object that kept a respectful distance. On no account, however, would he brook the near approach of any vessel, large or small; and when any such took place, his angry remonstrance became as vigorous as his pride and delight were great when the offending craft withdrew. In course of time it became necessary to pass a towering warship at close quarters, and, probably owing to its huge size, it was treated by Carlo to an exceptionally vehement display of antipathy, a circumstance which pleased Mac very much, since, as he averred, it proved his pet's aversion to such institutions.

On we glided, past rugged headland, picturesque islet, and beautiful beach, until a glimpse of the mighty ocean proclaimed it time to alter our course if we would enter what appeared to be a bay of limited area, but which is in reality the entrance to

a vast and maze-like harbour of surpassing beauty. We had not been long engaged in threading our devious way among these winding waters when the breeze which had hitherto served us died completely away, and thereupon Mac very fretfully announced that if the calm continued for any considerable length of time, it would be impossible to reach the camping-ground he had in view before nightfall. I was tempted to remind him of the fact that he alone was responsible for any inconvenience to which we would have to submit, because of the part he took in delaying our departure; but as nothing could possibly be gained by doing so, I refrained, and instead of upbraiding him, made a suggestion. I expressed myself in favour of going ashore at once, camping for the night, and continuing our journey on the morrow; but my companion irritably avowed his intention of proceeding at all hazards, and a possible chance of avoiding many thrilling experiences was thereby lost for ever.

The lengthening shadows of the tree-clad hills which reared themselves so abruptly from out the placid waters, betokened the near approach of sunset before the errant breeze returned; but it compensated in some degree for its recent defection by the increased energy which it quickly displayed, and we were soon sailing gaily again towards a goal which we were destined never to reach.

Darkness set in, and save the gentle murmur of the water as it resented the disturbance of its repose, and the faint sighing of the wind as it passed through the rigging, not a sound was to be heard.

Mac seemed disinclined to converse, so I gazed idly over the side at the angry fluid as it seemed to rush madly past. By and by I could plainly see outlined in phosphorescent gleams myriads of nymphs, who beckoned me seductively to join them in their darkling haunts, and the fantastic frolics of these must have fascinated me for quite a long time, for when at length the spell became shattered, I could see that we had arrived at a part of the harbour with which I was unfamiliar.

That this would have to occur before we could reach the prospective camping-place, I was made aware by Mac's description of the latter's position; and as I had reason to believe that my acquaintance with the enchanting haven in which we then found ourselves was but little less extensive than his own, I felt justified in concluding that our journey's end was close at hand.

Questioning my companion eagerly on the subject, I received from him for the first time in my life a petulant reply.

"For heaven's sake do exercise a little patience," he said. "We have a long way to go yet, and childish fretfulness will only tend to make it

appear longer still. Don't worry, there's a good fellow."

Dim and uncertain as was the light, I could see at a glance that his countenance wore an unusually troubled expression; but this I attributed to a natural feeling of annoyance which he probably experienced on reflecting that he was the cause of our being belated, and so I lapsed again into silence.

The last words of his peevish answer were scarcely uttered, when the wind, already strong, suddenly increased to something like a hurricane; the boat sped with lightning-like rapidity through the rebellious water; and the gambols of the water-nymphs became more frolicsome than ever.

These I contemplated dreamingly until my attention was diverted by casually noting that a physical change in our surroundings was rapidly taking place. The high wooded hills, in whose shadows we had hitherto been sailing, faded swiftly away; and the whole scene changed, as if by magic, from a thing of beauty to one which could not truthfully be described as inviting. The farther we went the more apparent it became that we had abandoned the harbour proper and were sailing on a vast, and to me unknown, river, whose mud-coloured banks were barely high enough to restrain its waters from deluging the arid wastes

which stretched away on either side as far as the eye could reach.

Just as I was about to make some emphatic comment on the unsuitableness of the locality for the object which we had in view, a sudden change in the appearance of the water forcibly arrested my attention. The fitful phosphorescent gleams out of which my imagination had been fashioning sportive naiads had entirely disappeared, and from the angry ripples was emitted instead that which bore a striking resemblance to electrical sparks! At first the phenomenon was confined to the water which suffered disturbance by the passage of the boat; but it quickly spread in all directions until the entire bosom of the great river presented the appearance of a vast sheet of throbbing flame!

The spectacle was sufficiently awe-inspiring to make the stoutest heart quake; and yet a terrified glance at my companion showed me that he was perfectly unmoved. A fear of appearing faint-hearted restrained me from calling out to him in my anguish; and besides, as I told myself, I might be the victim of an optical illusion induced by some indefinable cause.

This latter theory remained unexploded but a very short time; and when I was forced to cast it aside as untenable, I felt that to remain silent any longer meant endangering my reason.

"This rather startling phenomenon does not seem to surprise you in the least, Mac," I said, as calmly as I could; "so that I suppose I am right in assuming that this is not the first time you have witnessed the weird spectacle? I hate making complaints, as you know; but I cannot help saying, old fellow, that I would prefer to spend my holidays among less uncanny surroundings."

The sound of my voice caused him to start violently, as if it had recalled him from a deep reverie; and having stared at me in an exceedingly strange way for quite a long time, he deliberately released the tiller, of which he had charge, and took a seat beside me.

"Oh! hang it all," I expostulated; "do you want to run us ashore?"

"Had I the power, I would have done so long since," he replied, in a hoarse, unnatural voice; "but all my efforts to that end have been in vain."

"The power!" I stammered, in pardonable trepidation. "What, in the name of goodness, do you mean?"

"That I am utterly unable to control the movements of the boat by the ordinary or any other method," he said solemnly. "We should have landed long ago would she but answer her helm; but she persistently refuses to do anything of the kind. I refrained from reporting the matter to you

in the hope that the strange spell which seems to have been cast upon us would pass away; but there does not appear to be any immediate prospect of that, judging by the sensational display to which you have called my attention, so that it is best that we face our temporary trouble in company, as it were. You were not right in assuming that I had previously witnessed anything of this kind; and when I assure you that I never set eyes on the locality before, you will readily understand that I did not choose it for a camping-place."

An explosive report of flapping canvas silenced him suddenly; and a startled glance at the mainsail revealed the terrifying fact that, although our craft was moving at a stupendous pace before a hard gale, it derived no momentum from its sails, which hung idly from their stays! We were being carried—Heaven knew where—by some unknown, irresistible force, at a rate which far outpaced the hurrying wind!

An icy cold sensation passed along my spinal column; a clammy, chilly perspiration suffused my brow; and the contraction of my scalp was of so violent a nature, that its natural covering became almost rigid enough to displace its artificial protector when the truth respecting our position forced itself boldly upon me.

Casting a wild despairing glance around, the tiller attracted my attention; and the possibility of the rudder having been lost suddenly occurring to me, I hastened to investigate in that direction for myself, although I was vaguely conscious that it mattered not to us whether it was lost or not.

A very few moments sufficed to prove that the steering gear was in faultless order, and that Mac's report concerning its powerlessness to affect the boat's course was all too correct; and the last ray of hope being thus extinguished, I buried my face in my hands, so as to shut out the horrifying spectacle by which we were surrounded, and tried to think out what was best to be done.

My condition was not one which made calm thinking possible, however, and the desperate idea of plunging into the fiery river and swimming for our lives having suggested itself to me almost at once, I imparted my inspiration to my companion as distinctly as a tongue with a strong cleaving tendency would permit.

The absurdity of assuming that we could resist the mighty influence which controlled the boat's movements, even if we survived actual contact with the mysterious fluid, having been pointed out to me, I could but groan dismally and bewail my fate.

"Above all things, we must not allow ourselves to become the victims of panic," Mac said, and there

was a light in his brave, honest eyes as he spoke which I had seen there more than once before in the hour of danger. "The position is altogether unique and undoubtedly trying: but that is all the more reason why we should endeavour to face it coolly and manfully. You have only just realized the predicament in which we are placed; but I have had a couple of hours or more to ponder on the situation, and my cogitation has convinced me that nothing whatever is to be gained by fretting. Since we must await developments, whether we like it or not, it is better far to do so calmly and bravely, than fretfully and timidly. The fact must not be overlooked that we might be very much worse off than we really are, old fellow; for we have an ample supply of provisions, and we suffer no physical discomfort of any kind. The irresistible influence at present controlling our movements may disappear as mysteriously as it arrived, at any moment; and when we regain our freedom of action, as we are sure to do sooner or later, I think we can be depended upon to find our way back to Middle Harbour. I am as hungry as the proverbial hunter, as you must be also; so I beg to propose that, like sensible men, we address ourselves to the work of self-refreshment, and calmly await inevitable results."

It was not so much the matter of this little speech, as the confident and courageous manner in which it

was delivered, that had the effect of allaying my pardonable fears to a surprising extent; and in an incredibly short space I became cool enough to adopt my friend's suggestion, and to emulate the generally philosophic view which he took of the situation.

In order to keep our thoughts as far as possible from dwelling on what we looked upon then as a dire misfortune, conversation on indifferent subjects was not allowed to flag for an instant, until the drowsy god made a call which was not to be denied, and we were forced to seek rest in forgetfulness.

CHAPTER II

THE bright morning sun was well above the horizon before his rays became strong enough to recall us from grateful dreamland; and, as may easily be imagined, a rapid survey of our new surroundings followed immediately on our awakening.

It was apparent at a glance that no appreciable diminution of the speed at which we were being hurried onward had taken place since the previous night, a circumstance which was not calculated to reassure us; but when the fact was realized that in the meantime we had been transported entirely out of sight of land, I found it impossible to repress a fresh feeling of genuine alarm.

"Can it be that we are doomed to traverse forever the bosoms of lonely unknown seas like the Flying Dutchman of ancient story, I wonder?" I asked Mac, with a ghastly attempt at appearing

indifferent. "It certainly looks very much like it at present, and should such prove to be the case, we are beyond all doubt insufficiently rationed for the voyage."

"My dear fellow, you know as well as I that such things as unknown lonely oceans have long since ceased to exist, except at the frozen poles," was the cheery reply. "It would be impossible to travel for any length of time at such a rate as this anywhere in the world without sighting either some description of craft, or, better still, land itself; and you may be sure that in either event a rescue from our present position would not be long delayed. Be of good heart, old chap. All will yet be well, depend upon it."

For the second time in less than a score of hours his buoyant optimism succeeded in dispelling a sickening fear; and in a very few minutes I was coolly discussing the subject of the best course to pursue when the expected vessel hove in sight, and the probable impression our movements would create in the minds of those aboard her.

Certain formidable obstacles likely to operate against our speedy rescue, even after we succeeded in attracting attention, suggested themselves to my somewhat lively imagination; but on mentioning my misgivings to Mac, he confidently declared them to be perfectly groundless, and quite unworthy of a

moment's consideration, so that I at once became abundantly satisfied.

The summary dismissal of this subject was quickly followed by a reference to what would probably happen if by any chance we failed to put in an appearance at our official quarters at the appointed time, and hearty peals of genuine laughter rang out on the unresponsive waste of waters, as we pictured the uncharitable promptitude with which our evanishment would be attributed to a desire to escape the punishment due to a breach of trust, and the sense of disappointment which some of our professed friends would experience when thorough investigation established our complete innocence. It would take some time to effect this, however; and in the meantime the amount of our defalcations would be variously stated, and by each with an air of authority; the vices which led up to them would be confidently pronounced, and of course stigmatized with severity; the means adopted to compass our base designs would be confidentially canvassed; and not a few, of our debtors especially, would be found to make open confession of the fact that we never possessed their complete confidence.

Thanks to an abundant supply of reading matter, the flight of time was by no means irksome; and I was on the point of expressing astonishment at the progress made by the sun in his journey towards the

west, when a dismal howl from Carlo caused me to temporarily defer my intended remarks.

Glancing towards the prow, whereat our canine friend had maintained a vigilant but uneasy watch all day, our faithful look-out was seen to be a picture of abject terror, in the act of shiveringly deserting his post. Conduct such as this was so entirely foreign to the plucky animal's nature, that we recognized at once that the cause of his perturbation must be something more than usually terrifying. Careful and prolonged scrutiny in all directions failed to discover anything whatever to account for the bold retriever's trepidation, however; and just as we concluded that a passing glimpse of some monster of the deep must be responsible for his very unusual display of fear, our attention was arrested by a peculiar-looking cloud, shaped like an inverted balloon, and of intense blackness, which was ascending from the horizon directly ahead.

Slowly and majestically it arose, until it attained a considerable altitude, when its base became distended so rapidly, that before we had time to make more than bare comment on the strange manifestation, we found ourselves enveloped in a gloom which the rich rays of the setting sun were powerless to penetrate.

Having with considerable difficulty succeeded in finding and lighting our lamps, we stared at each

other for a minute or so without uttering a word; whereupon the silence became unbearable to me, and I expressed the firm conviction which I certainly held, that the doom which awaited us was rapidly approaching.

“The fact of our encountering an uncommonly dense sea fog does not justify you in arriving at such a doleful conclusion as that,” Mac told me, with a reassuring smile. “You only torment yourself unnecessarily by indulging in such gloomy anticipations; and you must not forget that no amount of despondency can do any possible good. For my part, I see no cause at all for alarm in this latest development. On the contrary, I view the visitation with much satisfaction; for I look upon it as the darkness that precedes the dawn, the forerunner of our delivery from a harmless, but certainly very astonishing spell.”

This, and more to the same effect, at length restored my equanimity to some extent; but that it was not destined to remain long undisturbed on this occasion, will shortly appear.

The evening meal, which my friend briskly served up, was as dainty and as appetizing as could reasonably be expected under conditions such as at the time existed; but notwithstanding all that, I could not relish it as he evidently did, and my pretence at doing so was an utter failure.

The same remark applies to a feeble attempt made subsequently to converse with some indication of interest; nor could I bestow any attention on the interesting volume in which I pretended to be engrossed after we eventually lapsed gradually into silence.

Do what I would I could not entirely rid myself of a feeling of apprehensiveness, of the existence of which I was anxious to keep my companion in ignorance; and so long as a trace of it remained, my thoughts could not be kept from wandering, as a matter of course.

Almost from the moment that the Cimmerian darkness fell upon us, I had a vague feeling that something to which I had been accustomed, besides the natural light, was entirely missing; but for the life of me I could not for a long time determine what it was.

Like a lightning-flash it occurred to me at last that the monotonous sound made by the boat, as with its stem it cleft the yielding waters, was no longer to be heard; and I naturally fell to wondering what could possibly have taken place to account for so strange a circumstance. Two things only could I imagine as likely to have the effect referred to: one was that we had entered a current which was flowing with prodigious rapidity; and the other that there was no longer any water to cleave; and as the

former seemed by far the more reasonable explanation, I felt inclined to take it for granted that it was the correct one. A desire to place the matter beyond any doubt grew stronger and stronger, however, until at length I resolved to secretly apply a practical test. This could easily be done by reaching over the side of the boat and using the sense of touch; but I shrank with horror from the idea of plunging an unprotected hand into a fluid which was beyond all question possessed of supernatural attributes, and I cast about for a safer and equally efficient means of accomplishing what I desired.

A short stealthy search resulted in the discovery of a piece of dry wood rather more than a yard long; and armed with this I proceeded warily to execute my design.

Cautiously as my arrangements were made, I could see that my movements attracted Mac's attention; so that in order to allay any suspicion that I might have aroused, a little delay became necessary. Having waited until I satisfied myself that I was unobserved, I slyly thrust forth my stick for the wetting which was necessary to convince me that a still further departure from normal conditions had not recently taken place.

The doubt I entertained about the proof being forthcoming was exceedingly small, indeed I felt rather ashamed of myself for harbouring any at all;

and it was partly due to this, probably, that the discovery I made had such a completely stunning effect.

I refused at first to credit the evidence of my senses; but a second and more thorough search proved beyond all possibility of doubt that not a trace of water was to be found anywhere within reach!

This additional blow was altogether too terrible to withstand; and the consequence was that it hurled me in a senseless heap from my seat into the bottom of the boat.

As soon as I regained the ability to make an explanation, I stammeringly imparted information as to the cause of my sudden attack to my wondering friend, who received it as if it contained nothing out of the common, and coolly proceeded to verify my report.

I fully expected to see him prostrated with abject terror, as I was myself, when the work of verification was completed; but in this I was very agreeably disappointed.

"You are quite right," he said calmly. "Water no longer plays any apparent part in effecting our transit to realms at present unknown; and as the risk of drowning to which we have been so long exposed is thereby removed, the fact is one to rejoice over and not one to lament. I really wish you would

not give way so sadly to nervous fears at every fresh development that takes place. It is doubtless rather astounding to realize the fact that we are floating swiftly along on nothing more substantial than atmospheric air; but it is not a whit more so than other of our recent experiences. Of one thing we have had ample proof, and that is that the mysterious influence controlling our movements is unquestionably benevolent; and that being so, we can afford to look forward to the result of all this with perfect confidence. Be advised by me and compose yourself to rest, as I am about to do, trusting to obtain deliverance on the coming day."

Without further ado he sought his improvised couch contentedly; but although I too turned in for the night soon afterwards, a long time elapsed before the rest which I wooed so assiduously consented to be won.

CHAPTER III

SOON after sunrise on the morning immediately succeeding the day on which we became enshrouded in the mysterious cloud, Mac and I were somewhat rudely awakened by a violent lurching motion of the boat; and rubbing our eyelids free with all speed, a hasty survey disclosed the fact that we were floating idly on a placid ocean, with nothing upon which to rest the prying eye but boundless sea and cloudless, azure sky.

Carlo, too, was prompt in making an eager examination of the position; and as his subsequent behaviour proved that he derived much gratification from the act, Mac oracularly declared that the faithful animal knew instinctively that our troubles were nearly over.

Having ascertained that the movements of the boat were again capable of being controlled, and

partaken of a hearty breakfast with great gusto, it was decided to set sail towards where the sun would set, and we accordingly did so in great buoyancy of spirit, and a faith in the correctness of the retriever's instinct that was touching in its simplicity.

Not very long after the resumption of sailing operations under the natural, and consequently preferable conditions, the monotony was suddenly dispelled by the appearance high above us of a large flock of what proved to be beautiful snow-white birds of a genus somewhat, but only slightly, resembling the gull family.

Calling to each other in not unmusical notes, these executed majestic circular movements of great beauty while engaged in their slow descent; and eventually they quietly alighted on the bosom of the silvery ocean at a point directly ahead.

"I told you old Carlo's instinct could be trusted implicitly," Mac shouted gleefully. "Those birds have their home on the cliffs of some not far distant shore; and the best plan for us to adopt is to patiently keep them in view, if we can, until they set out on their return to the place from whence they came, and then take whatever direction their flight may indicate. We shall probably have to wait until nearly sundown before we get the desired information, but that cannot be helped."

He was about to heave-to in pursuance of his

expressed design, when I suggested that it could do no harm to get into closer quarters with our most welcome visitors; and we accordingly continued to lessen the distance that lay between us and them. They manifested no signs whatever of fear at our approach; but when we arrived at a position within a short stone's throw of them, the whole flock, with the exception of three, took wing simultaneously and flew slowly and silently away in a direction at considerable variance with that which we had hitherto been pursuing.

The three that lagged behind remained perfectly stationary until we came to within a boat's length of where they apparently awaited us; and then they soared swiftly aloft, and gave us an abundance of evidence of being much overjoyed.

Having for a considerable time wheeled in graceful circles about and above us, cooing contentedly and without ceasing during the progress of the evolutions, they at length took up a position immediately ahead of our little vessel, and there with outstretched quivering wings they continued to poise their beautiful forms for several minutes. This little ceremony concluded, they flew round and round the boat again a few times; and ended by fluttering boldly on board and perching fearlessly within easy reach, as if anxious to comfort the poor lonely wanderers that we were.

As the day wore on towards noon without ship or land coming into view to stimulate me, the insufficient rest with which I had had to be content on the previous night began to tell a tale; and I was reluctantly forced to approach Mac on the subject of allowing me to indulge in a siesta.

The desired permission was readily granted, as I knew it would be; and after making a rapid but critical survey of the cloudless horizon, I quickly resigned myself to refreshing slumber.

My sojourn in the land of dreams had extended, as I afterwards learnt, to a space of nearly two hours, when I was urgently aroused by Mac, who excitedly directed my attention to a thin dark line at the junction of sea and sky, and at a point towards which the flight of the sea-birds was at the time directed. This my companion pronounced with the utmost confidence to be "land at last"; but fearing that in permitting myself to entertain a similar belief I should be but dooming to bitter disappointment one who was far from being fitted to bear any more just then, I preferred to regard the object of our joint attention as nothing more nor less than the crest of a dense black cloud which would either dissolve into thin air presently, or develop into a drenching rain storm later on.

That, too, was what I ruefully declared it to be, in reply to my friend's hopeful remarks; but the theory

was promptly scouted, and I was referred to the sniffs of recognition and general air of delight with which Carlo spasmodically gazed upon the indistinct form, as a convincing proof that the view I held was a palpably erroneous one.

While still engaged in the friendly contention on this subject which followed, and as each was in the act of assuring the other that, owing to the satisfactory headway we were making, it would not take long to convince him that he had fallen into error, the wind, which up to that time had been fine and fresh, died suddenly away, and a tantalizing calm ensued. To all outward appearances Mac bore the trying infliction with an heroic resignation; but I could no more help chafing under it than I could fly.

We had been floating idly on the glassy water for what seemed to me, whose impatience was becoming positively painful in its intensity, quite a long time, when the movements of our feathered fellow-passengers attracted my attention. From the moment we became becalmed they exhibited a certain degree of restlessness; but at last, as if their patience had become exhausted, they once more took to wing, and having executed several astonishing manœuvres not far above our heads, they shot suddenly upwards until a considerable altitude was attained, and thereupon began to give utterance to a series of

strange wild cries such as we had never heard bird give before.

That this action was intended as a signal to their comrades which had been resting since the calm fell upon us, Mac most strenuously maintained; and as it was immediately followed by a great commotion among the members of the main flock, his surmise would seem to be, to say the least, not quite destitute of warrant. As soon as our three little friends had completed the issue of instructions to their fellows, as my companion termed their peculiar behaviour, they at once set about returning to us; and at the same instant those ahead ascended into heaven's blue vault with amazing rapidity, and continued on their upward course until they disappeared entirely from view.

We sat gazing in wonderment in the direction from which they had vanished for several minutes, and were deploring the fact that they had seen fit to forsake us, when much to our delight they reappeared, and could be seen to be slowly descending by circular movements to the position on the ocean's bosom which they recently occupied.

A light breeze sprang up simultaneously with their reappearance; and as this waxed stronger and stronger as they approached, we were soon being urged forward almost as fast as even I could desire.

The acute anxiety of which I was possessed to

determine the real nature of the object towards which we were sailing, and to do so as quickly as possible, impelled me to peer so long and intently in the direction in which it lay, that the severe strain on my visual organs not only induced a serious dimness of sight, but a rather distressing nervous headache as well; and when this state of things was reported to Mac, he had but little difficulty in persuading me to shut out the light for a time by swathing myself in the bed-clothes. On the understanding that he would read aloud a certain magazine article in which we were both interested, but which neither had as yet read, he extracted from me a promise that I would not reopen my eyes until I received his permission. This arrangement proved an admirable means of passing away the time, since by it the attention of both was successfully kept from wandering, and as the essay presented several points which were worthy of discussion, the space occupied in dealing with it was by no means inconsiderable.

To me a very striking proof of this was afforded when, at the conclusion of a lively little debate on the general tenor of the essay with which we were dealing, I was invited by Mac to come forth and put my eyesight to the test once more.

There was no lack of promptitude in the way in which the invitation was accepted; and a glance

the most fleeting was sufficient to convince me that there could no longer be any doubt about the solidity of what I greatly feared was merely cloud. Land was in view, beyond all question, and only a few miles distant; and accordingly my heart leaped with a joy to which no words could give utterance.

Nearer and nearer we were wafted, until at length the wooded peaks and grassy slopes became plainly visible, and the music made by the lazy waves as they caressed the golden sands could be most distinctly heard.

This last seemed to inspire my companion with something akin to poetic fervour, for I overheard him make some reference to

“ . . . the murmurs low and grand
Of a heaving, liquid, silver sea
On a shore of golden sand.”

We sailed as close inshore as was deemed prudent; and then proceeded to furl our sails, so that we might leisurely consider what we had better do next.

Two courses were open to us, either to land at once and do some exploratory work, or continue to sail along the coast until we discovered some signs of human habitation. Long and anxiously we deliberated, and eventually it was decided, although not without considerable hesitation, to adopt the

latter; and the decision seemed to afford our feathered friends intense satisfaction.

Those in immediate attendance on us exhibited much unrest and uneasiness during the time occupied in discussing our plans for the immediate future; but the moment the sails were again unfurled their demeanour changed completely, and with loud cries of exceeding gladness they once more soared high above us, and proceeded to comport themselves in a manner similar to that which characterized their behaviour on their previous journey heavenwards.

The result on this occasion was not a rapid disappearance of the larger flock into the blue empyrean, but the execution on the part of the latter of a great variety of playful movements, followed by a sluggish resumption of their flight close to the surface of the water, and in a line parallel with the shore.

“Everything they do seems to point unmistakably to the fact that the duty of piloting us has been by some means imposed upon them,” Mac remarked, nodding towards the birds as he spoke; “and I have not the slightest doubt that by following them patiently we shall be directed aright, and consequently amply rewarded.”

To this I tacitly assented, not because I shared my friend's belief in the beautiful creatures having

any such mission, for I did not share it, but because I regarded the chance of finding what we sought by following that course quite as good as it would be if any other were adopted.

We had only travelled a comparatively short distance along our newly-shaped route, when Carlo again attracted special attention. He occupied a position near the prow, one which he favoured most in his waking moments; and with head erect and ears in an attitude denoting his possession of great curiosity, he peered anxiously ahead, uttering at uncertain intervals short growls, which became more and more emphatic as his gaze became prolonged.

Following the direction indicated by his wistful scrutiny, the most careful examination failed to reveal anything either on sea or land which would account for the intelligent quadruped's ebullient display of excitement, which eventually developed so fiercely that he had to be forcibly relegated aft to his lair. His master's admonitory words and glances kept him in subjection for a time; but when loud, excited cries from our flock of bird-pilots reached us, and their three friends flew off from us to them in a state of great agitation, he could no longer restrain his feelings, and rushed madly to the position from which he had been recently removed.

The first thing noticeable on looking towards our feathered guides was that the distance which they ordinarily allowed to intervene between themselves and our craft had been suddenly and considerably increased; but they were still sufficiently near to enable us to see that they were wheeling wildly above what appeared to be a tiny mass of submerged rock.

"This action of theirs is no doubt meant as a warning to us," Mac said gravely. "They wish to call our attention to the existence of what is probably a dangerous reef, so we must keep a sharp look-out for shoal water, and give the place a wide berth."

To carry out the latter part of his suggestion it became necessary to slightly alter the course we were then pursuing, and this was accordingly done; and so alert was the outlook kept, that we soon saw enough to cause us to doubt the accuracy of our first impression concerning the nature of the object over which the birds continued to hover.

"A boat, as I am alive!" Mac at length exclaimed excitedly, "and not an empty one either. Now I understand the cause of Carlo's behaviour. I might have known he wouldn't conduct himself in such a way without excellent reason. Good old dog! He could see all along that the thing was something more important than a mere isolated piece of rock."

Rattling on in this way, another course was promptly shaped which caused us to bear down directly on what we previously wished to avoid, and when at last we approached it sufficiently close to make a satisfactory examination, it was plainly apparent that all was not well with the strange boat's solitary occupant. In each hand he grasped an oar, with which he slowly and very feebly imitated the movements of a sculler; but what completely astounded Mac and myself was that the blades of the implements which he handled so mechanically never once touched the water!

Having contemplated him in deepest wonder for several minutes, during which Carlo barked loudly and incessantly at the stranger without succeeding in attracting his attention, it was decided to hail him; but Mac's stentorian tones were also wasted on the idle wind, for they elicited no response whatever.

As there was a possibility of the man being excessively deaf, and we had not yet appealed to his sense of sight, it was decided to at once enter his field of vision and see what would be the result; but although when first we passed before his staring eyes he dropped his oars with nervous suddenness, he gave no further indication of having seen us.

Time after time we crossed and recrossed so as to intercept his vacant gaze, noting, as we did so, that

he not only made no effort to recover his paddles, but that he seemed to be unconscious of having parted with them, for his arms continued to move as if he were still engaged in rowing; but nothing approaching a recognition of our presence rewarded us for our trouble, and we determined to get into close quarters with him forthwith.

It was some consolation, however, to know that if he could do nothing to assist us, we could do him the service of taking him in tow, and we were also in a position to minister to his wants, should he show signs of needing either meat or drink or both.

Remarking that it might only be a case of temporary suspension of consciousness from some cause or other, Mac so regulated the relative positions of the boats that the poor demented creature's unblinking gaze must, as he judged, rest on us the moment it became capable of resting on anything, and then he proceeded to bombard him with questions, in gradually ascending keys, concerning our whereabouts, the direction which led to the nearest port, and so forth, until he literally bawled himself hoarse.

His efforts to arouse him proved every whit as futile as those already made, however, and had it not been for the absence of pallor, and the continued mechanical movement of his upper limbs, I would not have hesitated to pronounce the figure defunct. The same three birds which perched about our boat during the greater part of the day, hopped uneasily about that occupied by the stranger during Mac's very earnest but somewhat ludicrous attempts at recalling him to his senses, but although they frequently alighted on his shoulders, breast, and head, persistently uttering their most plaintive notes the

CHAPTER IV

THE mingled feelings of curiosity and disappointment with which Mac and I hauled alongside the solitary and mysterious boatman were simply indescribable.

The curiosity with which we were filled was as to the nature and probable cause of the affliction under which the unfortunate creature evidently laboured, and to this was added a keen sense of disappointment at finding that his discovery, on the great importance of which we had been pluming ourselves, bid fair to be something worse than valueless, so far as we were personally concerned. To think that the only human being on whom we had set eyes since we entered Middle Harbour was hopelessly demented, and therefore incapable of supplying us with any information concerning our position on the surface of the globe, was indeed a depressing reflection.

while, nothing was forthcoming to show that the object of their gentle attentions was in the least degree conscious of their presence.

It occurred to Mac that a sound shaking might have the effect which we so earnestly desired, and he was actually on the point of putting it to the test, when I urgently intervened and pointed out the danger that might follow the taking of any such action. Being suddenly confronted with something unexpected, supposing him capable of being roused at all, might bring on a paroxysm which would not only endanger his life but ours under such conditions, I anxiously urged; and although my friend was willing and eager to take the risk, I eventually managed to dissuade him from executing his reckless design, and persuaded him to prepare for a fresh start onward with the stranger in tow.

Just as we were about to cast the boats apart and proceed upon our mysterious journey, Carlo, whose interest in all the proceedings had been of the keenest, suddenly sprang into the strange boat, a proceeding which was hailed with wild demonstrations of joy by the entire flock of our friends the sea-birds, and before we had time to interfere with his purpose, he fearlessly approached its occupant, and deliberately proceeded to salute the latter's outstretched hand after the manner of his kind.

This simple action had an electrical effect, and

compassed in an instant what Mac failed to accomplish in half-an-hour.

At touch of the faithful canine's tongue the outstretched hand was withdrawn as quickly as if it had come in contact with a bar of red-hot steel; the stony glare vanished, and the Derelict, as Mac called him, showed other signs of returning consciousness.

His first glance at Carlo was one of apprehension; but he soon regained confidence, and proceeded to feebly caress the retriever's curly, intelligent head, much to our delight. Looking about him vacantly, as if in the act of endeavouring to recall to his mind something which had escaped his memory, the interesting patient at length caught sight of Mac and me; and the moment he did so his face became illumined with a weird kind of light, a gentle smile enwreathed his lips, and he indicated by unmistakable signs that he suffered from thirst.

"The man is perishing for want of something to drink," I proclaimed oracularly. "Get him a mild stimulant without a moment's delay."

(I may here remark that one of my most striking characteristics is the promptitude with which I invariably issue orders to others in cases of emergency. I find it much more pleasant to do so than to attend to matters personally, and I am fortunate in rarely experiencing any difficulty in having my commands obeyed.)

A judicious use of what hospital folk designate "medical comforts" revived the sufferer in course of time sufficiently to enable him to give expression in faltering, feeble accents to his evidently fervent thankfulness; and our delight at finding that he could do so rationally, and that he spoke in the tongue with which we were most familiar, was simply unbounded.

During the time occupied by Mac in plying him with the necessary solid and liquid refreshment, I took occasion to leisurely note the general appearance of our newly-found friend and anticipated deliverer.

A rugged but rather handsome man he was, past middle life, with closely-trimmed steel-grey hair and beard, and dark-blue, kindly eyes surmounted by a massive, open forehead. A man of undoubtedly strong personality, but of such a kind as would instantly command implicit confidence and unbounded respect in any walk of life he might traverse, however humble.

As our boat afforded ample accommodation, and the prospect of an increase in his comfort generally, the Derelict was, of course, invited to join us; and after considerable trouble, caused by his decidedly weak condition, we succeeded in getting him aboard.

The necessary preparations for towing the vacant craft having been completed, and everything being in readiness for setting sail anew, Mac called upon

Carlo to leave the smaller boat, to which he still clung, and take up his former position with us.

Much to our consternation he flatly refused to obey the summons, and threats and remonstrances only elicited barks of emphatic refusal, interspersed with short spasmodic visits to a large canvas sheet which lay huddled in the boat's stern. On and about this unwieldy-looking bundle the three birds which we now knew so well had been hopping excitedly for some time; and we could not help noticing what absence of fear they displayed, when the retriever, with impatient whine, made vigorous attacks on their perch every time his master called upon him to leave.

During the first part of this comparatively short scene, the Derelict had been watching the movements of the main flock as they continued to wheel noiselessly overhead; but an unusually angry command issued by Mac to the retriever diverted the man's attention, and he looked about in a vague sort of way for the cause of my friend's disquiet. Having detected it, he watched Carlo's unaccountable doings for a time with nothing more than passive interest; but after a while, and on a sudden, something seemed to dawn upon him; whereupon he tottered to his feet, and with wildly staring eyes pointed dramatically to the object of the dog's erratic attentions.

“ Oh, great heaven ! my poor old friend Kniggs lies beneath that sheet,” he cried aloud, in tones of anguish. “ My memory forsook me so completely that I forgot all about him, and about everything else, until this moment. We have had a very trying experience, gentlemen. Poor Kniggs has had neither food nor drink for about two days and two nights, and the last occurrence of which I have any recollection is that he rolled himself in yonder canvas in the hope that he might obtain forgetfulness in sleep.

“ Judging by the dog’s inability to arouse him, I very much fear the worst has happened. Help me to reach his side, gentlemen, please ; help me to reach his side. This is indeed a sad ending to what was intended to be a day’s enjoyment of a favourite pastime which neither have indulged in for years.”

That he should be allowed to undertake any task which involved the exercise of even the least physical exertion was not to be thought of just then ; and so Mac, in response to an instruction issued by me with my customary readiness of resource, undertook the melancholy and unpleasant duty of examining the recumbent body of the hapless Kniggs, so as to prove beyond all possibility of doubt that his much-racked spirit had fled for ever.

CHAPTER V

IN the midst of a silence the depth of which testified to the anxiety with which the result was awaited, Mac proceeded with reverent mien towards the rude couch which contained what we all concluded was the lifeless body of the poor Derelict’s friend. Moving as slowly and treading as softly as if he were in a veritable chamber of death, he approached the apparently completely covered figure, and began gently and with bated breath to remove the rough covering in which it was evidently well wrapped.

No sooner did his hands come in contact with the canvas than the vigilant sea-birds broke forth once more into rapturous expressions of delight ; and at the same time Carlo’s excitement increased to a prodigious extent.

Whining impatiently, and trembling violently with

suspense, he watched his master's movements as keenly and as wistfully as we did; and when at length Mac beamingly announced that the slumberer's pulse beat strong and well, the retriever's gratification became almost as boundless as that of the Derelict, who sank to his seat uttering expressions of great relief and fervent thankfulness as soon as the message was received.

"What the deuce is the matter now?" came in querulous, muffled tones, in response to Mac's vigorous shaking. "I was enjoying a pleasant dream about having received a certain message which gave me great hope of receiving help in my wretchedness before long; and now you have spoiled the whole thing. Even a delusive hope is more sustaining than no hope at all."

It was evident at a glance that the hardships which the two friends had undergone had not had the debilitating effect on the little middle-aged man with the large, intelligent, grey eyes, who sleepily emerged from his rude resting-place in compliance with a cheery summons from Mac, that it had had on his friend the Derelict; and the consequence was that his recovery took place much more rapidly, and we were soon ready to resume our journey.

Before getting under way again, however, we invited our new-found friends, as a matter of course, to indicate the direction in which their homes lay;

and what was our horror when we found that they were as utterly ignorant on that important subject as we were ourselves!

Keen as was the disappointment which Mac and I experienced, that which entered into the souls of Mr. Kniggs and the Derelict when they learnt that we, too, were hopelessly in the dark concerning our whereabouts, was keener still; and several minutes passed away before they displayed any disposition to give or receive explanation.

When they did recover sufficiently from the shock which their disagreeable discovery inflicted to permit of their addressing themselves to the subject of the events which were responsible for landing them in the position which they then occupied, it soon became abundantly clear that their recent experiences and our own were almost exactly alike. The chief point of difference between them lay in the fact that Mac and I set out well provided for an extended absence, and were therefore subjected to no physical discomfort of any consequence; whilst Mr. Kniggs and his friend merely made provision for an afternoon's outing, and were consequently called upon to submit to considerable hardship.

In order if possible to prevent us from brooding gloomily over the woes we had in common, as all except himself showed unmistakable signs of doing as the discussion of the subject progressed, Mac took

the first favourable opportunity that presented itself to direct our attention to certain peculiar movements which were being indulged in by the three particular birds which during most of the day had fraternized with us in such a remarkable manner.

The first part of each movement consisted in their describing a few circles about the idle boats, slowly, and close to the surface of the water, calling urgently to each other as they went; after which they would fly rapidly off to the main flock, which was quietly resting on the ocean's breast a few hundred yards ahead, and in the direction in which we had been sailing since first we saw them. A rest of short duration with their fellows would ensue, at the conclusion of which they would again return to the craft and repeat the performance precisely as before. After having observed several repetitions of these strange manœuvres, Mac solemnly assured Mr. Kniggs and the *Derelict* that he had no doubt whatever that they were intended as an invitation to us to follow; and that by accepting it we should before long be conducted to a friendly port.

"Had we not decided to follow them in the first instance," he told Mr. Kniggs, as he adjusted the sail for action, "it is highly improbable that we should have had the pleasure of meeting with you and your friend; so that their influence hitherto has been distinctly beneficial."

The moment the sails bellied before a favouring breeze the resting sea-birds soared noisily aloft; and having indulged in a series of wild aerial evolutions, they proceeded leisurely on the course which they had been pursuing before the *Derelict* appeared upon the scene.

The cheerfulness and hope which Mac diffused so lavishly could not fail to have a reassuring effect on Mr. Kniggs and his friend, whose name it now transpired was Penwith; and it was not long before they were chatting away in a manner which showed that under more favourable auspices they would prove excellent companions.

Both their lives had been spent until quite recently in mining for the magic metal, gold, in various localities scattered over the face of a vast continent and its adjacent isles; and many and stirring were the tales they had to tell of adventures which lent zest to the days of their youth and early manhood.

Each of them manifested a disposition to institute comparisons between the most formidable of the dangers which in their time they had encountered and coped with successfully, and the very appalling experience through which they had just passed; and as this was just what Mac did not desire them to do, he set about devising a means of bringing it to an end.

Rightly concluding that other tales than those of adventure would be more suitable under the circumstances, he suggested that each should contribute in turn a story of romance connected either with himself personally or with some one else; and the proposal was received with unanimous approval.

Lots having been gravely cast to determine who should be first to speak, it fell to that of Mr. Penwith to take the initiative, which he did after a hesitancy that seemed to denote the progress of a mental struggle of no mean dimensions.

"Years before either of you young gentlemen saw the light," he said, nodding at Mac and me, "my only brother and I were engaged in gold-digging on a certain alluvial field, one of many upon which we had tried our fortunes with but indifferent success; and it was then that we arrived at a determination to try our luck at the particular branch of our ordinary occupation known as reefing. The mountains in the vicinity were known to be rich in deposits of quartz; and the project we had in view was to devote as much of our time as we could spare from working the poor and patchy alluvium, to testing that matrix for the precious metal.

"Buoyed up with the strong hope of one day 'striking it rich,' we toiled away contentedly in a wild region which soon became deserted by all but ourselves and a few 'fossickers,' as those are called

who cling to diggings after they have been proven poor. The only break in the monotony of our lives that took place for a long time was caused by our weekly visit to Cliffmead, a pretty little township nestling among the hills, a few miles distant from the scene of our labours. Every Saturday afternoon, whether in fair weather or in foul, we decked ourselves out in our best, and with a lightness of heart which an emperor might envy, betook ourselves to the homely 'Tower Inn,' whose hospitality we rationally enjoyed until the following Monday morning. Then, laden with supplies for the new-born week, we returned to our work refreshed and with undiminished confidence in the ultimate result of our labours.

"It was on one of these pleasant visits that a discovery was made which was destined to have an influence on both our lives which neither could possibly foresee.

"What that discovery proved to be was this. During our absence a certain addition to the family circle at the 'Tower' had taken place. The newcomer, who was a joyous, hazel-eyed, healthy girl, just emerging from her teens, turned out to be the landlady's niece; and as she came smilingly forward to be introduced to us by her doting, buxom, good-natured old aunt, I thought I detected an indefinable something about her which was entirely undiscover-

able in any woman I had ever met before. It was not surpassing physical beauty by which I was so strongly attracted, for of that she could not boast; but whatever it was, its potency revealed itself to me most unmistakably before I was many minutes in the sunshine of her presence. The touch of her shapely little hand sent a thrill through my frame, the like of which I had never experienced before; and I rapidly developed an overwhelming desire to bask in her sunniest of smiles, and gaze furtively on the graceful movements of her lithe form as she flitted noiselessly about the old-fashioned room. It was understood that I would join my brother and a number of other young men in a certain boisterous outdoor amusement which I was commonly supposed to favour; but when the time came for action, I claimed exemption on the ground that I had an important letter to write which I wished particularly to forward by that night's mail.

"Although her voice had a charm which was all its own, I strangely enough shrank timidly from engaging her in conversation personally; and the consequence was that, on the pretext already mentioned, I withdrew at the earliest possible moment to a quiet nook from which I could plainly see and hear her.

"It was just as well that I had not in reality an important letter to indite, for I felt quite unequal

to the task of writing anything but the two words which composed the girl's name—Nellie Nixon. These I traced times out of number, only varying the performance occasionally by making rude and very unsatisfactory sketches of her pretty head, so lavishly crowned with tresses of nut-brown, rippling hair.

"Towards sundown a considerable number of young people of both sexes began to arrive at the inn on horseback from various farmhouses on the distant plains; and it transpired that this was due to a contemplated dance in honour of Miss Nixon which was to be given later on in the evening.

"Among the visitors were several splendid specimens of bright country girlhood, but for none save her who, as if by magic, unpenned within me such a fountain of absorbing passion as almost to alarm me, had I either eyes or ears.

"As soon as I fully realized my condition I was seized with a nervous dread lest I should prematurely betray my secret, for she might reject the love I had to offer, and I was possessed of that peculiar kind of pride which made me shrink with something like horror from the idea of having the existence of my passion generally known, in case I met with a repulse.

"As the evening wore on an incident took place which went to show pretty plainly that my success

as a dissembler left much to be desired, and the discovery startled me as though I had been detected in some wrong-doing.

"I had been sitting apart for some little time gloomily following the lissome movements of the evening's heroine as she waltzed airily past in the awkward embrace of some privileged bumpkin, when I was approached by a young lady friend named King, whom I strongly suspected my brother of regarding with feelings far warmer than mere friendship would account for, and whose first name, by the way, was the same as my adored one's. By this bouncing, jolly girl I was rallied with a thoroughness of which a woman alone is capable when the tender passion is the subject, and plainly accused of having fallen suddenly in love.

"This had the effect of showing me the necessity for being more careful in the future; and wrapping myself more closely still in the mantle of reserve which I was desirous of wearing up to a given point, I once more joined actively in the evening's amusement.

"Many months passed away, during which my amorous condition, so far from suffering any abatement of warmth, became decidedly more torrid than ever; but although our exertions never for a moment relaxed, indeed might be said to have distinctly increased, the prospecting work which we so long

had had in hand, failed to reveal anything of value.

"The consequence was that the story which I had many a time told in other ways remained still untold in words, for I was far from relishing the idea of asking her to betroth herself to a penniless miner; and I should probably have continued to preserve an indefinite silence on the subject, had not my fears been aroused by a tale which was at the time appearing in one of the two weekly newspapers to which we always subscribed. The story referred to pointed with graphic force to the dangers of delay in cases of the kind, the author illustrating his argument by showing how the influence of a false pride played havoc all too sad with two fond hearts; and so strongly did the whole thing appeal to me that I there and then decided to ask Nellie Nixon to be my wife on our very next visit to Cliffmead.

"More than four-score hours had to come and go before we would be again due at the 'Tower,' and never surely since the world began did time prove so provokingly leaden-paced.

"Saturday afternoon came at last, however, and with even more than customary promptitude we were soon trudging gaily along the rough and devious bridle-path that led to our destination.

"Singing merrily as we went, and exchanging but very few remarks, we never cried halt until we

arrived at the summit of a steep hill which overlooked the little township, and from which could plainly be seen, nestling cosily beneath, the roof which sheltered her whom I loved so well.

"Here we came to an abrupt standstill, and having fanned with our hats our heated brows, and gazed admiringly for a time at the peaceful scene below, we continued on our way.

"During our temporary stoppage I thought I detected Tom on two or three occasions in the act of checking himself determinedly as he was on the point of confiding something to me—it was his love for handsome Nellie King, I had no doubt—but if possessed of any such intention he evidently decided to change his mind, and we walked on in a silence that plainly denoted preoccupation of an unusual kind.

"Through some grass paddocks at the rear of the inn there was a short cut of which we invariably availed ourselves; and just as we succeeded in scrambling through the last fence which lay between us and the house, my brother gently detained me, and I knew instinctively that he was about to reveal his secret at last.

"I did not intend to mention the matter to a living soul until I had actually placed the engagement ring on her finger, which I shall not be in a position to do until after I have had an interview

with old Clocks the local jeweller,' he said, in a hurried manner; 'but I feel that I must make an exception in your favour, old fellow. I have asked Nellie to be my wife, and she has consented!'

"Of course she has consented, my dear old boy,' I replied, wringing his hand warmly and with unfeigned pleasure. 'No one who had an opportunity of watching could be so dense as not to see that the wealth of affection which you palpably showered on her was to the full reciprocated.'

"In obedience to a sudden impulse I was about to confide my love affair to him in return for his confidence, when it suddenly occurred to me that I should do well to emulate the caution he displayed in keeping his own counsel until he made sure of his ground. The result was that I resolved, not without some little reluctance, to refrain from speaking on the subject until I, too, was in a position to announce myself as having been formally accepted by my sweetheart; and I never yet have ceased to wonder what would really have happened had I at that juncture decided to act differently.

"How do you think that stern, purse-proud old father of hers will receive the news?' I asked. 'Do you anticipate no trouble from him?'

"Her stern old father?' he repeated in astonishment. 'You don't mean to say that you are unaware of her being an orphan?'

“‘You must be joking, surely?’ I said, glancing at him inquiringly. ‘Why, I stood by his side in Mulligan’s store the time before last we were in town; and if Grumpy Griff died since then I think I’d have heard of the event.’

“‘Oh! now I see where the mistake comes in,’ he replied, with a merry laugh. ‘My ambition is not so strong as you seem to imagine, my dear fellow. I did not aspire to the hand of Nellie King the heiress, but to that of Nellie Nixon the penniless, whom I much prefer.’

“As through a mist I caught sight at that moment of a girl’s figure tripping blithely towards us; the gnarled gum trees at the same time began to sway round and round; and muttering something about having received ‘a touch of the sun,’ I did what I never did before or since—swooned away like a woman.”

CHAPTER VI

AFTER a short pause for refreshment, Mr. Penwith, having nerved himself for the completion of his self-imposed task, proceeded with his narrative as follows—

“When consciousness returned I found that my head was pillowed on Tom’s broad chest, and that his promised bride was in a kneeling posture by my side, fanning my fevered brow, and occasionally applying some cooling lotion to my throbbing temples. All this I discovered without giving them any signs of having revived, and for this I was thankful, since I wished for time to collect my scattered thoughts, and come to a decision as to the line of action I had better follow from that time forward. Listening to their whispered conversation, I soon learned sufficient to convince me that neither suspected the true cause of my sudden indisposition.

Both, indeed, agreed that the explanation I had given of it was the correct one; and the knowledge of these facts assisted me beyond measure in coming to the conclusion at which I promptly arrived. Had they had the least inkling of the truth, no power on earth would have prevented me from shouldering my 'swag' at the earliest possible moment, and putting as great a distance between me and them as it lay within my power to put; but as it was, I resolved to remain at my post, and bear as best I could the terrible misfortune which for ever extinguished the light of my life. They were the only two people in all the world for whom I cared a jot at that time, the only two people living whom I would gladly shield from harm with my life; and as I escaped the danger of becoming an object of pity to them, I determined to bury my carking secret deep down within my breast, where until this night it has remained inviolate, and live thenceforth for them alone, as usefully and cheerfully as it was possible for me to live.

"It took less time to form my plan of future action than it has taken me to describe its nature; and at its completion I jumped to my feet with a feeling of sheepishness, and repeating my former statement about having received a slight sunstroke, I expressed a strong desire to go to my room and lie down. Needless to say, my wish was at once grati-

fied; but the quiet for which I longed was not as yet forthcoming, for the ordeal of an examination at the hands of the only doctor of whom the district could then boast had still to be undergone. This merry dipsomaniac, who had been summoned at my brother's instigation, and whose delay in putting in an appearance was stated to be owing to the fact that it was only with much difficulty that the messenger succeeded in finding him at all, zigzagged his way into my presence at last, and proceeded with a comical assumption of gravity to feel my pulse, examine my tongue, and so forth. I tried as hard as I dared to escape this infliction as soon as I heard that I was to be visited professionally by the inebriate physician; but Tom and others about the place exhibited so much anxiety about having an expert's opinion of my case, that there was nothing for it but to submit.

"Having with a great show of anxious care completed his diagnosis, and before sitting down to write the prescription which he pretended to consider that my case required, the doctor hiccoughed instructions to my brother to have me supplied with a stimulant at once, and broadly hinted that a little liquid refreshment would not at the same time be unacceptable to himself. Both his requests were promptly attended to, as a matter of course; and having imbibed the generous potation with which

he was served, he soon developed signs of becoming somewhat communicative.

"The attack of heat apoplexy from which I suffered, he said, although not of a dangerous nature, afforded additional proof of the soundness of the advice which he never tired of giving, concerning the desirability of exercising great care in protecting the head from the sun's rays during the hot season of the year. Then he went on to affirm that I had had a very narrow escape from a serious if not indeed a fatal illness; warned me against a repetition of the carelessness of which, he said, I had been manifestly guilty, and pocketing his fee, which he more than earned by emphatically ordering that I should have perfect quiet so long as I desired it, he staggered off the premises with an amusing attempt at looking sage and dignified.

"How my reason survived the mental torture I endured during the silent watches of that awful night I know not; but it did, and when the first grey rays of dawn appeared, I hurried forth for a refreshing plunge in the cooling waters of the common bathing-place. Wonderfully braced and invigorated by my early swim, I next took an aimless ramble through the familiar hills and valleys; and the consequence of all this was, that by the time I returned to the 'Tower' I felt sufficiently strong and brave to successfully act upon the resolutions formed

on the previous evening, and to bear with resignation and fortitude the burden so suddenly and unexpectedly imposed, and so altogether impossible of removal.

"Owing to the fact that it was necessary to provide the wherewithal to furnish the pretty little wooden cottage which we designed and constructed ourselves in what we called our spare time, prospecting had to be reluctantly abandoned in favour of alluvial workings for several months, and this fact troubled both of us more than either cared to say, for we were firmly convinced that the success we expected could not be very far distant, and we were naturally anxious to realize it as soon as possible. How much at fault our judgment was will appear as I proceed.

"In course of time the last of many 'finishing touches,' as we termed them, was bestowed upon the little house, which Tom affectionately called 'The Nest,' and as it was then in readiness to receive its queen, the long-delayed marriage soon took place.

"Among the many wedding presents of various kinds and values which the occasion brought forth, came a generous gift from the landlord of the 'Tower,' and as this took the very useful shape of coin of the realm, it placed the young couple in the proud position of being able to contemplate the future with

considerable equanimity. It also had the effect of enabling Tom and myself to resume the prospecting operations which had been so long suspended, and of which we entertained such bright hopes; but although we devoted the greater part of five years' honest toil to the work thereafter, we failed to find any but pinched or hopelessly barren quartz reefs, tunnel in whatever direction we would.

"A section of the great mountain still remained untried, because our rather crude knowledge led us to look upon it as the least likely of all to produce anything of value, and this we decided to prospect too, after long and anxious deliberation.

"Some months subsequent to this, and at a time, too, when the performance of our huge task was proceeding swimmingly, my brother, one day while at work, complained of feeling unwell—the first time I ever heard him do so; but as after a short rest he appeared to get all right again, no importance was attached to the matter at the time. He was taken ill again on the following day, however, and on the day succeeding that he was too unwell to leave the house.

"Not without a vague feeling of alarm I then lost no time in obtaining the professional services of a young physician recently settled in Cliffmead, and on his advice, and because the case required the performance of a somewhat difficult surgical operation,

it was decided to send the patient forthwith to the metropolis.

"He was accompanied by his wife and the baby, the only other child, little four-year-old Walter, being left in my charge during their enforced absence.

"As may easily be imagined, the time that elapsed before I learned the result of the critical operation which my brother had to undergo was an especially anxious one for me; but when the pregnant message at last arrived, all my anxiety was at once dispelled. Everything passed off with the utmost success. He felt sure he would be strong enough to undertake the return journey in a few days; but his medical advisers insisted on his refraining from doing so for as many weeks.

"Every mail to Cliffmead—there were only two a week in those days—brought fresh and cheering news of his improved condition, and the last I received from the big city vaguely announced their intention of sailing in a few days, and told me not to expect to hear from them again from that address. I was also informed that it was their intention to spend a day or two at Belport (the sea-port town at which they would disembark), in order to give Nellie an opportunity of calling upon certain relatives in the vicinity; and knowing that they intended to perform their land journey by mail coach as before, I had no

difficulty in calculating when they would be due at the 'Tower.'

"Two or three nights after I received the memorable letter to which I have just referred, my sleep was so disturbed by a horrid dream in which a fatal shipwreck figured prominently, but at the same time indistinctly, that I woke about midnight with a violent start, and with nerves completely unstrung. Partially dressing I quickly had recourse to the soothing influence of the fragrant weed, and having paced to and fro in the starlight for the greater part of an hour, I became at length sufficiently composed to return to rest.

"Strange to say, my slumbers were again disturbed by the same frightful dream that had already unnerved me, but on its second visit it rapidly assumed a definite shape, and soon presented a most vivid picture.

"I imagined myself standing on one of the high, wild cliffs which grimly sentinel Belport's busy harbour. Hundreds of others were there too, and hundreds more came hurrying to the spot with wan, excited faces. A great storm was raging, and through the spray-formed mist could be seen, by the uncertain light of early dawn, a large steamship drifting helplessly to destruction. Heroic efforts to communicate with her were made again and again, but owing to the terrific force of wind and wave they all ended in failure.

"On, slowly on, came the surely-doomed ship, amid the anguish-stricken groans of strong men, and the despairing cries of the women and children who had been attracted to the place. Nearer and nearer she came, regardless of the hoarse and prolonged protest of the escaping steam which an accident had rendered her incapable of using, until at length she crashed with awful force into the submerged rocks so close to where I stood, that it seemed as if a stone could be hurled to her deck.

"Then the wind and sea seemed to lull for a moment or two, as if to gloat over their murderous work before cruelly completing it, and it was at that instant that I saw something which made my heart stand still. Waiting calmly on the poop where all seemed panic and confusion, was my brother, clasping to his breast his wife and child. Looking upward, as my glance rested on him, he caught sight of me at once, and with a sad smile of fortitude lighting up his brave, handsome face, he waved me a farewell just as a towering sea came howling in and dashed the ill-fated vessel to atoms, as though she had been made of matchwood.

"Becoming desperate to the verge of madness, I prepared to hurl myself from the beetling cliffs, when—— I awoke in a state of mortal terror, and found myself bathed in a cold perspiration.

"So terribly realistic was the whole thing, and

so very deeply did it impress me, that I decided upon making my way to the 'Tower' at once, in the vague but slender hope of having my fears allayed there, and I set out for Cliffmead accordingly, after having arranged with a neighbour to look after my little charge, Walter, during my absence.

"I had traversed a little more than half the distance when I was startled by the clattering sound of a horse's hoofs in rapid motion, and as the burly form of the landlord of the 'Tower,' vigorously urging his faithful steed, burst into view immediately afterwards, I had no hesitation in coming to the conclusion that the sleeping vision I had had portrayed a dread reality. Each narrowly scanned the other's countenance by the aid of the feeble dawn-light when we met, but neither expressed the least surprise at such an unusual meeting.

"He greeted me with some approach to his customary geniality of manner, but it was easy to see that it was only by a powerful effort he succeeded in maintaining something like calmness, as he proceeded to inquire whether I knew the exact day on which Tom and Nellie intended to set sail for home. When he found that my information on the point was no more definite than that which he possessed himself, he could no longer restrain his excitement, and in trembling accents he told of a report which

reached him somehow, concerning a terrible shipwreck close to Belport.

"The vessel belonged to the line by which my brother and his wife would most probably return; and he was consumed with anxiety lest they should have taken passage by her, he said, for all hands were reported lost.

"The outward-bound mail was due to leave Cliffmead that morning, as luck would have it; and in answer to a question as to what I thought was best to be done, I announced my intention of taking passage by it, so as to place the matter beyond doubt as quickly as possible. I had no doubt of my own which required to be set at rest, for I felt as absolutely certain that the unspeakably sad occurrence had been truthfully revealed to me, as it was possible to feel about anything; but I refrained from mentioning this fact to my anxious friend, since I failed to see how any good could result.

"Heartrending scenes presented themselves when the shipping-office was reached. Large numbers of persons of both sexes and all ages elbowed their way excitedly through the immense throng of sympathetic idlers that surged about the building; and those I joined mechanically, and without a moment's loss of time. I experienced the utmost difficulty in gaining access to the large room in which the list of the victims' names was exhibited; but when at

last I succeeded, the object of my mission was soon attained, for the very first name on the death-roll was one that I knew it was sure to include.

"With a feeling of infinite loneliness, and a pronounced tendency to assume a rebellious attitude towards the very edict that bade me live, I fought my way outward through the sobbing, moaning crowd; and having prepared my sad message for dispatch by the return mail to Cliffmead, I at once proceeded to the scene of the disaster, in the hope that I might have the melancholy satisfaction of recovering the bodies of my dear ones from the seething depths of the relentless sea.

"Many weeks passed away before I recovered sufficiently from the attack of brain fever which my prolonged and gruesome vigil induced to enable me to realize where I was, and what was going on around me; but when at length I did cease to hover between life and death, it was to find that I was once more in my own old room at the 'Tower,' and that I was being carefully watched and tended by anxious eyes and willing hands.

"Acting on imperative instructions from my medical attendant, the patient nurses did their best to keep me from worrying about the nature of the events that were responsible for landing me on a bed of sickness. Every question I put with the

object of dispelling the dense fog that enshrouded my memory, met with an answer full of well-meant vagueness, and a gentle reminder that quiet was essential to my speedy recovery; but nothing which they could say or do could keep my weary brain from trying to unravel the mystery. Several days came and went; and as each passed slowly away my physical strength became gradually greater, but my inability to recall recent occurrences remained as pronounced as ever.

"Looking about my room one evening in a vacant sort of way, and as if searching for some object that would give me the required clue, my glance fell suddenly on my little toddling nephew, who could be detected peeping shyly at me through the partly-opened door; and at sight of that baby face all the dread circumstances which led to his becoming a little helpless orphan flashed through my mind in an instant.

"That I owed a solemn duty to the doubly unfortunate child, struck me forcibly also at the same moment; and I determined there and then to devote my life to an endeavour to secure his welfare. My efforts have been rewarded by a fair measure of success, I am happy to say; for I succeeded in getting him soundly educated, and in procuring him the advantages of an honourable and lucrative profession.

"A few words more and my little story will come to an end.

"After many years of comparatively fruitless toil, first in conjunction with my poor dead brother, and ever since in mateship with my dear old friend Kniggs, who has listened to me as patiently as any, I find myself the possessor of affluence, for at last the long-sought golden stone has been discovered. When I have seen my adopted son once more, and endowed him with that which will render him permanently independent of his profession and every other consideration, the dream of the best years of my life will have been realized, and I can end my days in full contentment."

As the sound of the last words of the pathetic history died away, Mac approached its narrator and warmly but silently wrung his honest hand, an example which I was quick to follow; but beyond tugging with a little increased energy at his bearded chin, Mr. Kniggs exhibited no signs of emotion.

"The pity of it is, gentlemen," the latter said at length, and with much solemnity, "that the young man for whose sake a boundless self-sacrifice was practised by my friend in the past, to my certain knowledge, has proved totally unworthy. All the goodness and fostering care of his foolish old uncle has been repaid by undoubted indications of black ingratitude; and yet we are told that further favours

are to be heaped upon him without question and without stint! And this too in face of the fact that numbers of deserving charities are to be found on every hand. I have no patience with the man."

"There is one subject upon which Kniggs and I have never agreed," Mr. Penwith said, with a deprecating but good-natured smile. "He formed an ungenerously low estimate of my nephew's merits almost from the first, and he obstinately refuses to correct the error. I admit that I have not heard from the lad as often as I could wish since he left me over two years ago; but that is no reason why a charge of base ingratitude should be hurled against him in his absence. The apparent neglect is easily accounted for if one bears in mind the numberless matters of serious interest that must always occupy the attention of a busy member of the legal profession."

"Numberless fiddlesticks!" blurted Mr. Kniggs. "Even if it be granted that he has always been too busy to pay you a visit, it does not follow that he could never find time to favour you with as much as a single line. Put him to the test that I have suggested, and if his intention all along has not been to discard you, it will be soon made apparent. If, on the other hand, that has been his wish, as I maintain, then you ought to be aware of the fact."

Then addressing himself specially to Mac and myself, Mr. Kniggs went on to explain that the test which he wished to have applied consisted simply in so arranging matters that when the first meeting between uncle and nephew took place, the former should appear arrayed for the occasion in the every-day garb of a working miner.

"The chance to do so still remains," he went on to say, "for when we called at the young hopeful's office on our arrival from the country, we found him absent, and could get no definite information as to when he would return, by the way. Should the adoption of my proposal prove that I have misjudged Master Walter, I promise to act every whit as generously towards him as his foster-father intends to act; for no living being has a claim upon me, and it would be my duty to make reparation to the very fullest extent."

"As I have often told you, I have no doubt about the lad's fidelity," his friend replied, "and I cannot act as though I had, even for the great consideration you have been again good enough to mention."

It was here pointed out by Mac that the proposed little bit of masquerading would have the effect of adding immensely to the pleasant nature of the surprise which was in store for the young lawyer;

and drowsily admitting that this aspect of the case was not unworthy of consideration, the weary Mr. Penwith composed himself to rest, and the example thus set was followed by my friend Mac with remarkable promptitude.

ously, would certainly not have been resorted to, as it was, for the purpose of passing time. On the other hand, had he been there to receive us, the opportunity of unmasking the thankless whelp would have fled for ever; for he would immediately infer from our prosperous appearance that fortune had favoured us at last, and we would be received with open arms beyond any doubt. Your friend's suggestion to Penwith was a happy one, and I have great hope that it will bear good fruit."

That dark hour which is said to precede the dawn had arrived, and we were still trying bravely to entertain one another, when yet another outbreak of excitement among our little pilots attracted our attention.

At the time mentioned they were abreast a bold headland, which loomed darkly ahead; and dark as it undoubtedly was, we could plainly see their white, shapely forms in the act of excelling all their previous exhibitions of excitement and delight.

The three that remained with the boat through the night became very demonstrative too; but instead of joining the main flock, they contented themselves with hovering about and above us in an ecstatic manner, which for some reason or other inspired Mr. Kniggs and myself with a feeling of no mean elation.

On nearing the spot at which the majority of our

CHAPTER VII

THE night had far advanced before Mr. Penwith's story, the gist only of which has been recorded, came to an end; and although it was evident that had Mr. Kniggs followed the promptings of nature, he would do as Mac and Mr. Penwith had already done, he good-naturedly announced his intention of keeping watch with me until our friends were sufficiently refreshed to relieve us.

In the long conversation which followed, Mr. Kniggs had much that was unfavourable to tell of his friend's nephew, whose career he had closely watched from childhood, and whose callous neglect of his foster-father he bitterly resented.

"Had he been at his office when we called there the other day," he said, "his uncle and I would not be here to-night; for the fishing excursion on which we went, and which has been prolonged so mysteri-

feathered friends were disporting themselves, it became apparent that a considerable alteration in our course would soon have to take place in order to avoid going out to sea; and immediately after the time came at which the change of direction was effected, a flash of strong but mellow light came to us from a distant promontory, making our hearts jump suddenly with a great joy.

At first we hesitated to believe that what we saw issued from a lighthouse; but as the flash was repeated again and again at regular intervals, a very few minutes sufficed to convince us that a beacon was in sight, and that consequently human habitation could not be far off.

Carlo was so overjoyed at the discovery that had been made, and so boisterous in giving expression to his satisfaction, that he soon aroused the sleepers, and then followed a scene of pleasurable excitement which it is impossible to describe.

Many and diverse were the theories advanced concerning the probable identity of the mariner's guide on which all eyes were eagerly and almost constantly fixed, as though we feared it might steal away if it remained unwatched; but when the morning light became strong enough to enable us to examine it and its surroundings with something approaching completeness, it was easy to see how entirely wide of the mark were all our conjectures.

The place bore no resemblance to anything of the kind we had ever seen, or of which we had ever heard or read, except that the great light which the lofty tower contained revolved, and that it marked the entrance to what proved to be a capacious harbour.

Barely had we time to note all this, when signs of an intention on the part of the sea-birds to desert us at last were detected; and watching their movements for a time, we saw them wheel swiftly around the lighthouse a few times, and then soar aloft in a spiral column and disappear completely from view.

The three of their number that attached themselves to the boat in such a remarkable manner still remained, however, and when a course was shaped towards the harbour, they at once constituted themselves our willing guides.

Following their lead as a matter of course, and with perfect faith in the wisdom of doing so, we sailed past countless bays and islets of surpassing beauty, until suddenly, and as if by magic, the domes and spires of a great city came clearly into view, and here we parted company with the last of our voluntary pilots, as regretfully as if we were being severed from oldest and dearest friends. Breaking the rigid silence they had maintained since we entered the magnificent harbour to which they so faithfully

conducted us, they hovered about us joyously for several minutes, and then they too soared slowly aloft and disappeared in the blue empyrean.

In awed silence we all gazed more or less constantly in the direction of the point at which they vanished, right up to the moment that we came within reach of the great public quay which we selected as a landing-place; but we looked in vain for any sign of their return, and had reluctantly to direct our attention elsewhere.

Not without a certain feeling of timorousness we presently disembarked at the most secluded spot we could find on the busy and capacious wharf, and having secured the boats, and made everything snug, we leisurely proceeded to reconnoitre.

It afforded us much gratification to find as we moved about among the busy throng, that the predominant language in use was the one with which we were most familiar; but notwithstanding this, we refrained from precipitately confiding our woes to any one. The truth is that every member of our little party shrank instinctively from addressing strangers if it could possibly be avoided, and as there was a possibility of learning something at the great railway-station close at hand which might throw some light on our surroundings, it was decided to visit that edifice before questioning any one.

The first circumstance that particularly attracted

our attention after we landed was the entire absence of steam as a motive power either on land or water, and the next thing to astonish us was that animal life was nowhere to be seen employed in the work of traction.

We were still engaged in giving expression to our admiration of the general results which these novel conditions produced when we entered the station, and proceeded at once to eagerly scan the timetables in search of the name of some city or town of whose existence we had some previous knowledge. Much to our disappointment, however, not a single combination of letters in the several long lists which were there exhibited contained a name of which we had ever before heard; and dejectedly relinquishing our fruitless task, we took up a position from which a clear view could be had of the crowds of people who came and went unceasingly.

For over half-an-hour we had been staring curiously at the swarms of strange faces that passed and re-passed, when Mac pointed out the uselessness of wasting time in that fashion, and suggested that we should interview the official in charge of the station, and lay our case unreservedly before him.

This proposal met with unanimous approval, and we were on the point of moving off for the purpose of putting it into effect, when something occurred which delayed our departure, and instantly struck

all four dumb with astonishment. And that it had this effect is not to be wondered at, for it consisted in the hurried arrival of four persons, three of whom were recognized by Mac and myself as they flashed past on their way to the train, and one of whom was evidently well known to Mr. Kniggs and his friend.

The latter was the first to recover from his astonishment, and the moment he did so he rushed wildly after the departing train, calling urgently upon one who was all unconscious of his presence, in the hope of attracting his attention.

The explanation which Mr. Kniggs had to give of his friend's extraordinary behaviour was, that one of the two gentlemen who constituted the masculine half of the excited little party that created such a sudden sensation, and the only one who accompanied the two young ladies on their journey, was none other than Mr. Penwith's nephew. Although we were glad, of course, to hear this, we could see nothing in it at the time to excite wonder; but the statement which Mac and I had to make in return was one well calculated to inspire any one who heard it with awe.

The brother and sisters whom we saw in Walter Penwith's company were the dearest friends we had on earth; but it was a matter of universal belief that they, together with their widowed mother, lost their lives at sea half-a-dozen years before!

This announcement had not the paralyzing effect on Mr. Kniggs that we anticipated; nor did Mr. Penwith seem so impressed as we could wish, when his violent excitement cooled sufficiently to permit of his listening to what we had to say.

"Either universal belief has been woefully at fault," the former remarked oracularly, "or you gentlemen are at present the victims of a rather remarkable hallucination. That it is a case of mistaken identity seems much more probable than the alternative proposition. Don't you think so yourselves?"

"Absolute proof will soon be forthcoming," Mr. Penwith reminded us; "for I shall have to interview the gentleman whose identity is in doubt as soon as I can do so without interrupting the conversation in which he seems so engrossed, and I will soon learn then whether he is Mr. Robert Wingford or merely his counterfeit presentment. Whoever he is, it is evident that he is a friend of Walter's; and as such he is doubtless in a position to enlighten me as to the boy's movements, for which I cannot be too thankful."

And here the matter was allowed to remain for the time being, by common consent.

CHAPTER VIII

It was not without a certain degree of unexpressed indignation that Mac and I noted what we considered a rather curious fact, that while Mr. Penwith and his friend would not for a moment admit the possibility of their having fallen into error in a work of identification which they had to perform by the aid of a fleeting glance, they made no secret whatever of being possessed of the firm conviction that my friend and I blundered egregiously in arriving at the conclusion that the man whom we had had an opportunity of surveying closely and very deliberately was beyond all doubt Bob Wingford, our erstwhile school-mate and best of friends. In reply to their questions on the subject, we had to acknowledge that the fact of only two people having survived the disaster by which he was supposed to have perished was one that was universally admitted to be well authenticated;

and that Wingford was not one of those two, we had to admit without hesitation. Altogether, the evidence in favour of the view they took was made to appear so irresistibly strong, that my belief in the testimony of my sense of sight began to falter unmistakably; and it would probably have broken down completely very soon had my attention not been arrested by certain peculiar movements in which Carlo was at the time indulging, and which quickly convinced me that my first impression was the correct one, and that my growing scepticism was quite unwarranted.

The sagacious creature had been prowling inquisitively about the spacious premises; and in the course of his wanderings he chanced to pass close to where the supposed Wingford and his friend were still engaged in their prolonged conversation.

While yet about a dozen paces from them he came to a sudden halt; and having sniffed at them inquiringly, he proceeded slowly and cautiously to make a closer and more thorough examination.

A very few moments sufficed to convince him that his suspicion was well founded; and an extravagant display of canine rapture followed without delay, evidently much to the astonishment of the gentleman towards whom it was directed, as well as of the companion with whom he was speaking earnestly still.

Having relieved his feelings to some extent by excessive fawning, he next set about endeavouring to induce the recipient of his pressing attentions to follow his lead to where we all anxiously awaited his coming.

The means he adopted to secure the end he had in view were characteristically intelligent. First of all he would take a short but rapid run in our direction; then turn about abruptly and bark forth an impatient invitation; and finding his demand disregarded, the whole operation would at once be repeated.

For what seemed quite a long time these wiles seemed likely to prove hopelessly fruitless; but the time for the friends to part came at last, and when it did, Wingford, for it was really he, decided upon humouring the retriever by following in his wake so long as he could do so without incurring too much personal inconvenience.

The gyrations indulged in by Carlo when he realized that what he wished to happen was about to transpire after all, would almost make one dizzy to behold; and not for a moment did he relax his jubilant movements until he brought Wingford to a point from which he could not very well escape without getting a full view of the members of our little party.

Having accomplished this he turned his attention

to Mac and myself, and wildly, but, as it happened, quite unnecessarily, proceeded to do what he could towards directing our attention to the approach of our friend.

Following these peculiar movements with an apparently increasing curiosity, the latter's glance very soon fell on me, and immediately afterwards on the only other member of the group whom he knew; and the instant it did so he stood suddenly still, became extremely pale, and with wide-open eyes stared in breathless wonder first at one and then at the other for several seconds.

How long the spell would have remained unbroken had it continued intact until I dispelled it, it is impossible to say; but as it was, its existence was comparatively short-lived, for Mac soon took steps to bring it to an end.

"Why, Bob, old fellow," he said, approaching Wingford, his face wreathed in a sunny smile, "you have not forgotten old friends so soon, surely, have you?"

Here followed a scene of excitement which must be left to the reader's imagination to depict; and when the principal actors in it became sufficiently cool to act rationally, we were all taken in charge by Wingford, and were soon rolling in a sumptuous conveyance through the grand streets of a superb city.

Our destination proved to be a palatial inn, charmingly situated in extensive grounds which were redolent of the delicate perfume imparted by an abundance of lovely flowers and rarest shrubs; and on arrival thereat each was provided with an attendant in obedience to orders issued by Wingford, who also gave instructions that we were to be furnished with suitable outfits with as little delay as possible.

Much refreshed by our ablutions and change of clothing, we were all in the highest spirits when we met our thoughtful host at an early luncheon; and each displayed such a feverish anxiety to join in the narration of the thrilling experiences to which we had been recently subjected, and towards which the conversation was at once directed, that it seemed to me impossible that he could do more at first than guess imperfectly at the meaning which was intended to be conveyed. What struck me at the time as being particularly strange, however, was that when he did eventually become seized of the main facts connected with our remarkable voyages, he did not attach anything like the importance to them which he was naturally expected to attach.

"You certainly seem to have had a very trying time of it," he said, with what was evidently an effort at appearing wonder-stricken; "but I hope you will not allow the unpleasant subject to linger

in your memory any longer than you can help, for no good end can be served by allowing it to haunt you. I wish you to enjoy your sojourn here thoroughly; but to do so it is necessary that you completely ignore all the awe-inspiring experiences through which you have recently passed. You will find much here to excite your deepest interest, and direct your thoughts into pleasant channels; and that being so, you can rest assured that you will never have any real cause to regret having paid a visit to Blestland, terrifying as were the conditions under which your voyage hither was made."

"Blestland?" was echoed simultaneously by all four.

"I never knew that there was a country so named on this miserable earth of ours," Mac exclaimed; "and certainly never dreamt that there was a single division of the globe worthy of such a name."

"Very little indeed is known of its existence beyond the confines of the place itself," Wingford replied; "but I think that when you have had an opportunity of learning something of the social and political life of the region, you will admit that it is not at all inaptly named. You will find a vast difference between the social system by which we are governed here, and the very best of those with which you have been hitherto acquainted. You will look in vain for class or religious hatreds, abject

poverty, and general discontent; and the cruel enslavement of labour of which you have had such a rich experience is nowhere to be found. I do not wish it to be inferred that the state of things I describe always existed here; for as a matter of fact it was evolved out of a state of social misery and injustice as deplorably bad in some respects as any to be found on Earth at the present day. Gradually, peacefully, and legitimately evolved, as history tells us, and as it is pleasing to know. Had it been otherwise, not only would the reformation have been dearly bought, but its stability could in no way be depended upon; for although violent revolution may succeed in removing some forms of injustice, sooner or later it is sure to replace them with others equally as objectionable, and which will in turn cry aloud for removal.

"I am too closely pressed for time at present to describe to you in anything approaching detail the permanent and beneficial reforms that have been effected here by the exercise of common-sense on the part of the people themselves, and without inflicting a single injustice on any human being; but I shall take an early opportunity of going as fully as seems necessary into the whole matter with you.

"Anyhow, the present is not a fitting time to discuss the subject, for you must be sadly in need

of a little rest and quiet, which I strongly recommend you to indulge in forthwith."

As he was preparing to take his departure, after having named an hour at which we might all expect to see him next, Mr. Penwith questioned him, and for about the hundredth time, on some subject connected with the movements of his nephew; and as he did so in a sufficiently loud tone to enable every one present to hear what was said, it had the effect of reminding Mr. Kniggs of his pet scheme for testing young Penwith's fidelity.

Briefly and rapidly he explained his proposition to Wingford, but grounding it on this occasion on his alleged desire to spring a pleasant surprise on his friend's nephew; and the absorbing interest which the gentleman addressed displayed as the plan became swiftly unfolded, was a matter of considerable surprise both to Mac and myself. Nor could we account for the warmth with which he appealed to Mr. Penwith, and with a very flattering measure of success, to comply with the harmless wishes of his friend; but as, in deference to his request, we accompanied him to his office, we did not remain long unenlightened on these points.

"Although, as I said a while ago, I know you must be in need of rest," he said, as soon as we got beyond hearing distance of Mr. Penwith and his friend, "I could not resist the temptation to ask you

out for a little private chat after hearing what Mr. Kniggs has just been disclosing. You were no doubt surprised to see how eagerly I wrestled with Mr. Penwith on behalf of Mr. Kniggs' innocent-looking proposal; but I assure you that I have most excellent reasons for being extremely anxious to see the latter carry his point, especially if I should be so fortunate as to succeed, as I think I shall be, in having the suggested test applied in the presence of my mother and sisters. On his arrival in Blestland all alone several months back, I did everything that lay in my power to comfort and assist Mr. Walter Penwith; and among other things I secured him an introduction to the members of my family. Almost from that unhappy hour the peace and contentment which I found in this, my new and better home, have been more or less soured and disturbed; and all through the malignant agency of this very man!

"On the occasion of his very first visit to our house, I overheard him give expression to the sorrow which he professed to feel on learning that there is a total absence of missionary activity in this fair region; and could I have foreseen then what this reflection would suggest to his cunning mind, good care would have been taken that his visit should not be repeated, and a vast amount of mental worry and heart-burning might have been avoided. As it was next to impossible to divine this, however, his coming

and going were not interfered with until it became too late to make my interference either effective or desirable; for before many days had elapsed he had succeeded in winning the complete confidence of the women-folk by confiding to them his intention of at once establishing a propaganda for the conversion of the happy Blestlanders, and invoking their aid on behalf of an undertaking which he managed to persuade them was instituted from purely religious and philanthropic motives.

"Repeated and ostentatious efforts were purposely made by him, and always in my mother's presence, to induce me to join the proposed band of aggressive missionaries; and as I always flatly refused to have anything to do with the matter, as he well knew I should, I soon came to be viewed as distinctly unregenerate, and my influence in the household as rapidly waned.

"That in doing all this he had an ulterior object in view I never had the slightest doubt; but what the exact nature of it was I could only guess at vaguely, until one evening about a month back, when I was gleefully informed by poor mater that he had that day asked her permission to pay his addresses to my sister Bessie, with a view to their speedy union."

Up to this point my interest in the foregoing

narrative was of the mildly sympathetic order; but on hearing the concluding words of his last sentence, my breast became instantly surcharged with an indignant resentment that seemed to force all the blood in my body into my face and ears. And these effects were not produced without a most excellent reason; for from my earliest boyhood I loved the sister to whom he referred, to the confines of distraction. That she herself could not help being aware of the state of my feelings towards her, I had no doubt; but nothing definite could be known on the subject to any one, for I was restrained by a combination of pride and bashfulness from pleading for her hand until I had attained to a man's position in the office in which I was employed as a junior, and the promotion for which I yearned had not been received at the date on which she mysteriously disappeared on a visit to Blestland.

"He lost no time in availing himself of the permission to woo so freely granted him by mother," Wingford went on to say; "but I am happy to say his amorous advances met with a most unfavourable reception. Instead of accepting his repulse in a manly fashion, however, he adopted the characteristic course of appealing to maternal influence to aid him in an attempt to induce Bessie to reverse, or at any rate re-consider, her plainly-expressed

decision; and he was so far successful that the poor girl was prevailed upon to withdraw her cold refusal and allow the matter to stand over for maturer consideration. I felt inclined to blame her for this display of weakness when first I heard of it; but when I came to consider how intensely devoted she is, as we all are, to her only surviving parent, I fully realized the motives by which she was prompted. Mother's coercive action, too, excited my resentment and indignation at the outset; but when I heard of the pressure the fellow brought to bear to compel her to act as she did, these also disappeared. He began by pointing out that his union with Bessie would tend immensely to strengthen and consolidate the mission, since it would put an end to the possibility of a marriage being contracted between her and a stiff-necked, unregenerate Blestlander; and he concluded by more than hinting at the strong probability of his having to relinquish his missionary labours, owing to a want of heart to carry them on, should my sister persist in refusing to wed him.

"All these things clearly indicate that the only hope there is of rescuing my poor unhappy Bessie from an impending doom worse far than death, lies in my ability to discover some means of exhibiting the Bishop, as I always call him, to his fellow-

missioners in his true colours. Now it has occurred to me that this might possibly be effected to an extent sufficient for my purpose, if the pleasant-surprise proposal be successfully carried out, and if the theatre used for the occasion be a drawing-room in our house. True, the good Bishop may receive his doting old uncle with open arms, and so retain his position unimpaired; but judging by the way in which he is reported to have behaved towards him in the past, and by what I have seen of the man since his arrival here, I have every reason to believe that he will do just the reverse. Anyhow the experiment is one well worthy of being made, and I know I can rely on both of you to aid me in giving it a fair trial. The utmost precaution must be used to prevent an accidental meeting of the men pending the result; but as the Bishop does not return to town until nearly nightfall, there is no necessity to exercise any special vigilance until then.

"By the way, it occurs to me now for the second time—I forgot to mention it when it occurred to me before—that the name of the lady to whom the girls and young Penwith went on a visit this morning sounds exactly like that of the author of the proposal which I am impatiently anxious to see carried into effect. Mrs. Plantagenet Kniggs,

who is a widow with a young family of three, is one of the very few immigrants of whom Blestland can boast. She arrived here from Canada shortly after we landed, and lived on the most affectionate terms with my folks until the Bishop's advent. A certain degree of estrangement sprang up between the families then, however, owing to the widow's refusal to countenance the mission on conscientious grounds; and although anxious negotiations take place from time to time, the breach seems no nearer to being healed than ever. Nor for the life of me can I see how they can hope to arrive at a satisfactory understanding on the subject upon which they are at variance; for while the Bishop is willing to grant any concessions demanded by either side, my sisters refuse, and always must stoutly refuse, to concede the soundness of certain religious dogmas which the widow regards as the embodiment of eternal truth! Should it happily prove that Mr. Kniggs is really related to the last-named lady, I would suggest that he proceed to her place by the first out-going train to-morrow; and as no better means of keeping nephew and uncle apart for the present could be devised, the latter should be pressed to accompany his friend, and to delay his return until he receives a summons from me."

The speaker's official quarters were reached by

this time; and as his spare time was just about exhausted, and Mac and I were anxious to question Mr. Kniggs on the subject suggested by our friend Wingford, we took a hasty leave and returned with all speed to the hotel.

CHAPTER IX

VAINLY endeavouring to repress our excitement, Mac and I rushed wildly and with but little ceremony into the presence of Mr. Penwith and his friend, who were enjoying the grateful rest prescribed for them by Wingford; and as we both began to bombard Mr. Kniggs with inquiries concerning his family affairs at the same instant, and with much precipitation, we succeeded in creating considerable astonishment at very short notice, as may easily be imagined.

"I have not, I regret to say, one single relative in the land of the living," Mr. Kniggs said sadly, as soon as we gave him a chance to make himself heard. "I never had a sister, and my last surviving brother died in far-off Canada between six and seven years ago. He left a widow and three little ones well provided for; but soon after his death the

widowed mother became possessed of an irresistible desire to recross the seas to her native land. With her children she set sail for the Old World in due course; but nothing was ever heard of the ship again. She was swallowed up by the cruel sea, and with her were lost the only relatives that remained to me on earth."

"Few things are impossible, you know, Mr. Kniggs," Mac told him excitedly; "and those you have mourned so long may have escaped after all. Pray what was your sister-in-law's name?"

"Her name was Susan," Mr. Kniggs replied, glancing at his questioner, as if he doubted his sanity; "Susan Smith was her full maiden name."

"My friend is too flurried to make himself easily understood," I gasped out nervously, quite under the impression that I could make Mac's meaning clear. "What he meant to ask for was your brother's name. What was it, please?"

"The same as my own, of course," he answered, eyeing me also rather suspiciously. "He enjoyed more than the average share of prosperity; but still he never became proud enough, just as I never rose high enough nor descended sufficiently low, to discard plain Kniggs, the name we both inherited. Poor old Plant—his name was Plantagenet, but we called him Plant for short—no man I ever knew was less likely to be spoiled by success than he

was, for his nature was as simple and unaffected as——"

Any further remarks which he might have intended to make were here cut suddenly short by frantic shouts of "Hurrah! hurrah! 'Tis she! 'Tis she!" from Mac and myself; and up to such an unaccountable state of excitement did we work ourselves, that some time elapsed before we could rationally explain what our conduct meant, and so dispel the grave suspicions which our auditors afterwards confessed to having entertained concerning our mental condition.

There was no need to suggest to Mr. Kniggs the desirability of paying the widow an early visit, or of hinting to Mr. Penwith that he might accompany his friend, for the first thing they did on fully realizing the position, was to propose that they should set out for her abode without a moment's unnecessary delay; but when their wishes in this respect were communicated to Wingford, he expressed himself as strongly opposed to any such steps being taken.

"The only train available to them for to-day," he explained, "is timed to stop at a midway station, just as that by which the Bishop returns reaches the same place; and this is evidently a very good and sufficient reason why their departure must be postponed till to-morrow. Impress upon them that

it is absolutely necessary to prepare Mrs. Kniggs for their entirely unexpected appearance on the scene; and remind them that although I shall proceed to break the news of their arrival to her as soon as possible, nothing can be done in this respect yet awhile, for I have ascertained that she has just left for the railway-station with my sisters and their escort, and is not expected back for some hours, owing to having certain business to transact after she sees them off. The first of these reasons will be quite sufficient to satisfy Mr. Kniggs; the second is intended for advancement by way of explanation to Mr. Penwith. When you have succeeded in allaying their impetuosity, bring Mac along and we will go and have afternoon tea with mother. As for our other two friends, their arrival must, for obvious reasons, be kept secret from her for the present."

We anticipated the receipt of a warm welcome from Mrs. Wingford; but the actual reception we met with at her hands was touchingly tender and affectionate, a fact which inspired me with the highest hope of being able to ultimately vanquish the Bishop, and win her consent to make Bessie my bride.

There were so many matters in which we had a common interest to be talked about, that our topics of conversation were very far from being exhausted when the time arrived for Wingford to proceed to

the railway-station to meet his sisters on their return; and as it was imperatively necessary that Mac and I should at once proceed to assist Mr. Kniggs in the task assigned him of keeping a keen watch over the movements of Mr. Penwith for a short but rather critical period, the remainder of our news-budget had to be left untouched until some future occasion.

As the gentleman to be guarded exhibited no desire whatever to take any walks abroad, he exacted nothing approaching a wearying attention; and as we had no difficulty in convincing Mr. Kniggs that the only absolutely safe course to be pursued was for his friend and himself to retire to rest as early as possible, Mac and I found ourselves at liberty to take a ramble through the city while yet the night was young.

We had not been many minutes engaged in strolling through the beautiful streets, when our attention was arrested by strains of sweetest music, which evidently emanated from a very powerful band playing in the open; and following the direction indicated by the entrancing melody, we presently found ourselves in an immense square wherein many thousands of happy-looking people were congregated.

We were soon swallowed up in the great stream of merry promenaders, and had been enjoying for some little time the exquisite harmony by which we

had been attracted to the spot, the delicate perfume exhaled by shrub and flower, and the prismatic and ever-changing beauty of the many-playing fountains, when suddenly, as if in answer to my thoughts, we came face to face with Bessie Wingford and her sister Mary.

I was thrown too deeply into confusion by the informal meeting to retain any but the most hazy ideas of what transpired immediately after it took place; but when, in the course of a ceremonious introduction, the name of Walter Penwith was mentioned, I was instantly recalled to a normal condition of alertness and self-possession.

To a casual and unprejudiced observer the man to whom we were introduced would most certainly appear more than ordinarily handsome; but to my critical, and, I fear, unmerciful gaze, he presented a countenance forbidding in the extreme. The moustache with which nature endeavoured to partially conceal the feature, was too slight to hide from me the cruel hardness of his mouth; there was nothing to screen the heaviness and firmness of the square lower jaw; and the thick bushy eyebrows, although rather remarkable in themselves, could not divert attention from the closely-set, piercing, jet-black eyes with which he scanned us so fiercely and narrowly. He was dressed in the sombre garb supposed for some occult reason to be most befitting

to one charged with the delivery of a message described as instinct with joy and gladness; and he spoke with a certain whining drawl that made me feel very uncomfortable.

"It gives me very great pleasure indeed to welcome you to Blestland," he said, as we all strolled off into a quiet, leafy avenue; "and the more so as you have the privilege of being known to my dearest friends. You will like the country immensely, I assure you. Indeed it could not be otherwise, for it is quite a delightful place. Its inhabitants, too, are the simplest and most unaffected in manner, and the least generally selfish by far, of any people I ever met or heard of; but their many virtues are infinitely more than counteracted by their possession of one great fault, I am sorry to say. Their fatal defect is an utter want of that faith without which it is impossible to be saved; and it is the bounden duty of every one who has a knowledge of soul-saving truth to do everything that lies within his or her power to awaken them to a conception of their grave responsibility. With the invaluable assistance of dear Mrs. Wingford and the young ladies, I have done all I could since my arrival to kindle within their breasts the sacred light; but I regret to say that hitherto my efforts have not met with the success for which I had hoped. Undismayed by my temporary failure, however, I am determined to

persevere; and if prayerful energy and devotion to duty can avail anything, ultimate success is assured. The ladies will bear me out in what I say when I tell you that what we stand most in need of is an increase in our numerical strength—indeed we spent the whole of this valuable day in an ineffectual attempt to add to it—and if for no other reason than that your presence will help to remedy that defect, I assure you that we hail your arrival with infinite delight. I may tell you that our poor efforts on behalf of the benighted are not by any means viewed with approval by Mr. Wingford; and I do sincerely hope and trust that the attempt, which he is sure to make, to poison your minds against us will be quite as unsuccessful as it deserves to be.”

“I must remind you that it is not quite fair to accuse my brother of being capable of attempting anything of the kind, Mr. Penwith,” Mary Wingford said, and the tone in which she spoke had a ring of indignation in it. “His attitude towards the mission has always been one of utter indifference; but under no conceivable circumstance would he stoop to anything petty or underhand, any more than you would yourself.”

Having graciously accepted his humble and profuse apologies, she next made an heroic effort to prevent him from monopolizing all the conversation; but

well meant as the action undoubtedly was, it proved depressingly futile, for in answer to a question concerning a young legal friend, I chanced to express sorrow at his being unable to accompany us, and this gave him a pretext which he seized with avidity.

“He would find his knowledge of law of but small value to him here, so far as fighting the battle of life is concerned,” he interjected, at the same time favouring me with a ferocious leer. “I speak from experience, for I happen to belong to the same honourable profession myself, and I know that from a mere worldly point of view it would be better far for me if I were a maker of boots.”

“The ranks of your profession are over-manned, I presume?” said Mac inquiringly; “or is it that a comparatively few offices have a virtual monopoly of all the lucrative business?”

“Neither of these exists in Blestland; so that we must look elsewhere for the cause of the deplorable state of things of which I have spoken,” the Bishop replied solemnly. “You will know where it is to be found, when I inform you that in the ancient history of this great nation there existed a period when a majority of its people became smitten with an insane desire to reform pretty nearly everything connected with their political and social life; and the very first thing to which they turned their attention was the system in vogue under which Acts of Parliament

were constructed, a system very similar to that with which you are best acquainted. A radical alteration in law-making methods was the result, and one which was fraught with much evil consequence to the members of my honourable profession; for the electors had the unheard-of effrontery to insist that the work of their Parliaments should be performed in such a way, that the necessity for frequent appeals to the law courts to ascertain the probable meaning of their various Acts would be reduced to a minimum. It was therefore enacted that no Act of Parliament can attain the force of law until the simplicity of its construction and consequent clearness of its meaning shall have been attested by a Revisory Council, consisting of specially-trained and responsible experts; and the first serious blow at the rights and privileges of an ancient and learned profession was thereupon struck.

"The unholy persecution was not permitted to end here, however; for we read that this arbitrary interference with vested interests was immediately followed by another monstrous outrage on decency and justice—the legal profession was deprived of the right, which it long enjoyed in common with others, of recovering by process of law, from recalcitrant or dishonest clients, its just demands for services rendered! The effect of these grossly tyrannical 'reforms,' as they were impudently called, was to

reduce the number of civil actions to a most surprising extent; and as crime is almost an unknown evil in the land, owing to a widespread prosperity and contentment, your friend would be doomed to a bitter disappointment did he come here under the impression that he could profitably turn to account his special knowledge."

"I have heard quite enough to convince me," Mac whispered, "that the place is not by any means misnamed."

"It is nevertheless a matter for regret that you were not accompanied by him on your visit to Blestland," continued the Bishop, "for his presence here would no doubt mean an additional helper for the ladies and myself; but in what has been providentially given us, we have much to be thankful for. A committee meeting is arranged for to-morrow afternoon at three, to be held at Mrs. Wingford's house; and if you gentlemen will kindly attend it, I shall have much pleasure in disclosing to you fully our plan of operations, and indicating the missionary duties with which at first you are to be entrusted."

There was a gleam of malignant triumph in the glances which he bestowed on Mac and myself, as slowly and with much deliberation he gave utterance to this last important sentence; but although I could plainly see that he flattered himself on the supposition of having placed us in a dilemma, I had

no fear of being unable to prove to him that he was mistaken.

"It seems to me that the interference of persons possessed of no special qualifications with such work as that in which you are engaged," I said rather loftily, "would really be productive of more harm than good; and as my friend and I are destitute, I fear, of the qualifications to which I refer, our active assistance would in all probability prove worse than valueless. You may rely, however, on having our moral support and keenest sympathy in your undertaking; for any pursuit in which our friends engage could not fail to——"

"Oh! for mercy's sake, not that, not that!" he cried tremblingly, uplifting his hands as if to ward off a blow. "Do not, I beseech you, have recourse to unworthy subterfuge in order to evade the sacred call of duty! Your refusal to take part in the work of your Maker is bad enough in all conscience; do not, I implore you, make matters worse by trying to conceal the real reason by which you are actuated! You first of all frankly confess that you lack the only qualification necessary to fit you for service under our banner, which, as must be apparent to any one, consists simply of a humble belief in revealed religion; and in the next breath you tell us that we can rely on having your moral support, whatever that may mean, and your keenest sympathy! Now

without stopping to enlarge on the palpable disingenuousness here displayed, I will pass on to the deplorable condition of things revealed by your acknowledged want of faith in the principles of the religion in which you were fortunate enough to be born and bred. There is some excuse for the existence of unbelief among those who, like our poor Blestlanders, have been nurtured in spiritual darkness; but to find it where it was least to be expected is unspeakably shocking! Oh! gentlemen, gentlemen, let me exhort you in all humility and in the true spirit of brotherly love, to lose not a moment in returning to the fold whence you strayed in an evil hour and under evil influences. It is terrible even to reflect on the awful danger to which you have exposed your immortal souls; but now that it has been pointed out to you, your duty is plain. Signalize your arrival in this fair region, by a free and full repentance, I entreat you; and do what you can to atone for past backsliding by coming to us at once with chastened hearts, and with a single desire to do everything that lies in your power to forward the good cause in which the ladies and I take so deep an interest."

Under other circumstances I could afford to laugh at the fellow's impudent harangue, and would most probably have treated the audacious onslaught with withering contempt; but a glance sufficed to show

that he had made a deep impression on the girls, and more especially on Bessie, and that being so, some action had to be promptly taken to counteract the effect produced.

"I really must protest against having a construction forced upon my few simple remarks which they cannot fairly be made to bear, Mr. Penwith," I said, with a coolness that surprised myself. "When I spoke of our being destitute of the qualifications which those who would profitably engage in such works as yours should possess, I had in my mind's eye self-confidence, persuasiveness, magnetic eloquence, and the like. I certainly did not wish to imply that I considered faith in the doctrines promulgated by the mission an indispensable adjunct; for I am but too well aware that it is nothing of the kind. No one, I venture to think, knows better than you, sir, that hypocrisy is not by any means a thing unknown among those who profess to feel unbounded anxiety for the safety of the souls of others; and yet such men are respected as preachers, sometimes up to the very hour of their being unmasked."

I had the satisfaction of seeing the clouds disappear from the girls' brows, and the hate conveyed in the Bishop's glances deepen, as my explanation progressed; but the clear advantage which I had undoubtedly gained was destined to be short-lived.

"I felt perfectly certain that Mr. Penwith mistook

your meaning," Mary said, with a bright smile, "and I am sure we ought to be very thankful for your sympathy and promise of indirect support to begin with. It is not impossible that later on you may see your way clear to lend us active assistance."

"It is very difficult to say what time may produce, Miss Mary," I replied; "but certainly nothing can be lost by waiting patiently to see, in this case. The subject has been prematurely broached, and perhaps it is as well, since it gives increased time in which to fully consider it; but of this I am perfectly certain, that no good end can be served by making any further reference to the matter until our next visit to Blestland."

For Bessie's special benefit I was about to allude with tender significance to the fact that, within an hour after landing on its shores, I had made up my mind to end my days in Blestland after the settlement of my affairs in my native land, when on glancing at her pretty face I was surprised and puzzled to find that the cloud of displeasure which I had a moment before dispelled had reappeared; and at the same instant I was considerably startled by a loud snort of well-feigned indignation from the Bishop.

"I hope you are satisfied now, ladies," he said, with a deprecatory smile, "as to the exact amount of esteem in which our poor little mission and its

objects are held by your professed friends. You are at liberty to act as you choose, of course; but for my part I really cannot stand quietly by and listen to undeserved sneers being ruthlessly hurled at what I hold sacred. Under these circumstances you will permit me, I am sure, to wish you a very good evening."

So saying, he bowed to them ceremoniously; and without taking the slightest further notice of Mac or myself, he stalked off with a dignified air of righteous indignation, which was evidently meant to convey a silent but stern rebuke.

CHAPTER X

THAT the Bishop had scored a point against us was made painfully apparent to Mac and myself by the attitude of cold displeasure which the ladies assumed towards us after our enemy's departure; but what the nature of it could possibly be we were completely at a loss to imagine. Time after time I passed under mental review the particular remarks of which he seemed to complain; but nothing calculated to offend him or any one else could be detected on the closest examination. Truth to tell, I cared very little indeed whether I offended the fellow or not; but as the source of his real or assumed annoyance was clearly identical with that which caused the girls to take umbrage, I was naturally anxious to be made aware of what was responsible for the unpleasantness.

Questioning the sisters on the subject was of no avail; indeed it made matters distinctly worse, for

they evidently harboured the opinion that my alleged ignorance was a mere pretence, and that my only object in asking for information was to tease and make fun of them.

"I seem doomed to be misunderstood on this my first day in Blestland," I ultimately complained. "First of all I make some simple statement to Mr. Penwith in response to a certain suggestion, and this is promptly misconstrued in the most flagrant manner, as I speedily proved when I got an opportunity to explain; and almost before I had time to clear this away, another equally harmless expression of opinion is invested with some mysterious meaning which, as it seems to be calculated to give offence, it certainly never was intended to convey. That is all I can say in self-defence, since I am not to be told specifically wherein I have offended. I have tried again and again to discover a construction for my few innocent remarks which could possibly account for the displeasure they seem to have created; but the oftener I try the more perplexed I become. I certainly said that I thought the subject upon which Mr. Penwith seemed inclined to harp had been rather prematurely broached; but the rebuke was such a very mild one, that I cannot imagine it offending any one. I also ventured to say that no good end could possibly be served by making any further reference to the subject alluded to until our next

visit to Blestland; but surely there was nothing in that diffident expression of opinion which by any stretch of imagination could be held to be offensive? I really cannot help thinking that I have been, to say the least, rather harshly dealt with."

"What we complain of is that you did not say frankly and openly that you had no intention whatever of ever joining the mission," Bessie said coldly. "It would be much more manly to do so than to talk about deferring your decision until your next visit to Blestland. Possibly you thought there was something humorous in adopting that style of refusal, and if so, all I can say is, that your sense of humour has very sadly deteriorated with the flight of time."

"Yes, indeed it has," her sister cried, eagerly continuing the attack; "and at the same time the wicked boy seems to have developed an unbecoming frivolity. There was a time when he would be among the last to indulge in a sly little jeer at people because their consciences urged them to undertake a religious work, and they loyally and cheerfully obeyed the mandate. Oh! you cruel, cruel creature; you really ought to be very much ashamed of yourself."

"But, in the name of all that is curious, what for?" I almost peevishly inquired. "Do you doubt my sincerity when I speak of paying another visit to Blestland? If so, you do me an injustice, I assure

you; for I give you my word of honour that that is my deliberate intention. As in duty bound, Mac and I must return to work at the expiration of our leave of absence, as I was about to explain when your friend Mr. Penwith interrupted me in such an unaccountable manner, previous to taking himself off in high dudgeon; but one of my first official acts after having resumed my duties will be to give the requisite notice to my employer of my intention to relinquish the trust which he long since reposed in me, and the moment I find myself free to do so, I shall pack up my modest belongings and return to Blestland to leave it nevermore."

I directed what was intended to be a superlatively eloquent glance towards Bessie at the conclusion of these remarks; but, much to my surprise, she met it as calmly and with as great a degree of unconcern as if it emanated from Mac or any other ordinary acquaintance.

A short whispered conversation between the sisters ensued, after which my friend and I underwent an examination at the hands of the younger girl.

"Have you said anything to Bob," she asked, "about all this?"

"Oh, yes," I said briskly. "We told him it was necessary that we should put in an appearance at our offices by a certain date, and that we should have

to rely on his good offices to procure us the necessary means of transit."

"And what did he tell you in reply?" was her next question.

"That we need give ourselves no trouble whatever in connection with the matter," I answered; "as he would personally see that everything that it was possible to do towards gratifying our wishes should be done."

"The dear old chap is anxious to make our stay as pleasant as possible," Mac added, "and threatens to take it as a personal affront if he finds that we worry about any temporal affairs whatever while we remain."

"And did mother say nothing from which you might infer that grave difficulties will have to be overcome before your request can be granted?" she then inquired.

"No allusion was made to the subject in her presence," I replied, and a feeling akin to apprehension came upon me as I spoke. "The difficulties are not so grave as to be insurmountable I presume, otherwise Bob would have at once apprised us of the fact."

"Had he done so the confusion and misunderstanding which have arisen this evening would have been avoided," the young lady said, a little pettishly; "and for the life of me I cannot see what object he

could have in withholding knowledge, which in the nature of things cannot be long withheld. The truth concerning your position should have been made known to you at once, as it was to us when we arrived."

"Do you seriously wish me to understand that the obstacles in the way of our returning home are insuperable?" I anxiously inquired; "or are you merely trying to have a little harmless fun at our expense?"

An interrogative glance at Bessie sufficed to convince me in an instant that no joking was intended; for in the limpid depths of her wondrous eyes there was that which spoke more eloquently far than words.

"I was never more serious in my life than when I assure you, as I do now, that it is just as impossible for you to return whence you came as it is for me to fly to yonder moon," was her sister's solemn rejoinder. "Your future home must be in Blestland, whether you will it so or not; but remembering the political principles to which you both were formerly, and are no doubt yet attached, I have no hesitation at all in promising that you will find in the greatly improved conditions of life by which you will be surrounded, much to compensate for the change."

"You must remember, Mary, that it requires much more to compensate some people than it does

to compensate others," her sister told her. "When we were called upon to visit Blestland no tender ties were swiftly severed; so that we were in a position to appreciate at once a change which removed us from a world of widespread human misery to one where such a thing is practically unknown. The position of these gentlemen is most probably very different."

The tone in which these remarks were uttered, and the apparent want of interest with which she received my ready disclaimer, certainly seemed to indicate her absolute indifference; but all this I attributed to maiden coyness, and with the utmost complacence looked forward to shortly proving such to be the case.

A good deal of desultory conversation took place in the sort of summer-house to which we now withdrew from the unheeding throng; but the time to see the ladies home arrived at last, and with Mary and Mac leading the way a somewhat reluctant start was made.

As a feeling suspiciously like nervousness took possession of me, and Bessie displayed no disposition whatever to talk, an uncomfortable silence fell upon us during the first few minutes after being left together. Embarrassing as this undoubtedly was, however, it flattered my vanity immensely, for I promptly attributed my companion's silence to the

same cause that rendered me mute; but when presently she threw off her reserve, and with perfect coolness and self-possession began to ply me with questions concerning former friends and old school-fellows, I began to think her confusion was rather more apparent than real.

Whenever the slightest opportunity to do so presented itself, I dropped certain pretty plain hints as to the state of my feelings towards her; but it availed not in the least, for she showed no signs whatever of understanding what I meant, beyond promptly changing the subject on each occasion with great dexterity.

Goaded at length to the verge of desperation, and in mortal fear lest the opportunity to speak should pass from out my grasp, I suddenly brought her to a stand-still, and with a burning eloquence that quite surprised myself, told her almost fiercely the old, old story, in the old conventional way.

The little hand I held trembled slightly as she listened, and a few tears were hastily brushed away; but in the clear, steady voice in which she replied there were no signs of emotion.

"I feel more deeply honoured than I can ever tell," she said, "at receiving such an offer from one whom I so highly respect; but it is quite impossible that we can ever be more to each other than we have always been—more like brother and

sister than ordinary friends. You will show your respect for this assurance, I am sure, by never again alluding to the subject on which you have just spoken; and now we will hurry on, please, or Mary will begin to think that some accident has happened to us."

So that, after all, I had been all the time living in a fool's paradise!

It was a fearful blow; for to the bitter disappointment resulting from a wholly unexpected but decisive repulse, were superadded the feelings naturally arising from a deeply-wounded vanity.

Silence again reigned, but it was of the dismal, gloomy description; and it was fast becoming quite insupportable when the figure of Wingford came suddenly into view. He was strolling leisurely towards us, and with him was a gentleman of about his own age, at sight of whom the whole demeanour of the girl by my side instantly changed. Thus was the true cause of her objection to marrying the Bishop revealed—I had been vain enough to attribute it to cherished memories of myself—and it was the same, of course, that operated against me and for ever blighted my existence.

"Here comes that lazy brother of mine to meet us," she said, with a smile betokening relief. "The gentleman with him is a Mr. Zeen, and a very valued friend of his. He is a young Blestlander, and a

fine specimen of physical manhood. Don't you think so?"

"Even an impartial observer like myself could not do otherwise than acknowledge that," I replied, with bitter significance. "I dare swear he is responsible for many a maiden's weary sigh, and that the lady of his choice rejoices in a knowledge of the fact."

"Oh! you are really too severe," she continued. "I fear you have developed an unfavourable opinion of my suffering sex since last we met."

The mockery of an introduction to the man who had robbed me, even though unconsciously, of the woman whom I loved more devotedly than before, now that she seemed unattainable, having been gone through, Wingford proceeded to rally me on my moodiness; and Bessie at once constituted herself my apologist.

"You will not be so unreasonable as to expect him to be cheerful," she told her brother, "when I tell you that only a few minutes have elapsed since Mary acquainted him with the fact that Blestland must be his future home—a duty which you seem to have neglected, by the way."

"I purposely refrained from saying anything on the subject, because I wished them to see a little of their new home and the people by whom it is inhabited before telling them that they had seen the

last of the planet Earth," Bob said gravely. "No harm has been done in revealing the truth prematurely, however, for they are both far too philosophic to fret over the inevitable. They have already had my assurance that they will never have cause to regret their visit; but I now wish to repeat it with emphasis. At first it will probably seem rather hard to be torn suddenly away from lifelong friends and old associations; but a recompense will soon be found in the formation of fresh ties, and in the forging of friendships far more true and enduring than any to be found upon Earth. Best of all, they will find, as I have previously hinted to them, in the social and political life to which they are about to be introduced, something very closely approaching the ideal which I know they once possessed, and which I am sure they cherish still; so that, all these things considered, there is no reason whatever why they should not contemplate the future with the utmost serenity."

Mac having vigorously protested that he would not have the new order of things changed for worlds, and I having contributed an ungracious growl for Bessie's particular benefit, to the effect that I had not sufficient interest in life to make me care a rap where my lot was cast, the party repaired in a body to Mrs. Wingford's drawing-room, where I was doomed to spend a couple of hours in such

misery as I hope I shall never again be called upon to endure.

I had barely entered the apartment when I received a summons to attend my hostess; and by her side I had to remain during the rest of the evening, listening to garrulous reminiscences that did not interest me, and answering the innumerable questions with which she plied me unmercifully.

Having to pay some semblance of respectful attention to what I am afraid I secretly regarded as vapid twaddle, was difficult enough to one in the particular frame of mind in which I was just then; but what made it infinitely more difficult still, was having to sit quietly by and witness the undisguised love-making that was being carried on between the girl I adored and the Blestlandic interloper who was responsible for making my life a blank.

For a long time I had been devoutly wishing that something would occur to interrupt the incessant flow of language, if only for a moment, so that I might get an opportunity to ask permission to retire; but nothing did, nor did it seem likely that anything would for hours to come, when Wingford providentially entered with a missive for his mother, and the relief I longed for arrived at last.

During the progress of leave-taking which immediately followed, it transpired that the welcome message received by Mrs. Wingford was from the Bishop, and

that it announced his inability to attend a projected meeting of the members of the mission set down for the following day, owing to his having been urgently summoned to a locality named, and from which he could not hope to return for a couple of days; but to all this I listened with perfect unconcern, for had I not learnt enough that evening to cause a complete change in my mental attitude towards the man? So complete was it, indeed, that when, in seeing Mac and myself off the premises, Wingford referred regretfully to the fact that a postponement of the meeting between uncle and nephew would have to take place for a day or two, my sympathy with the latter became so pronounced that I had the utmost difficulty in refraining from giving verbal expression to it, and deprecating generally the pursuance of a line of action of which but a few hours previously I had expressed unqualified approval.

And so we went through the beautifully-lighted but almost silent streets, each so absorbed with his own thoughts that not a word was interchanged between us until our destination was well-nigh reached.

Then Mac threw off his abstraction, and suddenly developed signs of an anxiety to become very communicative.

"I never spent a pleasanter evening in my life," he began, "and I was glad to see that you enjoyed yourself too, in a quiet way. It evidently afforded the dear old lady unspeakable pleasure to chat with you about old times and absent friends, for I do not remember ever seeing her in such an animated mood before. That young Blestlander is a fine young fellow. I like him very much, and so will you when you come to know something of him, I feel sure. I wish I could sing as he can. With his fine voice, good looks, and good breeding, one cannot wonder that he is such a favourite with the ladies. And this reminds me of the Wingford girls. Who would have thought that the gawky, freckled school-girl of half-a-dozen years ago could ever have developed into the magnificent specimen of womanhood that Miss Mary Wingford is to-day? Nothing but ocular proof could ever have convinced me that such a physical metamorphosis could possibly take place. And not in appearance only has she changed. She

CHAPTER XI

THE first day of our sojourn in Blestland was rapidly drawing to a close when Mac and I parted from our friend Wingford, and set out for a brisk walk towards our temporary residence, preferring, for the sake of exercise, this mode of reaching it to using the conveyance which we were pressed to accept.

Had there been any one with us to note it, he could not fail to have been struck by the marked contrast between what I considered at the time the aggressive elation of my companion and the funereal solemnity of myself.

With head erect and chest expanded he strode along as if on air, humming joyously the music of a ditty heard that night for the first time, whilst I with leaden tread and downcast eyes paced sullenly by his side.

has altered for the better in every respect. The voice whose harshness was erstwhile so irritating, especially when used in the practice of singing-lessons, has mellowed so wonderfully that its cadences thrill one with ecstasy, and altogether her presence seems to inspire one with restfulness and content."

"Oho! my gallant celibate; so that is how the land lies, is it?" I asked, at once becoming deeply interested. "Mary Wingford is evidently not the only one in whom a visit to Blestland has wrought radical changes. Who would have thought that you, for example, would ever be heard talking in a strain so sentimental? Why, had I not heard you boast so frequently that you were perfectly impregnable to Cupid's darts, I should be inclined to think that you had fallen hopelessly in love."

"And if you did think so, you would do me no injustice," he frankly admitted. "I admit that I have been in the habit of declaring myself proof against the charms of the fair sex; but I see now that my verdict was arrived at on insufficient evidence, as the Bishop would probably say. Yes, I fell hopelessly, irretrievably in love with Mary Wingford, in less than five minutes after we met this evening, and the result is that life has suddenly become invested with a charm for me that it never had before. It was my intention at first to say nothing even to you about it for a few days at least; but on

reflecting that we always shared each other's secrets loyally, I promptly changed my mind and determined to tell you all."

Here was an unconscious "heaping of coals of fire on my devoted head" with a vengeance; and so thoroughly ashamed of myself did it make me, that I decided to confide to him forthwith the secret of my life, as being the only reparation which it was in my power to make, for having acted towards him as I had.

"Of your loyalty in always confiding your joys and sorrows to me, I have not the slightest doubt," I told him, and my cheeks tingled as I spoke; "but I am ashamed to say that I have been mean enough not to be equally frank with you. My conscience acquits me of having offended against the canons of true mateship more than once; but I freely confess that to have offended at all was unpardonable. What I would have told you years ago, if a peculiar species of what I am beginning to think was false pride had not kept me silent, is this—I fell in love with Bessie when yet we were little more than children; and it proved to be no boyish fancy on my part, for my affection grew stronger and deeper as the years rolled on, until ultimately it absorbed my very soul. Restrained by the same influence that kept me from confiding in you, I went on loving her in secret, and when at last I found myself

in a position which I considered justified me in speaking to her of my passion, she was torn beyond my reach before I had an opportunity of uttering a word. The heart-breaking parting I looked on, of course, as a final one; and ever since it took place, until to-day, the thought of speaking of what might have been has been unbearable."

By this time we had reached the hotel, and were lounging comfortably in the smoking-room; and Mac, whose eyes had been dancing with delight as he listened, jumped to his feet at this point, and taking both my hands in his, wrung them with vigorous warmth.

"Poor old chap," he said; "I can imagine what you must have suffered. But now you can afford to blot out the memory of it for ever, for all will soon be well. Lose no precious time in coming to an understanding with the girl, and then go boldly to her mother and tell her that you aspire to her daughter's hand. That will effectually settle the Bishop's pretensions, relieve Bessie of a prospect which she views with disfavour, and assure the unity of two fond hearts which never should be parted."

"I determined this morning to ask her to be my wife at the very first opportunity," I replied, smiling at his unwonted and enthusiastic gush, "and that I have already found. I proposed to her this evening when escorting her home, and was rewarded with

a polite but very firm refusal. She thanked me in the set terms which the novelist usually puts in his heroine's mouth for such unfavourable occasions; told me she could never be more to me than a sister; and concluded by expressing a hope that I would never revert to the subject again. Of this I would take but very little notice, if I thought there was the smallest prospect of inducing her to alter her decision; but I am quite convinced that there is none whatever. Her heart is bestowed elsewhere."

"Indeed?" he remarked gravely. "She made no secret, then, of her reason for rejecting you?"

"She offered no explanation, nor did I ask for any," I said; "but the true one became easy enough to find the moment that that young Blestlander appeared upon the scene."

"Why, hang it all, you do not suspect her of being in love with young Zeen surely, do you?" he cried excitedly.

"Oh no, I do not suspect her of being," I answered. "I am quite positive she is, and that he is with her. So would you be convinced of the fact, if you had had eyes or ears all the evening for anybody but her sister. Their love-making was more palpable by far than that carried on between you and your divinity, and I had to suffer the torture of witnessing it for hours!"

Instead of all this eliciting his sympathy, as I expected it would, it had just the opposite effect; for on hearing it he threw himself on an adjacent couch and actually shrieked with mocking laughter.

Indignantly flinging my half-finished cigar from me, I was about to withdraw in disgust, when he divined my intention and arrested my progress.

"By Jove! old fellow," he remarked, still laughing, "if it be, as I have heard said, that depth of affection may be gauged by violence of jealousy, you are indeed in a very bad way. You have been needlessly torturing yourself all the evening, I am happy to tell you; for Bessie and he are no more to one another than are he and Mary. He is shortly to be married to a great friend of theirs, and has been a true and valued friend of the family ever since their arrival; but beyond that there is nothing between them that need cause you the least uneasiness."

Had I been a prisoner condemned to Siberian exile I could not have received the announcement of my free pardon with a higher degree of delight than I heard this; and the bearer of the news I regarded for the moment as I might regard one who had saved me from being the victim of some terrible calamity. My case was still bad enough, but still far from being as hopeless as I had led myself to believe it was.

"Nothing is more apt to land one in unpleasant places than jumping hastily to conclusions," Mac went on to say. "You promptly attributed the reception you met with at Bessie's hands to a certain cause, whereas the real explanation of it doubtless is that she considers herself bound in honour to the Bishop, through some promise, expressed or implied, given to her mother under parental pressure. Show your disregard of her injunction about not reverting to the subject again by renewing the attack at the earliest possible moment—being a woman she will think all the more of you for doing so—and if my deduction proves to be the correct one, as I am sure it will, you have no cause at all to despair."

I entered the apartment in which this discussion took place as thoroughly dejected as it is possible for a human being to become; and when at length I left it to retire for the night, I was as full of hope and eager anticipation as if in the meantime I had received an encouraging message from the girl I loved so well.

The first duty of importance that had to be attended to on the following morning was that of seeing Mr. Kniggs and his friend off on their journey towards the widow's abode; and this having been satisfactorily performed, we were taken in charge by Wingford and young Zeen and driven through the city for sight-seeing purposes.

The latter, who must have marvelled at the contrast between the coldness of my attitude towards him on the previous evening and the effusive cordiality of my manner towards him a few hours later, we found to be an exceptionally pleasant companion, and an exceedingly well-informed man.

It soon became evident that he took a deep interest in the social and political affairs of Earth, for he questioned us closely on the subject whenever our attention was not being directed towards some object of passing interest.

"Has any advance been made towards the emancipation of the masses," he inquired, "since my friend Wingford left your unhappy native planet?"

"The condition of things grows worse instead of better as time goes on," Mac replied bitterly. "The power of money becomes greater, the rich become richer and the poor poorer as the years go by; and what the end of it all will be no living soul can tell."

"And still those who do the world's work, and who by combining could effectually and legitimately remedy such a deplorable state of things, persist in remaining disunited!" the young Blestlander exclaimed. "It is perfectly incredible that people could be found anywhere to act so insanely."

"I have explained to him," Wingford said, addressing me, "how great the political antagonism is which exists between the genteel worker on the one

hand, and the rougher and humbler toiler on the other. He knows that in any struggle for justice that might take place the former could always be depended upon to range himself on the side of the common enemy, the monopolist, and that even among the other section anything approaching unanimity is most difficult to secure."

"And this last especially is what I quite fail to understand," Zeen remarked, with a puzzled air. "It is inconceivable that people could be guilty of such folly as to allow mere self-seeking and petty jealousies to stand in the way for any great length of time, when the object aimed at was important reform vitally affecting themselves."

"Oh, but I must remind you that you are overlooking the most powerful factor of all," Mac told him. "You must not forget the disturbing influence wielded by the Baytrees and Mandarins."

"Baytrees and Mandarins?" the young Blestlander repeated. "I never heard of them before. What are they, pray?"

"I never could bring myself to speak to him of the wretched factions for very shame," Wingford said, in answer to inquiring looks. "Now that you have mentioned the subject, however, you may as well tell him all about them. It will lower the race from which we have sprung in his estimation, but it will also enable him to see more clearly the

difficulties in the way of reform to be met with even in the most enlightened and progressive nations of the earth."

"He never could have other than a very imperfect conception of them while unacquainted with the existence of the Baytrees and Mandarins," Mac continued. "You ask what these are, Mr. Zeen? Well, they are the names given to two great factions which have been called into existence by something which I understand is quite unknown in Blestland—namely, religious discord. Both sections profess to follow the same Teacher, but they differ in certain details as to the exact meaning of what He taught. You can doubtless see nothing in this calculated to give rise to bitter, undying animosity, but with the people I speak of it is entirely different. The partisans of each faction firmly believe that those of the other will suffer transcendental and unending torture in an after life as a just punishment for holding religious views which their consciences compel them to hold; but not satisfied with this soothing reflection, they look upon it as a sacred duty to persecute each other to the utmost before passing out of their mundane state of existence. The social want of harmony, the bickerings and the heartburnings which this state of things produces, I will leave you to imagine; but it is in the domain of politics that its most far-reaching and enduring

public mischief is wrought. Here it is that the unholy hate which they bear towards each other is taken advantage of by their 'common enemy the monopolist,' if I may use an expression which was used just now by our friend Wingford; and so artfully and effectively are their prejudices played upon, that their potency for good is almost invariably destroyed, and they become unconscious instruments in the hands of those whose interest it is to perpetuate a system which sanctions the exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few."

"All this places the matter in a very different light to that through which I have been accustomed to view it," Zeen remarked. "The astonishing fanaticism, of which I hear now for the first time, fully accounts for the deplorable want of unity among the masses of which I have been long aware, but have never been able to understand until now. What an exceedingly great pity it is that a baleful influence of any kind should operate to keep men apart when united action is so much to be desired, as it is in a constitutional fight for justice and liberty, and that a practical unanimity can almost always be secured when a suicidal industrial war is insanelly proposed as a protest against the aggressive inroads of monopoly."

"A very great pity indeed," Wingford assented; "but so it is precisely with our unhappy kinsmen.

You can see now how much every Blestlander has to be thankful for; since it seems probable that if the authors of the Great Reform had such a state of things as that described by my friend Mac to contend against, the misery and injustice which they swept away for ever would have remained to curse the land to the present day. Indeed, when the length of time which it took to effect their object is taken into consideration, although they had only the gigantic power of money and the class hatreds which foolishly existed here also in those benighted times to overcome, it seems absolutely certain that such would have been the case."

"I am not aware of the nature of the reform which they succeeded in effecting," Mac said; "but of this I feel quite certain, that if it was such as to deserve the name of Great, they never would have accomplished it had they had the Baytrees and Mandarins, or their equivalent, arrayed against them. I have long been of opinion, and am still, that the earthly citadel of Monopoly will remain perfectly impregnable so long as the flower of Earth's people remain riven by sectarian hate; and despairing as I do of their ever becoming otherwise, I long since gave up all hope of the emancipation of the unhappy masses ever being reduced to an accomplished fact."

"The outlook is no doubt very far from being a promising one," the young Blestlander assented

sympathetically; "but I do not think the case is quite so desperate as to be utterly hopeless. Time, as we know, works wonders, and it may eventually obliterate the pernicious influence of which you so justly complain. There was a period in the history of Blestland, far away back in the dim ages of antiquity no doubt, when the prospect of obtaining redress for the wrongs under which the great majority of the people groaned seemed so remote as to be entirely beyond reach; but courage and perseverance overcame all obstacles, and justice and right triumphed in the end. The difficulties to be contended against were not quite so formidable as they would seem to be on Earth, it is true; but after all, it is only a question of degree, and the same result may yet be attained there. Except that they were never rent by any such fanatical factions as those of which I have just heard, the condition of the inhabitants of this planet before the Great Reform was very similar to that of the people on Earth at the present time. The same impoverishment of the million for the enrichment of the few was to be found on all sides, as *it always must be wherever there is no limitation to the enormous power for evil which capital can wield*; and for centuries it was submitted to with a lamb-like simplicity. Long-continued immunity at last produced its natural result, and the groans of the weak began to be heard, and murmurs

at the exactions of the financially strong rose and fell at unequal intervals. Then came a long series of industrial upheavals, very similar to the labour strikes of which you have had sad experience, both as to the manner in which they were conducted and the barrenness of their results, and these in turn were followed by all the sickening horrors which naturally attend on bloody revolutions. Revolt after revolt now marked a long period in the planet's history; but although the efforts of the rebels to destroy established forms of government were occasionally crowned with success, it was always at the cost of appalling human suffering, for which the victors as a whole never gained any corresponding advantage. On the contrary, each succeeding insurrection merely served to place the condition of the unhappy masses in a distinctly worse position than it was before; for they were gradually shorn of almost every shred of liberty, and any relief they ever received from the pressure of monopolistic tyranny from any particular quarter was sure to be more than counterbalanced by a violent attack from some other direction. The stern lessons of experience took effect at last, and the people began to see that it was as hopeless to expect any real redress through the agency of violence and lawlessness as it was to look for succour to industrial disturbances; and when this stage was reached, they appear to

have realized for the first time that their only hope lay in the rational exercise of the political privileges still at their command, and which had been won for them, to little purpose hitherto, ages before by their forefathers. Then arose a small but true and earnest band of patriots to lead the people on to victory, and the bloodless battle, of which the Great Reform was the outcome, was forthwith commenced. As I have already said, the difficulty they experienced in securing united action among those for whom they fought was not so formidable as men engaged on a similar mission would evidently experience upon Earth; but nevertheless their task was by no means an easy one, nor was it accomplished without their having to submit to a great deal of disheartening delay and disappointment, much misrepresentation, and even violent persecution. Every step made forward, however small, was fiercely resented by those whose interest it was to conserve the then existing class-made laws; and as this meant that the reformers had to wage a continual war against the enormous traitor-making power of money, assisted for a long time by a stubborn phalanx composed of a section of the workers whose unreasoning sympathy the defenders of monopoly freely received, the progress made by the good work was necessarily very slow. High courage, determination, and a patriotic devotion to public duty prevailed in the end, how-

ever, and one fine morning in lovely spring, when all nature was decked in her fairest and freshest, the glorious sun rose to gladden a Blestland from which pampered Monopoly was banished for ever, and in which the rights of all, whether rich or poor, were to be thenceforth guarded with a jealousy undying."

It is doubtless unnecessary to say that Mac and I listened to all this with very much more than fleeting interest, or that at its conclusion we very eagerly and simultaneously begged for more detailed information.

Before he had time to enter into any further particulars, however, an urgent, and evidently authoritative summons, calling Wingford and himself away, arrived, so that the burning curiosity which he had succeeded in arousing had to remain unsatisfied for a time at least.

CHAPTER XII

FOR a considerable time after the hurried departure of Wingford and his friend on what was a mysterious mission, so far as a want of knowledge of its object on the part of Mac and myself was concerned, our attention was devoted to wondering what could possibly be the nature of the reform that produced results such as those mentioned by the young Blestlander; but as time wore on and no signs of their return presented themselves, their continued absence called forth some comment from my companion, and at the same time awakened my always easily-aroused apprehensiveness.

"I shall not be in the least surprised to hear that we are the real cause of their being called away so urgently," I told Mac ruefully. "The authorities have been made aware of our arrival, of course; and as they fear that our presence would add an element

of strength to the Bishop's proselytizing crusade, which, according to Wingford, they view with secret but undoubted disfavour, they have decided after mature consideration to refuse us a refuge. Having arrived at this determination they at once send for Wingford as our friend, and Zeen as the public officer whose province it is to see that their decision is carried into effect; and as the receipt of the mandate occasioned the deepest distress to poor old Bob, Zeen and he at once joined forces for the purpose of procuring all the available influence at their command, with the object of having the obnoxious edict recalled if possible. We must wait for a glance at our old friend's face, which I could always read as if it were an open book, before we learn whether they were successful or not; but judging by the length of their absence it seems most probable that they found the ministers inexorable."

Contrary altogether to his usual custom under such circumstances, Mac adopted this gloomy view of the situation without the slightest hesitation or demur; and the consequence was that both were very soon in a state of mental wretchedness which was very far from being enviable.

"What makes the idea of banishment more bitter for me than it otherwise would be, is the thought that I shall have to resign poor Bessie to her cruel fate after all," I went on to complain. "It is simply

maddening to think that the coast will be made perfectly clear for the designing Bishop in such a fashion."

We had dolefully fixed upon some solitary island as the most probable place to which we should be deported; hazarded the conjecture that we might possibly be placed within reach of the means of subsistence; and had dismally decided that there was no likelihood whatever of our being allowed to take wives unto ourselves, when Wingford and Zeen re-entered the apartment. The faces of both probably wore a somewhat grave expression; but to my distorted imagination they appeared intensely solemn. So eager was I to display my perspicacity that I barely gave Bob time to apologize for their protracted absence before announcing that I clearly divined the nature of the business that detained them.

"You were sent for to receive orders for our banishment because the authorities fear that we might be induced to join the Bishop in his mission work," I asserted with confidence, "and you have been unsuccessfully doing all you could to get them to alter their decision. Well, we have no alternative but to bow to it, I suppose; but we could do that much more cheerfully if the indirect cause of our trouble were similarly treated. Why not banish the Bishop too?"

The looks of astonishment with which they listened

to the first part of this impetuous outburst gave way to amused smiles at its conclusion; and then it dawned upon me that I had again made a stupid blunder, and I felt very sheepish in consequence.

"My dear fellow, you have been worrying yourself about something that has no foundation whatever in fact," Wingford said brightly. "Blestland is not so inhospitable as you have done her the injustice to imagine, I assure you. Indeed, instead of receiving instructions to banish any one, the exact opposite is the case. Several other visitors have just arrived from Earth, and we were sent for to be charged with their fitting reception. What lends additional interest to the occurrence is that all the new arrivals hail from our own native place. Two of them indeed are none other than Sir David Munch and millionaire Cringe, the late employers of Mac, yourself, and myself."

Partly owing to the fact that we were too highly elated at hearing that we were not to be cast forth, and partly to the fact that recent experience had rendered us almost proof against astonishment, Mac and I were by no means so wonder-stricken by this intelligence as its bearer evidently thought we should be; and we found no difficulty in listening calmly to the whole of what he had to tell.

"In addition to these," he went on to say, "there are Craftson the great city landlord; Old Benny the

usurious money-lender; Bulgee the rich retailer; and one other who seems singularly out of place in such company—little Fussi, the cordwainer and political agitator. On receipt of instructions from head-quarters, we gave the necessary orders immediately to have their wants attended to, and then proceeded to the quay to interview them; but when I saw who they were, it occurred to me at once that to be confronted suddenly with one whom they have long regarded as dead would only serve to intensify the nervous condition in which most of them are, to an extent that might prove dangerous to the reason of some of their number. Now a glimpse of you and Mac would have no such effect—on the contrary it could not fail to reassure them—and that being so, we are here to crave your assistance. Another reason why I should like you to accompany us is this: the party is a fairly representative one, the history of every member of it is well known to you both, and it would deeply interest our friend Zeen to hear from one of you a short sketch of the career of each before our interview with them actually takes place."

His request was acceded to as a matter of course; but for my part I could not help devoutly wishing that the arrival of Cringe and his companions had been delayed until the crisis in my life, which was then at its height, had been disposed of one way or

other. It was cruel to be called upon to devote attention to any subject whatever while my second appeal to Bessie remained unmade, I told myself; and thereupon I proceeded to conjure up yet another harrowing vision to torment me most dreadfully. It was beyond all doubt, I egotistically reflected, that the arrival of Mac and myself filled the Bishop with alarm; and what could be more likely than that the announcement he made about his going out of town was a mere ruse to put me off my guard, and that he was even then endeavouring to bring things to a climax by insisting on Mrs. Wingford procuring a final answer from her daughter without further ado? I knew that if he only succeeded in extorting a promise from the girl, nothing imaginable could induce her to break it, even though it had been wrung from her under great moral pressure; and it was because I was aware of this fact that I soon developed a condition of extreme fretfulness and impatience.

Just before reaching our destination Mac noticed my irritability, and an opportunity presenting itself I confided the cause to him secretly. The idea was promptly and rather bluntly ridiculed, as it deserved to be, and reminding me of my proved liability to make erroneous surmises, he exhorted me to be of good cheer and to exercise patience.

His words had a soothing effect, and I had become

comparatively calm by the time the building was reached in which the new-comers were temporarily housed.

Arrived here we were at once ushered up a wide winding staircase, and into one of several spacious galleries with which the place was furnished, and from which a clear view of those we sought could be had without ourselves being seen.

That the majority of the party were exceedingly distressed could be seen at a glance; but they all had different ways of unconsciously revealing the fact.

Mr. Cringe, for example, undoubtedly the strongest personality amongst them, paced restlessly backwards and forwards, his brow knitted into a savage frown, and his hands thrust deep into his breeches pockets. Having watched his movements closely and silently for a little time, we all agreed that he resembled nothing so much as some wild, ferocious denizen of the forest recently placed under restraint, and therefore fuming with baffled rage.

Sir David Muntch sat apart from the others, rocking himself to and fro dejectedly, with his large hands clasped on his capacious waistcoat as if engaged in prayer; and it was easy to see by the wistful glances which he continually cast at his friend Mr. Cringe, that on him he relied entirely to extricate them from a difficulty at once perplexing and uncommon.

Old Benny the usurer sat with his face buried in his gnarled hands, moaning most dismally at irregular intervals; and Mr. Bulgee, who started with painful nervousness at every moan, stood first on one foot and then the other, gazing at him with watery orbs, as if he expected a terrible catastrophe to occur at any moment, and looked to the old dealer in money to supply in some way the first signs of its approach.

The recently dethroned city kinglet, Mr. Craftson, reclined on a form in a state bordering on utter collapse apparently; and his deadly political foe, little Fussi the Leveller, stood by his side holding a generous goblet for his acceptance, and evidently endeavouring to soothe him with whatever words of comfort he could command.

"Want of sympathy with human suffering is not one of the faults with which the little agitator can fairly be charged," Mac told Zeen. "Indeed it would have been better for himself, from one point of view, had he been less largely endowed with unselfishness; for in that event life for him would have been less stormy, and less destitute of the material comforts which most people covet. Ever since his boyhood he has been an enthusiastic advocate of political reform; but although his intentions have, I believe, always been of the purest and best, aiming as he did at achieving what you tell us

has been achieved here, he never succeeded in suggesting a remedy that commended itself to any but the thoughtless few. No greater lover of even-handed justice could be found anywhere than he is; and yet when the schemes which he advocated for the amelioration of the condition of the masses were not crude or impracticable, they were always sure to be such as would involve injustice in some form or other. To his credit be it said, however, he never at any time identified himself with the cowardly political party whose infamous methods are violence, bloodshed, and murder; but notwithstanding all that, he has unintentionally wrought more mischief to the cause he has at heart than the man to whom he is just now attending could ever accomplish with all his riches.

"And this is saying a good deal, for the influence which Mr. Craftson has been in the habit of wielding in the domain of politics may truthfully be described as enormous. That querulous and insignificant-looking personage will feel the change that has so suddenly come upon him rather keenly, I am afraid; and when it is borne in mind that he has hitherto been one of Fortune's most favoured ones, it would be a matter for surprise if it were otherwise. The first favour bestowed upon him by the fickle jade was this—she created him sole heir to an extensive city property which had been acquired by one of

his ancestors at a time when its value was inconsiderable, but which ultimately developed into an enormous rent-producer under the pressure of public requirement induced by an increase of population, and so satisfied does she seem to have been with the result—the man is and always has been a miserly creature, I may tell you—that she has never since ceased to shower her choicest gifts upon him. He never did anything whatever to deserve the princely income to which he succeeded when he arrived at man's estate; and as it has gone on increasing ever since without any exertion on his part, and he has been allowed to reap the full benefit of everything which added value to the source from which it is derived, it would indeed be strange if I had to report that Mr. Craftson was in favour of disturbing the existing order of things in the land of his nativity."

A louder and more dismal howl than usual having emanated from Old Benny just here, all eyes were turned towards him instantly, and Mac at once proceeded to make some scornful references to him for the benefit of the young man who seemed so very deeply interested in what he had to say so far.

"That craven specimen of humanity is not only a prince among usurers himself, but is also the descendant of a long line of harpies who were all as free as he has been to batten on their fellows by similar means," he continued; "and when that is

said it becomes unnecessary to remark that his conservatism in politics is of the very strongest imaginable. You hear how loudly he can howl for sympathy when misfortune overtakes himself, but not a single instance has ever been known of a successful appeal for clemency being made to him by a luckless victim.

"Not by any means the least remarkable member of the group is Mr. Bulgee, that person with the ever-tearful eye and flabby jowl, who stares earnestly at the trafficker in money as if spellbound. That vacuous ignoramus began life as a worker in one of the very lowest grades, and he continued to follow his humble calling until he, fortunately for him, contracted a marriage with an orphaned heiress to a modest competency. Then he forswore manual labour, and armed as he was with an effective weapon for compelling some of his fellows to indirectly share with him the fruits of their labour, he cast about for a suitable means of investing his newly-acquired capital. A profitable distributing business which the meanest order of intelligence could conduct, and which was consequently exactly the thing required, was ultimately selected in fear and trembling, and thereupon Mr. Bulgee blossomed forth as a comfortable business man. Events proved that Dame Fortune viewed him too with no unkindly eye, and the onward march of time found him prospering

prodigiously, speaking comparatively. The accumulation of wealth wrought many changes in the man, but none so pronounced as that which soon took place in the views he held concerning the respective rights of capital and labour. Indeed he has been transformed from one who was wont to agitate in an unreasoning way against conceding any rights whatever to capital, to a person who utterly scouts the idea of making any concession to the worker which can by any possibility be avoided. The proudest boast of his life is that he is a self-made man, which happens to be untrue, as I have shown; but one which runs it very close for supremacy is that he was never known to pay a shilling for labour while an equally suitable service could be obtained for a smaller sum. Although when his place was in the ranks of the workers he could frequently be heard declaiming against the tyranny of capital, yet he always strongly deprecated having recourse to the fatuous 'labour strike,' not so much because he recognized it to be hurtful and unprofitable, as because he knew that his action in doing so would not be allowed to pass unrewarded by the stronger of the contending parties. But if this early antagonism was a mere make-believe assumed for the attainment of selfish ends, that which he has since developed is instinct with a living reality. Were all employers of labour but of his way of thinking, he will tell

you, the world would soon hear the last of industrial wars. At the first well-defined sign of serious revolt he would close all the avenues to production throughout the land, so as to cut off supply most effectually, and closed these should remain until a lesson not easily forgotten was inculcated, and the humbled workers came with bowed heads and shivering frames imploring forgiveness on their bended knees from their triumphant masters."

"It is really terrifying to reflect that such a thing is quite within the bounds of possibility," Zeen exclaimed. "Even human selfishness cannot be said to be wholly destitute of redeeming qualities, you see, for I suppose it is that alone which prevents that unity of action necessary to the realization of Mr. Bulgee's horrid dream."

"If you hinted to that large man who rocks himself to and fro so dejectedly, and wistfully follows his lean friend's movements, that you suspected the existence of selfishness in the class to which he belongs," Mac proceeded to say, "you would very deeply offend him indeed. The gentleman's name is Sir David Muntch, and his career has been rather a peculiar one. When a boy he had the good luck to attract the attention of a rather philanthropic city merchant, who rescued him from waifdom and forthwith found employment for the lad in his own office as assistant messenger and light porter. Among the

duties which he had to perform was the conveyance of parcels and messages from his employer to his employer's only child, a motherless girl of about his own age, and the reigning queen of her father's heart as well as of his superb mansion. The consequence of this was that the young people were very frequently brought into personal contact, and the result was that a mutual attachment gradually grew into existence between the lonely young heiress and her father's thoughtless dependant. Although this was nothing more than what might have been expected under the circumstances, the possibility of anything of the kind taking place never seems to have occurred to the doting father, so that for more than two years the lovers continued to meet almost daily, and generally several times each week-day, without exciting anything approaching suspicion. A stop was at length put to these happy meetings, suddenly and without warning of any kind, in consequence of the promotion of messenger Muntch to a position in the counting-house for which he would not have fitted himself so sedulously and anxiously could he have foreseen what would be the result. Their enforced separation only served to fan the tender flame which each had kindled in the breast of the other into a fierce fire of passion, and before any great length of time elapsed clandestine interviews between the young couple became of frequent

occurrence. These also continued for a considerable time without attracting any particular attention by reason of their remaining undetected, but a rude awakening was in store for the haughty but unsuspecting merchant, and it came at last when he received the authoritative announcement that if shame and scandal were to be averted, the marriage of the lovers could not be long delayed. The blow to the unhappy father was of course a terribly severe one, but recognizing as he did that much depended on his giving no sign of having received it, he seemed to rally almost immediately. At first he indignantly scouted the proposal made by his old friend the family physician, then he wavered a little, but being utterly unable to discover any reasonable alternative, he ultimately yielded like a sensible man to his friend's wishes and his daughter's tears and entreaties, and Muntch soon afterwards became the husband of an heiress. Before the projected marriage was publicly announced, a report was published to the effect that the prospective bridegroom had been proved beyond doubt to be the heir to vast estates in a far-off foreign land, and in order to lend colour to the statement and so allay suspicion, the wedded pair set sail for the region indicated shortly after they were united. Almost a decade passed away before they returned, and as within a year after their return the good old merchant, who never wholly

recovered from the shock which their indiscretion occasioned him, passed peacefully over to the great majority, the gentleman beneath, at an early age, found himself at the head of the great establishment wherein he once acted as messenger. He was not the sort of man to rest content with that, however, and the consequence was that he became prominently identified with the great pastoral industry in the course of a little time, and subsequently blossomed into the leading spirit in the government of a great banking institution. This position invested the man with greater social and political power than ever, and it is needless to add that he has always used it in defence of the class-made laws of which he himself is a notable product."

"And the title by which his name is prefixed is the reward of a brilliant success, I presume?" the young Blestlander remarked. "By the way, I am aware that the bestowal of titular distinction rests with the sovereign; but what I wish to know is, from what source did the exalted functionary who first conferred that particular mark of approval on a grateful subject derive the right to create the distinction?"

"My dear sir, he did not trouble himself about deriving it from any particular source," Mac replied, with a pitying smile. "He simply assumed it, just as he possessed himself of everything he coveted

which he had strength enough to annex. If any one could have been found intrepid enough to put your question to the gentleman himself, he would be told, if he were not forthwith beheaded for his temerity, that the right had a divine origin, just as he claimed his right to rule had; and as no proof to the contrary would be forthcoming, there the matter would end."

I could not help chafing very considerably at the delay which was being caused by all this, and ventured to hint that we might as well proceed with the principal business which we were present to transact. This had the required effect, for Mac hurried through the remainder of what he had to say with commendable promptitude.

"Let me tell Mr. Zeen something of Mr. Theophilus Cringe, the last, but by no means the least, remarkable member of the group, before we make a move," he continued. "There seems to be no doubt that the claim which that gaunt, unamiable person makes of being the real architect of his own fortunes rests on a much sounder foundation than that put forward by Mr. Bulgee on his own behalf. The truth of the statement, which he never tires of making, to the effect that he was thrown on the world at a tender age destitute alike of money, friends, and special knowledge, seems to be very generally conceded; and I certainly know of no

reason why it should not be taken for granted. These grave disadvantages rendered his progress very slow for a long and weary time; but by the exercise of a rigid frugality, and a devotion to business which he describes as worthy of being emulated by all, he eventually succeeded in saving sufficient money out of his scanty wage to justify him in entering into a contract for the performance of a very humble public work. This step necessitated the employment of human assistants; and it also gave Mr. Cringe the first experience he had ever had of how sweet a privilege it is to be in a position to profit by other people's labour. Thenceforward his rise in life became rapid and more rapid, until at length the gentleman with the forbidding scowl whom you see pacing to and fro so doggedly, became the virtual controller of the destinies of many thousands of his fellow-creatures.

"I think I have now said sufficient to give you a general idea of the sort of people whom you are about to meet for the first time, and who may be regarded as typical of some of the more striking products of a much-vaunted civilization; and as it is needless to keep the poor creatures any longer in suspense, and my friend seems painfully anxious to make a move forward, it only remains for me to suggest that we proceed at once to interview the new arrivals."

A deep sigh of relief escaped me at the conclusion of these remarks; and pretending to attribute this to a feeling of regret at the cessation of his eloquence, Mac took me playfully by the arm and we descended forthwith to the immigrants.

“Ho! ho! what have we here, Sir David? What have we here, I ask?” he presently roared triumphantly. “These dandy clerks of ours seem quite at home in this outlandish place. They’re enjoyin’ themselves too, I dare swear, an’ all at our expense. I’m continually tryin’ to impress on that headstrong managin’ man o’ mine that he pays the fellows under him altogether too high; an’ take my word for it, if you look into the matter you will find that your people make the same mistake. It is an easy matter to rectify, however; an’ as sure as my name is Theophilus Cringe I will lose no more time than I can help in puttin’ things to rights. I never got any holidays when I had to work hard for a livin’. I wouldn’t take ’em if I got ’em, for the very good reason that I never had the good luck to work for any one foolish enough to pay me for doin’ nothin’, as you an’ I pay these fellows. It is a consolation to think, however, Sir David, that the time spent in our uncanny wanderin’s won’t be altogether mispent if it teaches us a lesson in the management of our affairs, an’ we have the moral courage to act upon it with firmness an’ promptness.”

The intensity of rage up to which the man worked himself in a few moments was awful to behold; and when he suddenly turned and yelled at me to approach and explain my presence there, his eyes seemed to emit red rays of deadly hate.

CHAPTER XIII

WHILE our party was on its way to interview the new-comers, I was in high hopes that a very few minutes would suffice to transact the simple business which was the object of our visit, and that the subsequent course of events would give me an early opportunity of making another appeal to Bessie Wingford; but although in this I was doomed to be disappointed, the liveliness of the proceedings compensated in some degree for the loss of precious time.

The first member of the distracted little party to notice our approach was Mr. Cringe, who came to a sudden standstill at sight of us, and releasing a mouthful of his scraggy beard which he had been engaged in savagely chewing, he regarded us for a few moments with a Gorgonian glare, such as he might be expected to bestow on the most hardened malefactors.

This ferocity of manner unnerved me to such an extent that for a moment or two I could not obey the ungracious mandate even if I would; but quickly recovering my equanimity, I turned to Wingford for information concerning the extent to which he wished his former employer enlightened. This action on my part had the effect of diverting the attention of the furious Mr. Cringe from me to my friend, at whom he continued to gaze intently, with a curious mixture of awe and suspicion, for several seconds, but without uttering a word. Eventually he approached us; and on being assured, in reply to a question, that he made no mistake as to Bob Wingford's identity, his fury again became instantly terrific.

"Oh! indeed," he hissed, and his features were distorted into what was meant to be a sarcastic grin. "Then the harrowin' tale about the fatal drownin' accident was all a lie, invented to disarm suspicion an' cover your retreat? I can see through the little game now, plainly enough. If only I had been less of a trustin', unsuspecting fool, I'd have long since ordered a special audit of your accounts; but it isn't too late yet, an' you may depend upon it that you will not have long to wait, after I find out what you have cost me, before learnin' what your cunnin' disappearance will cost you!"

By this time he was foaming at the mouth; and

being destitute of sufficient breath to make himself heard, had to pause for a little time.

"As for you," he continued, indicating me with a large bony finger, "you need expect no mercy either. You have proved yourself the apt pupil of an ungrateful hound, an' I'll take care you are made to repent of the fact for the rest of your life. Then as regards the remainin' member of the precious trio, I have no doubt, Sir David, that you will know how to deal with him as he deserves to be dealt with."

"I really must confess to an inability to quite grasp the position," Munch replied nervously. "Do I understand that you are in possession of convincing proof that these young men have abused the trust reposed in them?"

"Convincin' proof?" roared Cringe. "In the name o' heaven, what better proof do you want than that they have slunk away from their homes, an' secreted themselves in a place where they thought they never would be discovered? I have no legal evidence of their guilt as yet, I admit; but as a magistrate of the territory of long standin' an' wide experience, I have no hesitation in sayin' that there is ample circumstantial evidence that when their books come to be investigated they'll be found wantin'. Take my word for it, when a well-paid clerk leaves a position of trust an' pretends to get

drowned so as to get clear away unmolested, he has excellent reasons for the action he takes; an' when you find that he has been joined in his retreat by two of his boon companions, you don't want to be told what they too have been up to, I should imagine. Ugh! the miserable, ungrateful villains! We've got them now, an' let them escape us if they can!"

Purple and almost choking, he made certain clawing motions towards us with his long, bony fingers when he could speak no longer, as if giving expression to a desire to rend us limb from limb; and then thrusting his hands into his pockets again, he resumed his monotonous march, but at a much brisker pace than before.

The objects of this gross attack, with the exception of Mac, who exhibited certain signs of indignation, bore the infliction with equanimity, and submitted with fortitude to be viewed for a time in the light which persons charged with crime are apt to be regarded whether they be guilty or otherwise; and the voice and manner in which Wingford addressed them when the storm abated sufficiently to permit of his obtaining a hearing, had lost none of their calmness and dignity.

"I will make no reference to the cruel and unwarranted charges which you have just heard made against my friends and myself," he said, "beyond

stating that I feel quite sure that Mr. Cringe will live to thoroughly repent ever having made them."

"This gentleman comes here under instructions from the governing authorities, whose valued servant he is, prepared to provide for the immediate wants of your party," Mac said warmly; "and it is altogether too bad that he should be met with a storm of vile abuse. The treatment he has received has been so indecent that if he takes my advice he will withdraw and leave you to your own resources."

This brought Sir David to his feet in a towering passion in an instant; and shaking a fat forefinger at the last speaker threateningly, he approached him to within a few paces.

"That is all very well, my fine fellow," he wheezed; "but no one against whom there is such well-grounded suspicion as there is against you, is a fit person to give advice on any subject. You talk of indecency in others; but I know of nothing more indecent than your putting yourself forward under the circumstances."

Old Benny, who had been listening with rapt attention to everything that transpired, here shambling towards Muntch, and with many awkward gestures intended for the expression of unlimited deference, asked his permission to make a suggestion, which was granted with lordly condescension.

"Mit all due respect, Zur David," he whined, "I

must be permitted to remind you that nobody knows better than yourself that beesness is beesness; an' as there can be no denyin' that we are just at present in a bit of a fix, out o' vich these young men may be able to hextricate us, don't you think you might bromise them forgiveness for their bast evil deeds on condition that they help us midout delay to get back to our 'omes an' families?"

"It is shocking to think, sir, that your respect for the law is so meagre as to permit you to make such a proposition," was the reply. "Means can surely be found to effect what we require without compounding a felony. I have been ever ready to extend indulgence where lapses have been made, under certain conditions; but when I am called upon to deal with a mean thief who deliberately and systematically robs an indulgent master——"

The sentence was never finished; for before he had time to utter another word Mac, who could restrain himself no longer, was upon him like a lion, and catching him by the huge throat, shook him as a dog would a rat.

"How dare you address such words to me, you cowardly hound?" he hissed through his clenched teeth. "How dare you? How dare you?"

The agility displayed by Old Benny in removing himself to a safe distance when he saw the turn affairs had taken, was simply incredible; and as his

friend Cringe exhibited no anxiety to rescue him from what soon bid fair to prove certain strangulation, and none of the others except little Fussi made the slightest effort to relieve him, it devolved on Wingford and myself to release the wretched baronet from the iron grip of his powerful assailant. The task, which proved to be by no means an easy one, was performed, I am afraid, in anything but a whole-hearted manner; and no sooner was it completed than the rescued man startled all present by giving forth an awful howl of anguish, and at the same time bounding off with an elephantine lack of grace and most undignified alacrity.

A glance showed that Carlo was the direct cause of this extraordinary conduct. It appears that the old dog had been engaged in playing with some recently-made canine acquaintances in the vicinity when the scuffle occurred; and hearing his master's angry voice, he hastened to learn the cause of his excitement.

Arriving on the scene just in time to witness the separation of Mac and Sir David, he at once concluded that aggressive action on the part of the latter was the cause of all the trouble; and thereupon he promptly proceeded to give expression to his disapproval in the way he considered best calculated to be convincing and otherwise generally effective.

Although the faithful retriever was speedily beaten

off, and the injury inflicted was very slight, owing to the defective condition of the animal's teeth, the hapless Muntch continued to groan dismally and limp about in a ludicrous fashion for several minutes; towards the expiration of which Mr. Cringe resumed his onslaught with renewed vigour and increased virulence, thus rendering it impossible for Wingford to explain the particular object of his visit.

When Old Benny judged all danger to have passed, he shuffled his way back to us; but instead of sitting apart from the others as he had done previously, he seated himself on a movable form alongside Mr. Bulgee and Mr. Craftson, probably because he considered their proximity afforded him an increased measure of protection.

"Zur David is a very much 'eadsthrong man, an' has but very leetle tact," he was heard to say. "Now if it vos my case I'd bromise these fellows any mortal thing they chose to ask, if I thought they could 'elp us."

"And perform whatever you promised too, I have no doubt," Mr. Craftson sneered.

"Oh! that is a very different thing, my dear zur—a totally different thing," the old usurer replied. "I 'ave as strong an objection to bein' imposed upon as any man; so that I think it very likely that I'd hinsist on reviewin' the arrangement before consentin' to complete."

The approach of the awesome Mr. Cringe put a stop to what might have developed into an acrimonious discussion; for he frequently made disparaging remarks about us as he passed, and to these they seemed to consider it their duty to pay the most deferential attention.

Severe as his strictures were on such occasions, it was deemed best to ignore them and so let his anger burn itself out; but Mac's fiery temper was only controllable up to a certain point, and the time came at last when it exploded with rather farcical results.

Presuming on the forbearance with which his abusive remarks were received, Mr. Cringe ultimately went so far as to point the finger of scorn towards him, and ask with withering bitterness what could be thought of a human monster who, not content with robbing him, tried openly to murder a too indulgent master!

This produced the climax; for in the twinkling of an eye Mac sprang like a tiger towards his traducer, with the intention of dealing with him as he had already dealt with another reviler of his good name and reputation.

Now it so happened that at the time of this occurrence Mr. Cringe was standing immediately in front of Old Benny; and becoming quickly aware of the intention of the enemy, he prepared to receive

him with a loud snort, partly indicative of terror and partly defiance.

There was that in the eye of the avenger, however, which made him quail visibly when the crucial moment arrived; and when Mac's lightning-like thrust was made at the hirsute throat of his prey, the hurried backward retreat of the latter plainly bespoke the craven.

This manœuvre was executed with such extreme suddenness, and the distance between him and those on the form behind him was so short, that there was no time to realize what was about to happen before he crashed into the occupants of the seat, which promptly overturned, and all four were hurled pell-mell to the ground. An indescribable scene of confusion instantly followed.

Amid a perfect storm of howls and execrations the wretched men kicked and clawed each other, and wriggled and twisted in a most surprising way, in their frantic efforts to regain an upright attitude; but strange to say, the more they kicked and clawed and wriggled, the more inextricably mixed they seemed to become.

Probably not before they became too thoroughly exhausted to struggle any longer would they have attained the end they had in view, had not something occurred to divert their attention from the active business of mauling and booting one another; but

something did happen to effect this, and it was an event too which invested their ridiculous predicament with no inconsiderable amount of terror.

The dreadful din set up by the actors in the absurd *mêlée* soon attracted Carlo from his gambols again; but on this occasion he was accompanied by a couple of his playmates, to whom he had doubtless confided his encounter with Munch, and whose natural love of conflict prompted them to hasten to the fray.

Just as they arrived at the scene of the disaster Mr. Cringe had succeeded, more by chance than good management, in getting on to his hands and knees; but if he entertained any hope of being released from his peculiar plight without further unpleasantness because of his success in partially disengaging himself, that hope was doomed to be rudely dispelled; for at sight of the struggling mass of humanity the pugnacious quadrupeds, with eager yelp, rushed headlong amongst them, and promptly selected the unhappy man as their first victim.

The Blestlandic curs being much younger than Carlo, their weapons of offence were much more formidable; and when in addition to this it is borne in mind that his attitude at the moment was one which greatly favoured his assailants, it is not to be wondered at that Mr. Cringe signalized his resentment at the sudden attack by plunging madly

forward with a mighty roar, and turning heels over head with all the expedition that lay within his power.

No movement which he could execute could have been more effective in quickly freeing him of his tormentors than the ungainly somersault in which he indulged; and before the excited brutes had time to renew the attack, they were ignominiously hunted out of doors, and the necessary steps to prevent their return at will were taken at the same time.

The expulsion of the unruly animals seemed to afford great relief to Sir David Muntch, who witnessed it from a distant pillar towards which he had hied with most undignified haste when the erring creatures appeared upon the scene, and behind which he made vain but grotesque efforts to hide his massive form while his bosom business-friend was being painfully worried; but no amount of assurance concerning the banishment of his four-footed enemies appeared capable of pacifying Mr. Cringe, who continued to rub the affected parts sympathetically, and execrate all and sundry for several minutes after all danger had passed.

Comparative quiet was at length restored, however; and soon afterwards the four victims of the untoward accident were to be seen seated apart, begrimed and moody, and casting occasional re-

proachful glances from one to another, which went to show plainly that each blamed some one else for all that had occurred.

After consultation it was decided to confide to little Fussi the fact that it was utterly impossible to make immediate arrangements for the departure of himself and his fellow-exiles; and he was then asked to join Zeen in an endeavour to bring Craftson, Old Benny, and Bulgee to something like reason.

It was also arranged that Bob Wingford and I should see what could be done towards bringing Sir David Muntch to view the position in a rational light; for the hopelessness of attempting to approach the irascible Mr. Cringe directly was clearly recognized, and we saw that our only hope of being able to get to business within a reasonable time lay in our being able to persuade the baronet to try and restore his friend to a state somewhat approaching a common-sense frame of mind without much further ado.

There was a manifest change for the better in Sir David's bearing when Wingford addressed him with manly courtesy in pursuance of the design just mentioned; but his arrogance of manner was still sufficiently pronounced to render him supremely amusing to any one behind the scenes.

"We cannot but be grateful to your authorities for the kindly interest they deign to take in our

welfare," he said pompously enough; "but I wish it to be distinctly understood that we cannot accept anything as a mere favour, even from their gracious hands. You say that at least several days must elapse before arrangements for our homeward journey can be completed; and as we are here almost totally unprovided with money, and it is manifestly impossible to subsist without aid in the meantime, I can see no alternative but to accept the hospitable offer which you have been deputed to make. I am therefore willing to accept it, as far as I am personally concerned; but only on condition that every item of supply, and every service however small that I may require, shall be charged against me to the uttermost farthing of their value; for under no circumstances could I consent to place myself under a compliment even to hosts who have proved themselves so extremely kind and thoughtful."

A promise that scrupulous attention should be paid to his wishes concerning the fulfilment of the condition to which he referred was freely forthcoming, of course; and when delicately requested to use his influence in the direction of bringing Mr. Cringe to his own way of thinking, he graciously and almost eagerly complied.

The conversion of the exiled magnate was not accomplished without some difficulty—indeed in the

preliminary stages of the interview between the two men, signs were not wanting that it would not be accomplished at all—but the baronet's suavity and persuasiveness at length prevailed, and much to our delight Mr. Cringe signified his willingness, albeit ungraciously enough, to accept the hospitality which it was Wingford's privilege to offer.

He was very emphatic in his insistence on the same condition as that imposed by Sir David as the price of his compliance, as was also Mr. Craftson, when the proposition we were there to make was placed fairly before him; but as far as Old Benny and Mr. Bulgee were concerned, they were quite willing to accept any favour that might be submitted for their acceptance without imposing any terms or conditions whatever.

No one could have been more palpably pleased at some kind of an understanding having been at last arrived at than Sir David, whose eyes seemed to have been opened to the stupid nature of the attitude he and his friend assumed towards us when he underwent the maltreatment to which he was subjected at Mac's hands. The fault attaching to certain occurrences, which he need not more clearly indicate, lay entirely with his impulsive and somewhat stubborn but well-meaning friend Mr. Cringe, he told Bob Wingford and myself confidentially; but he assured us that very great allowances ought

to be made for the poor gentleman, owing to the very trying time through which, in common with himself and the other members of their party, he had just passed. His friend's temper was at all times rather easily inflamed, he reminded us; but the experiences of the previous few days could not fail to irritate and embitter him had his disposition been ever so angelic. To this he attributed the regrettable unpleasantnesses that had taken place that morning, and which he hoped would be entirely forgotten from that moment.

He then proceeded to describe in awestricken tones some leading events of the mysterious voyage which they had just completed. These proved to be precisely similar to those of which we ourselves had had personal experience; but in accordance with a previous understanding, no reference was made just then to the fact.

Preparations for a start towards the dwelling destined to accommodate himself and the other members of his party were just about complete by the time Sir David, with a shudder, finished the relation of his weird adventures; but a still further delay to our departure was caused by Mr. Cringe making the discovery by some means that the form of government in which Blestland rejoiced was a pure republic.

In an instant he flared up again, the more readily,

perhaps, because the announcement, which so deeply displeased him, was received by little Fussi with enthusiastic applause; and thereupon he launched forth into a bitter denunciation of democracy and everything connected therewith.

"I tell you frankly that I'm sorry to hear it," he said, "for before any nation can become a republic she must be guilty of the heinous crime of usurpin' properly-constituted authority. Republicanism is nothin' more nor less than an invention of Old Nick intended to lead poor mortals astray an' demoralize them. There is no such thing as stability obtainable under the unnatural growth which such a system undoubtedly is—nothing but rotteness an' corruption. Why, don't we all know that heaven itself is a kingdom—an' surely nothin' better than that can be hoped for by way of example? If it were not for such unquiet spirits, such agents of the Evil One as that man Fussi, nothin' would ever have been heard of Anarchism, Socialism, Republicanism, an' all the other wicked isms; an' the people's rulers are greatly to blame for allowin' such pests an' firebrands to go about preachin' their damnable doctrines. No stauncher believer in true liberty than I am could be found anywhere, I venture to say; but the liberty extended to reconstructors of society, an' notably in my own native land, is not true liberty at all—it

is nothin' more nor less than vicious licence. In only one way can the dangerous political agitator be effectively dealt with, an' that is to squelch him the moment his head appears above ground, as it were !”

“He has certainly done incalculable harm in the past, and will surely continue to do it in the future, if some common-sense repressive measures are not adopted,” Sir David agreed; “but as it seems improbable that any good can be effected by discussing the subject now, perhaps it would be as well to postpone its further consideration, and proceed at once with these gentlemen to our temporary residence.”

This being assented to with a sulky grunt, Mac, who had carried little Fussi out of earshot on some pretext at the earliest stage of Mr. Cringe's philippic, so as to prevent a wordy war, was recalled; and in a very few moments afterwards we were all to be seen driving off together as amicably, to all appearances, as if nothing had ever occurred to cause dissension in our ranks.

CHAPTER XIV

EVERYTHING that kindness and forethought could suggest was done to make the new arrivals as comfortable as it was possible to make them under the circumstances; and to do them justice, they exhibited no lack of appreciation of the efforts made in their behalf.

Even Mr. Cringe thawed visibly under the influence of the treatment he received; but one circumstance in particular still remained to keep alive his dissatisfaction. This was the presence of little Fussi under the same roof that sheltered himself and the other respectable members of the party.

“I could never be induced to allow a revolutionary rascal like that to defile an outhouse of mine with his presence,” he declared, “an' therefore I don't think it unreasonable to ask that I be spared the humiliation of having to reside in the same house

with him any longer than can be helped. The proper place to house such a fellow as that is some cheap restaurant, where he would be likely to fall among congenial spirits. There is nothin' whatever in common between the man an' any other member of the party, an' you may be sure that his company would not have been tolerated durin' the few days of our supernatural experiences if any means of gettin' rid of him could have been found without havin' recourse to actual violence."

He was partially pacified on being assured in reply that the little Leveller had already expressed his intention of accepting employment at his trade as soon as it could be obtained; that in a day or two at most the work he wished for would be forthcoming; and that in the meantime he would be kept as much aloof as it was possible to keep him without doing too great a violence to his feelings.

This announcement was well calculated to awaken uncomfortable reflections in the mind of him to whom it was addressed, as well as in that of his friend, Sir David, who also heard it; for a comparison between either of them and the despised Fussi, when all met on equal terms, so far as an absence of the forceful power of capital was concerned, could not fail to exhibit the little agitator in by far the most favourable light.

But the idea of making any such comparison

never occurred to either of them; and the baronet proceeded forthwith to contribute certain oracular observations on the particular subject under discussion, and on certain other matters which the theme suggested.

"The misguided man is never so completely at home as when he is spreading discontent among his fellows," he said, glancing disapproval towards the unconscious Fussi; "so that it is to be hoped that his employer will make him devote as much time as possible to labour, and so keep him out of mischief as far as practicable. The greatest curse with which humanity has ever been afflicted, in my opinion, is directly traceable to short hours of labour. That is the cause of the seething unrest and discontent that have grown so rapidly of late years in all the so-called civilized countries of the globe. Evidences of a rebellious spirit and whining complaints were things unknown among the masses when people were in the habit of attending to their industrial pursuits from sunrise to sunset, and often longer, and the consequence was that the world's work was carried on smoothly and harmoniously, as it would always continue to be carried on if the lower orders were not cursed by being educated into becoming violently discontented with their lot. Just look at any of those countries which we are egotistically in the habit of regarding as wholly, or at any rate partly,

uncivilized, and in which the masses have no time to devote to the study of inflammatory and disquieting literature, even if they were qualified to do so and could obtain it, and tell me whether there can be the least doubt that her people as a whole are infinitely happier than the comparatively leisured workers of whichever you may consider the most enlightened nation in Christendom. Why, of course there cannot."

All this, and the approval which it elicited from the speaker's admirers, was noted by the young Blestlander with undisguised astonishment; but no serious attempt at controverting the statements was contemplated for a moment, as most probably would have been the case had Mac or Fussi been present to hear them.

"When you and your friends feel inclined to accompany myself and Mr. Zeen to the manufacturing quarters of this city, and afterwards to a few of its suburbs, where the home of the worker is principally to be found," Wingford replied, "I think I can show you sufficient, Sir David, to convince you that short hours of labour are by no means incompatible with a very high degree indeed of national prosperity and contentment."

This was received with sundry incredulous smiles and head-shakes; but as they all expressed a willingness to spend the remainder of the afternoon in the

manner suggested, their whole party, including the little shoemaker, were promptly accommodated with a suitable conveyance, and the tour of inspection commenced.

Finding that we could be of no further service to Wingford, for that day at least, Mac and I craftily hinted before he left that we proposed returning to our lodgings, there to await his return; but this he would not hear of, as we rightly surmised would be the case, and a promise to spend the time we talked of wasting in entertaining his mother and sisters with the vast store of news for which they hungered was extracted from us forthwith. Could he but have witnessed the eager haste with which we prepared to pay the promised visit at the instant that he and the party he had in charge disappeared round the first street corner, it is highly probable that a doubt would have been created in his mind as to the absolute genuineness of a certain slight show of hesitancy which we manifested before consenting to adopt his suggestion.

Just as we were about to alight at the entrance to the cosy home of the girls we loved, I was very completely taken aback, and Mac was very considerably surprised, by the sudden appearance of the Bishop, who at that moment emerged therefrom, and favouring us with an elaborate bow of mock ceremony, and a demoniacal grin of triumph, drove

quickly off, exhibiting various signs of self-satisfaction for our benefit as he went.

"What you feared this morning has come to pass after all, apparently," Mac said presently; "and judging by the warmth with which the fellow literally shakes hands with himself, and his other general expressions of delight, it seems rather probable that his cunning ruse has been rewarded with some measure of success. If you will only play your cards boldly and well, he will have much less cause to be satisfied with himself at the conclusion of his next visit, I feel sure. The first thing to be done is to take Mary into your confidence. You will find her a valuable ally, or I am very much mistaken. Next embrace the opportunity, which Mary's tact will provide, of seeing Bessie in private; and having learned, in response to your earnest and persistent pleading, that her rejection of your advances last night was not due to her having a preference for somebody else, go at once to her mother and place your case before her with all the power you can command. Should the old lady prove inexorable, which is very improbable I think, there will still remain very good grounds for hope, you must remember; for, as we know, Mr. Kniggs has the utmost confidence in his ability to unmask your rival and exhibit him in his true and presumably repulsive colours to-morrow night. And now come

along and set vigorously to work, bearing always in mind that 'faint heart never won fair lady.'"

These words of encouragement did much to rally my rapidly drooping spirits; but when soon afterwards I entered the house and found that both Bessie and Mary presented living pictures of misery, I became quite cheerful.

As Mrs. Wingford was not present, having just retired, as we were told, owing to a headache, I had but little difficulty in finding an opportunity to tell Mary privately all I wished to confide to her; and I found in her a confidante even more sympathetic, indeed, than I had anticipated.

"I very much fear that your case is hopeless," she said tearfully; "for although poor Bessie did not promise in so many words this afternoon to marry Mr. Penwith, she did what amounts to the same thing—promised mother to abide by her wishes in that as in all other respects. Now I don't know whether you are aware of the fact or not, but I may tell you that with mother it has become the chief desire of her life to see this union brought about. Her mind, for certain reasons, has become more firmly fixed on accomplishing this than I ever knew it to be riveted on any object previously; so that you can easily imagine what the effect of my sister's reluctantly given promise is likely to be."

"I did hear that she had set her heart on sacri-

ficing her child by compelling her to marry a man against her will, and one, too, who is a comparative stranger to every member of the family," I briskly remarked; "but I understand that her reason for this is that she fears the girl might contract a marriage with an unregenerate son of the soil."

"That is one of the motives by which she is actuated, no doubt," she replied; "but there is yet another, and one also which influences her to quite as great, if not indeed to a greater extent. You see, she takes an all-absorbing interest in the mission which Mr. Penwith established soon after his arrival on finding how greatly it was needed, and which he has so bravely and unselfishly conducted ever since; and she is very firmly of opinion that the marriage which she so urgently desires to see consummated would materially strengthen and consolidate the movement. Indeed, she knows that if Bessie persisted in withholding her consent to wed the man any longer, the mission of which he is the life and soul would practically cease to exist; for he told her plainly this afternoon, that in such an event he would be reluctantly compelled to sever his connection with it at once and for ever. This action on his part did not elevate him in my estimation, I freely admit, and I should have been glad to have seen what looked suspiciously like a threat resented, let the consequences be what they might; but the result

it produced, as far as poor mother was concerned, was that it terrified her into making a most impassioned appeal to Bessie's filial affection, in the course of which she expressed the conviction that my sister's disobedience would be certain to lead to disastrous consequences in many directions. Prayers and tearful entreaties on poor Bessie's part proved all in vain; so that when at length mother exhibited unmistakable signs of becoming seriously ill from over-excitement, my sister became suddenly and preternaturally calm, and brushing away her tears with a resolute gesture, gave the promise of which I have told you with clearness and distinctness. Could you have but witnessed, as I did, the rapturous delight with which the utterance of that promise was received, I think you would agree with me that the prospect of the giver of it ever being allowed to recall it is indeed very remote; but at the same time, if you think that there is the least probability of your being able to induce mother to alter her cherished plan in your favour, I shall be only too glad to provide you with a favourable opportunity to plead your cause."

There was very little in all this that could truthfully be described otherwise than as highly discouraging; but for all that it did not in the smallest degree affect the determination at which I had arrived of fighting the battle to the bitter end, if

Bessie would but fortify me with the most meagre encouragement.

This it was, of course, absolutely necessary that I should have, if possible, before proceeding further; and when this fact was explained to my fair confidante, she at once suggested that all four should proceed for a stroll through the grounds, where she could contrive to secure me an uninterrupted interview with Bessie with greater facility than it could be accomplished indoors.

Her sister at first manifested considerable reluctance to joining the proposed party, and talked of retiring to her room until we returned; but wheedling and coaxing had the desired effect eventually, and soon afterwards I found myself once more walking moodily by the side of her I loved so well, patiently awaiting an opportunity to unburden my soul.

I had not many minutes to wait before what I sought was forthcoming, for Mary Wingford's tact was not slow to provide it; but short as the time was during which I had to remain silent—I could not if I would talk on any other subject than that which was uppermost in my mind—a sufficient space elapsed to enable me to muse myself into a very much less confident and hopeful condition of mind than that with which I had set out. Indeed, when presently I became aware that Mac and Mary

had disappeared, and that the leafy avenue along which we slowly moved was quite deserted by all but ourselves, I found that my courage had oozed so completely away that I was incapable of uttering a single word.

My companion, who was so deeply occupied with her own thoughts that she had maintained an absolutely unbroken silence ever since we left the house, did not become cognizant of the fact that we were alone for several minutes after I did; and on making the discovery she exhibited palpable signs of being considerably startled and not a little annoyed, a circumstance which did not tend to reassure me, but had indeed something somewhat resembling the opposite effect.

“How exceedingly polite of them to take themselves off without a word of warning or excuse, to be sure,” she said, after glancing eagerly around. “I suppose that their action is intended as a trick, and if so, all I can say is that it is a particularly stupid one. Let us return to the house at once, please. I feel very much annoyed with Master Mac and my sister, I can assure you. They first of all pester me unmercifully to accompany them in their ramble; and having won my consent they afterwards meanly desert me, by way of showing their delicate appreciation of my compliance, I presume.”

All this, and a good deal more to the same effect,

she said in a flurried, disjointed, excited kind of way, evidently with a view to depriving me of any opportunity to speak on the subject which I had broached to her on the previous evening, should I by any chance contemplate doing so; and so far did she succeed in accomplishing her design, that we had approached to within a few yards of a point at which a sudden turn in the pleasant walk would bring us within full view of the house before the slightest break occurred in her irritating display of volubility. Here, however, she paused at last, being probably under the impression that there was no longer any need to continue; and the instant she did so I seized her by the arm and gently but firmly detained her.

“You asked me last night never to refer again in your presence to the fact that I love you better far than I love my life,” I said, with suppressed emotion; “and you would have been obeyed, even though silence would break my heart, if I had reason to think that your affections were elsewhere bestowed. Happily I have no reason to think anything of the kind; and that being so, I must implore you to reconsider your cruel decision of yesterday. And I would ask you, too, to do so in no light and airy spirit, but gravely and seriously; for more depends on the issue, so far at least as I am concerned, than I can find words to depict.”

Hereupon I proceeded to tell again with rude eloquence and in the most passionate terms of the intensity of the passion by which I was being consumed; of the unspeakable agony which her disappearance from Earth had occasioned me; of the transcendent joy with which her unexpected appearance at the railway-station on the previous morning had inspired me; and of the unutterable misery to which she would consign me should she prove heartless enough to do that which would cause me to curse for ever instead of bless the day that I had set foot on Blestland's shores.

It was evident that she made the most strenuous efforts to preserve a calm, unmoved demeanour during the delivery of this vehement appeal; but the urgent tears were not to be denied, and long before it was concluded they flowed fast and freely.

“You would have spared both of us a good deal of useless pain and distress if you had refrained from returning to this subject, as I hoped you would,” she replied, after stifling a sob and brushing away her tears. “I thought I said sufficient last night to make it clear that it would be worse than useless to do so; but as that does not appear to have been the case, I must go a step further, and confide to you that which cannot but convince you of the utter hopelessness of pursuing the matter any further. I have given a solemn promise to wed another.”

She endeavoured bravely but with indifferent success to utter these words in a careless tone, and with a steady voice; but when the last sentence was spoken she burst into tears again, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

I contemplated her agitation for several moments in silence, and with a deep sense of satisfaction, since it told as plainly as anything could tell what the result of my wooing would have been were she but a free agent; and when at length the violence of her paroxysm became somewhat abated, I returned to the attack with the highest degree of hope, and the utmost confidence in my ability to prosecute my suit to a successful issue.

"I understood Mary to say a while ago that you had given some sort of a vague promise to that effect," I said; "but as I also gathered from what she said that you did not give it voluntarily, and that it was, strangely enough, given to a third person, I cannot see that any importance whatever ought to be attached to the fact. No promise of any kind can be held for a moment to be binding which is extracted from one under pressure, you must remember."

"My sister seems to have favoured you with very full information about my affairs," she replied, pretending with a little frown to be angry thereat, "and it seems a pity that, having seen fit to take

that liberty, she did not refrain from having recourse to exaggeration. The promise I made was not an involuntary one. It was given because poor mother was so anxious to obtain it that to withhold it might result in serious consequences to her health, which, as you know, has never been very strong. How Mary could have construed that into coercion I am sure I cannot imagine; and as any attempt at breaking that promise, even if I were capable of acting so meanly, would inevitably endanger the life of the dear one to whom it was given, there can be no doubt about its being perfectly binding."

"I may have fallen into error in doing so," I went on to say, "but I certainly inferred from something said by your sister that the terms of the compact to which you committed yourself with such very peculiar spontaneousness, were of a general rather than a particular nature. What I mean to say is, that I gathered from her remarks on the subject that you never favoured any man directly with a vow to marry him. That is so, is it not?"

"As Mary has no doubt told you," she answered, "I promised mother to be guided entirely by her wishes in the matter; and as she is firmly of opinion that her spirit would find no rest beyond the grave unless I agreed to accept Mr. Penwith, I am in duty bound to regard myself as engaged to that gentleman, and I must ask you to do so too, for the future."

She was very nearly breaking down again at this point, but she succeeded with an effort in maintaining a calm exterior.

"After hearing from mother that she had won my consent," she continued, flushing with indignation, and as if addressing herself only, "he sought me out, and had the audacity to advance towards me with the evident intention of indulging in a caress," with a little shudder; "but I quickly divined the object he had in view, and fled wildly at his approach."

"But I altogether deny that you are in duty bound to regard yourself as engaged to this man," I said didactically. "It by no means follows that because you have promised to abide by your mother's wishes in the bestowal of your hand, that you are as yet formally engaged to him or any one else. Although I understand that his name was not actually mentioned on the occasion, I freely admit that this Mr. Penwith was very probably the person she had in her mind's eye when you were asked to pledge yourself after the manner you have described; but even so, it does not necessarily follow that it is impossible to persuade her into radically changing the views she holds in that particular direction. The conditions under which she conceived the unfortunate idea concerning your future of which she seems to be possessed, have undergone a very

material change during the last day or two; and it is not unreasonable to hope that she may be made to see the necessity of reconsidering the decision at which she arrived under such conditions. At any rate I am determined to put the matter to the test, unless expressly forbidden by you to do so. May I?"

To this there was no verbal response forthcoming; but in the fleeting glance which the curt question elicited I thought I saw sufficient to justify me in clasping her passionately to my wildly-beating heart, and showering hot kisses on her exquisite lips, and of course I acted accordingly.

Gently disengaging herself from my warm embrace as soon as opportunity offered, she hid with her hands her burning cheeks, and without uttering a word fled towards the house like a startled fawn.

With a feeling as near akin to perfect happiness as can possibly be imagined, I lighted a cigarette and leisurely followed her; and while in the act of admiring the graceful movements of her lithe form—she was the only woman I ever saw, by the way, who could run gracefully—I was rather startled at seeing the sombre form of the Bishop emerge from an avenue which intersected that along which she was hurrying, and glance keenly in the direction of her retreating figure. Before I had time to consider the advisability or otherwise of concealing myself in

the adjacent foliage, so as to baffle the attempt to ascertain the cause of her flight, which I knew he was sure to promptly make, he suddenly became aware of my approach; and hazy and uncertain as was the light in the opal-tinted gloaming, I could clearly see that at sight of me his face assumed an expression of most intense malevolence.

Having glared at me for a short space without blinking or moving, he presently came forward to meet me with a smile so expressive of ferocious dislike as to make me feel rather uncomfortable, to say the least.

CHAPTER XV

IT was interesting to note the marked contrast that existed between the forced suavity of manner and highly conciliatory tones of the Bishop when we came face to face in the garden, just as Bessie Wingford disappeared within the house after a furtive backward glance, and the fierce light with which his eyes blazed whenever he allowed our glances to meet for an instant, which he did not do frequently. Were it but possible for him to assassinate me with a look, he would have freed himself of my rivalry without a moment's hesitation, or if not, the general expression of his countenance whenever it chanced to come into complete view did him a grave injustice.

"I did not think, when I saw you last, that I should so soon have the pleasure of seeing you again," he began. "Indeed, when I left here a few hours ago, I anticipated having to undertake a

journey which would necessitate my absence until to-morrow, as I explained at the time to the ladies; but on reaching my humble quarters I found a message awaiting me which relieved me of the necessity of proceeding any further. And talking of my quarters reminds me to say that I will not ask yourself and your friend to visit them just at present, for bachelors' quarters at best are but cheerless and uninviting; but I am about to be married very shortly, and when the honeymoon is over, and we have settled down soberly to the serious affairs and joys of life, I hope you will both frequently do us the favour of spending an evening at our modest place. Of one thing you may rest perfectly assured at any rate, and that is, that you will receive a warm welcome both from myself and my wife that is to be whenever you choose to visit us."

The swift glance of evil import with which this invitation was accompanied eloquently attested the man's insincerity; but in thanking him for his courtesy, and expressing the pleasure which I asserted it would afford me to accept his proffered hospitality, I betrayed no sign of suspecting his want of candour.

"You manifest no curiosity concerning the name of the lady who has consented to become the sharer of my joys and sorrows?" he said after a pause.

"Not having the honour of being acquainted with

any of the young ladies of Blestland, her name would convey no meaning to me," I replied, in a tone of indifference.

"Oh! but she does not happen to be of Blestlandic origin," he said, favouring me at the same time with a sinister leer. "She is a compatriot of our own, and I am given to understand that you knew her as a child. My engagement is with none other than the charming Bessie Wingford; and I assure you that I idolize the bewitching creature to the very verge of sinfulness. I worshipped her the first moment I set eyes upon her; and the flame kindled within me then has been gathering strength ever since, until at last it has absorbed my very being. It is wicked, I know, to regard any human being, however adorable, with such feelings as I regard her; but strive how I would I could not keep my passion within moderate bounds, or anything approaching it. It makes me tremble at times to think of what the result would be should cruel Death deprive me of her; for to live without her now I know I could not. I have no fear whatever of any mere human agency ever separating us; but should such a thing prove possible, woe would surely betide those responsible; for although I am a man of peace, none may trench on my interests with impunity."

The manifest threat contained in the concluding

portion of this deliverance was uttered slowly, with marked emphasis, and in a harsh, grating voice most disagreeable to the ear; but I listened to what he had to say with such an assumption of sympathetic interest, and with so many signs of approval, that by the time we parted, which I took good care we did soon after our arrival at the house, the strong suspicion concerning herself and me which Bessie's flight aroused had almost completely disappeared.

In a consultation which Mac and I held subsequently, it was decided that nothing that could suggest itself to either of us should remain untried, in order to induce him to talk about his life on Earth, for we were anxious to get him committed if possible to some definite statement which we could afterwards prove to be untrue; but as subsequent events proved, what we sought was arrived at without the exercise of our ingenuity.

Later on, when all met at table, except Bob, who sent a message to say that he would be detained in town until too late to dine, the Bishop heard of the arrival of Cringe and party for the first time; and, as was but natural, the event gave rise to a good deal of conversation.

In accordance with what seems to have been his usual custom under such circumstances, however, Mr. Walter Penwith did more of the talking than all the others present put together; indeed, before we

had been very long seated he managed to monopolize the conversation completely.

As far as the ladies were concerned, including Bessie, they listened to his remarks with as much reverential attention as if he were delivering a sermon; and in view of the fact that his observations very soon drifted into the channel through which we wished them to flow, neither Mac nor I felt any disposition to resent his rudeness. On the contrary, we did all we could to encourage his loquacity.

"Inasmuch as the experience they have just had will tend to chasten the rebellious spirits of Mr. Cringe and those who have accompanied him, it is pleasing to think that much spiritual good will ensue to them in all probability," he snuffled monotonously. "To be suddenly bereft of luxurious homes, and all the personal comfort that wealth can command, and all nearly all of them have been, is no doubt a very trying experience; but it is all the more valuable on that very account, since the lesson it teaches is so sharply emphasized. I may be permitted to say, while disclaiming any desire whatever to boast, that neither the experience of Mr. Cringe nor that of Sir David Muntch was one whit more bitter than was my own, when I was called upon to sever my connection with my native land; and yet I have been more than compensated by the regeneration and

peace of spirit which it has brought about, to say nothing of anything else."

Here he tried to convey a meaning glance to Bessie, but failed in the attempt, and had to be content with an approving smile from the lady he regarded as his prospective mother-in-law.

"It was not alone a leading position in an honourable and lucrative profession that I was called upon to forfeit when I left on my enforced visit to Blestland," he continued, after a short pause; "I had also to forego the absolute certainty of inheriting the rich possessions of an old bachelor uncle, to whom I stood in the relation of an adopted son."

In order that no loophole might remain through which by any possibility he could afterwards escape, he was dexterously led not only into repeating the latter and more important portion of this very compromising statement, but also into going very fully into details concerning the magnificence of his uncle's country seat and the splendour of his town residence.

All this delighted Mac and myself beyond measure, and we had the utmost difficulty in disguising the fact from the romancer; but when he went on to tell, in tones of well-simulated pathos, of the depth of affection which had always existed between himself and his foster-father, our feelings of elation became very considerably modified.

"The loss of prospects so bright, from a mere worldly point of view, does not occasion me one moment's regret," he said in conclusion; "but so long as I live I must continue to mourn the loss I sustained on being torn away for ever from the kindest and best of men. Although I became an orphan when only an infant, I am proud to say, my dear Mrs. Wingford, that I am very far indeed from being deficient in filial instinct."

The complimentary references to his moral and religious excellences which this last remark evoked from the lady to whom it was directly addressed, were not by any means calculated to increase the hope I had of being able to depose the Bishop from the exalted position which he enjoyed in her estimation; but at the same time it did not shake in the slightest degree my firm determination to proceed with the attempt.

When in due course a general retirement to the drawing-room took place, my hated rival quickly constituted himself a sort of master of ceremonies, but as it turned out this also suited Mac's purpose and mine most excellently.

Both girls begged to be excused when he suggested the practice of certain hymns which were intended for use at the public services held by him at certain times and places, and which were understood to be for the most part the product of his own versatile

genius; but Mrs. Wingford insisted that one of them at least should assist the Bishop, and Bessie was of course selected.

Glancing maliciously at Mac and me as he followed his helpless victim to the piano, he said, with the disagreeable smile peculiar to him, that he hoped his efforts at producing hymnic harmony would not be found wholly unacceptable.

Then began the most lugubrious chant that it has ever been my lot to hear; but that notwithstanding, our hostess seemed to derive unbounded satisfaction from listening to it. Lest we should do a grave injustice to her musical taste, however, let us charitably suppose that the admiration she so freely expressed was intended to apply to the pious merit of the words of the precious compositions, and to that alone.

The first couple of numbers of what proved to be a rather extensive repertoire had to be repeated several times at Mrs. Wingford's request, and while this part of the dismal performance was progressing, Mary flitted about uneasily, awaiting an opportunity to claim her mother's attention. This presented itself when at length the Bishop paused in his singing to make some general remarks on the additional beauty which sacred words always lent to music, and on the exceeding value of such harmony when used as a soul awakener by persons qualified to give it proper expression.

When his egotistic observations on these subjects came to a conclusion, and before he had time to make a definite selection of the next hymn to be sung, Mary Wingford succeeded in getting her mother to withdraw on some pretext; and as Mac almost immediately followed in their wake, I was left to endure the infliction alone.

Fortunately I was not called upon to submit to it for very long, for Bob appeared upon the scene before the fourth composition had been repeated more than once or twice, and grasping the situation without an effort, carried me off to his library.

"It is no pleasure to you to sit there and listen to that man's execrable efforts, I know," he said, as we went; "and as he also cannot but be aware of the fact, it delights him to have you there, so that he may make you miserable. That is the method he always adopts when he wants, as he constantly does, to drive myself, and any friends I may venture to invite to spend the evening, beyond earshot of the drawing-room."

Wingford was delighted to hear of the untruthful statement to which the Bishop committed himself at dinner; was disinclined to attach any importance to the latter's boast about his possession of filial affection, believing it to be insincere and made for a purpose; and was very much distressed to hear, after I had told him of my lifelong passion for his sister

Bessie, that she had been coerced that morning into giving a promise which implied that she would consent to become Walter Penwith's wife.

"As I have already told you, poor mother looks upon the fellow as little less than a saint," he said, brightening up after a little time; "but still it is quite possible that she would change her views if she heard what you have to say, for you were always a prime favourite of hers. At any rate, no harm can come of making the experiment, so far as I can see, and if you take my advice you will do so at once."

I was in the act of assuring him that it was my intention to do as he suggested as soon as Mary could procure me a private interview with her mother, when that young lady appeared in person, her slender waist encircled by Mac's arm, and her cheeks suffused with blushes.

The prospective bridegroom announced their formal engagement; both received our warmest congratulations, and thereupon the bride-elect fled from the room in a state of bashful confusion.

"I have very little knowledge of affairs connected with the tender passion, it is true," Bob said, smiling benignly on Mac and myself; "but upon my word, I cannot help thinking that for rapidity of action in the domain of love, you two fellows are simply unapproachable."

"Act up to your reputation by interviewing Mrs.

Wingford without a moment's delay," Mac briskly demanded of me. "You could not possibly choose a better time to make your claim, for she is in the best of good-humour, and Mary has promised to see that you will not be interrupted."

No persuasion being necessary to induce me to adopt this suggestion, I instantly hurried from the room, and with resolute step hastened to where I was told the arbitress of my destiny was to be found.

in such a mood as to act in a way that would be calculated to blast not only my life, but her daughter's also! I could not, I believe, be fairly accused of ordinarily evincing an over-sanguine disposition, and yet here I was to be found overlooking the very obvious fact that her mood might change at any moment. It was therefore with a feeling of great confidence and self-satisfaction that I took the seat to which she waved me, and composed myself for the performance of the important task I had in hand.

"You have come to rejoice with me over the approaching marriage of Mac and Mary," she began, "and for that I have to thank you very much. I am quite sure that no one, not even I, will hail the auspicious event with more genuine pleasure. We must carefully guard against investing it with an importance greater than any event of this life should be invested with, however, and it was in search of strength to enable me to do this that you found me engaged when you entered. It is to the Good Book I go alike for consolation when troubled of spirit, and for correction when I feel in danger of developing pride through an excess of joy; and if you have not been in the habit of doing likewise in the past, let me implore you not to neglect doing so in the future."

Here she proceeded to read several extracts from

CHAPTER XVI

THE good wishes for the success of my mission which Bob and Mac called out to me as I left them precipitately with the object of seeking Mrs. Wingford and claiming Bessie's hand, were still ringing in my ears when I arrived at the pretty parlour occupied by the former lady, and in response to an invitation which followed my firm but deferential knock, I entered. I could see at a glance that my friend Mac had not overstated the case when he described our hostess as being in the best of good-humour, for her countenance literally beamed with excessive joy as she ceased poring over a well-thumbed and plethoric volume which lay before her, and glanced at me over the gold-rimmed spectacles which I remembered having seen her wear in my early youth.

Surely, I thought, she could not be so cruel while

the sacred tome to which she referred, extracts undoubtedly embodying precepts of a very high moral and philosophic value, but having no direct bearing whatever on the case to which she applied them with such an assumption of authority; and while she was engaged in doing this I experienced the utmost difficulty in preserving a decorous bearing, not because her quotations were inapplicable, but owing to the mirth-provoking method she adopted in her efforts to impress me with their applicability.

First of all she would read the passage to which she wished to direct my attention in a voice somewhat resembling that which she ordinarily used, and then in a solemn, monotonous drawl she would repeat it two or three times very slowly, holding her head on one side like a listening parrot as she spoke, and shaking a finger warningly at me after every word she uttered.

I succeeded in passing creditably through the ordeal, however, and was about to launch out into a statement of my claim to Bessie's hand, when another subject suggested itself to her, and she proceeded to make certain comments thereon which had a tendency to embarrass me to a certain extent.

"I gathered from the young couple before they left me just now, and that, too, with a very great deal of pleasure," she continued, "that the girls have

very good grounds for hoping that Mac and yourself may be persuaded to join the mission before long in an active capacity. It will indeed be good news to hear, and I hope to do so soon, that their hopes have been realized; for your assistance could not be otherwise than beneficial to the movement, and the fact of your connection with it could not fail to confer priceless spiritual blessings on yourselves."

As I very much feared would eventually be the case, she here entered upon a long and dreary eulogium concerning the merits of the mission's founder, bestowing many and very warm encomiums on the objects he had in view, and pointing out with pride in how very high a degree his aims and general conduct were worthy of being emulated.

I was beginning to fear that I should not get an opportunity of pleading my cause with her after all, unless I elected to rudely interrupt her, which was of course a distasteful alternative, when she made some reference to the holy sense of satisfaction which a person experienced after having conferred happiness on others; and then I saw the chance so impatiently watched for.

"You cannot imagine, for example," she said, "how unspeakably happy I feel at the present moment in the knowledge that I have been the means of conferring happiness on your friend Mac

and my darling daughter. It is a foretaste of heaven!"

"I have never had the good fortune to be in the enviable position of being able to contribute very much towards any one's felicity," I said; "but I am quite sure that if I had been I would have exercised the privilege to the utmost extent. Equally sure am I that you would permit no opportunity to escape for extracting refined and undiluted pleasure from so pleasant a source. Now, I have a suggestion to make which will furnish you with an opportunity to render several people, and two in particular, very, very happy indeed; and I have no doubt whatever, after what you have just said, that you will not hesitate to adopt it the moment it is made."

She cast a swift, inquiring glance in my direction when this point was reached; but she gave no sign of any kind to show that she had any suspicion of what was coming.

"Indeed?" she said, with a benevolent smile. "And pray what may be the nature of your suggestion? I cannot imagine how I could do any more in that direction than I have already done to-day."

"Sanction my marriage with Bessie, whom I have loved to distraction ever since I became capable of loving any one," I replied passionately, "and you will accomplish all that I have said."

She started violently on hearing Bessie's name, and her manner, which had hitherto been expressive of cordial geniality, instantly underwent a change to repellent frigidity.

"That is quite impossible," she answered, in hard, unsympathetic tones. "My daughter Bessie is already the affianced bride of another; and having made that announcement, I hope I have said all that is necessary to be said on the subject, and that you will see the propriety of never referring to the matter again."

"The importance of the subject is far and away too vital to permit of its being dismissed in such an offhand manner as that, my dear Mrs. Wingford," I told her solemnly; "and as I have it on the best authority that the only step your daughter has so far taken towards affiancing herself to any one consists in her having given you a promise that she would marry whomsoever you wished, I must respectfully ask that you let me show that my claim to her hand is infinitely superior to any that could possibly be put forward."

Here followed a long statement of the facts which I considered should weigh in my favour, and as strongly embellished for the occasion as it was possible for me to produce them.

I commenced by asking her to cast her memory back to the time when in the days of our happy

childhood Bessie and I were inseparable playmates; reminded her of how constantly we were thrown together socially after those days had fled; enlarged on the intensity of passion which was the inevitable result of this intercourse, and the peculiar feelings by which I was influenced in preserving silence on the subject for so long a time; told of the dreadful suffering I underwent when the news reached me which made me think I had lost her for ever, and of the shattered state of my spirit from that hour until soon after my arrival in Blestland; and then dwelt on the impossibility of describing the great joy with which I was filled on the previous morning, on finding that the girl whom I loved better far than I loved my life was still in the flesh, and unfettered too by marital ties.

From certain signs of impatience which she manifested, it was easy to see, before I had proceeded very far, that her heart was thoroughly steeled against me; and the farther I went, and the more earnest and pathetic I became, the more impatience she exhibited.

“To lose her now, and especially by such a means as that which you propose,” I said in conclusion, “would inflict on me a more terrible blow still than that which nearly deprived me of reason when I lost her before; and surely you cannot be so pitiless as to consign me to such a doom as that implies?”

And then again, should it unfortunately happen that my fate is a matter of indifference to you, I refuse to believe that you could ever nerve yourself to act so cruelly as to force an obnoxious union on a loving daughter! You could never harden your heart sufficiently to deliver her into a bondage to which death would be preferable, let the consequences be what they might! Endeavour to realize what it must be to condemn any human being to a living death; and when you have done so, the idea of so treating one's own flesh and blood, especially a helpless girl, will appear before your mind's eye in all its native repugnance, and Bessie will soon be free to follow her own inclination, which is the right, the proper, the *natural* course for her to follow under such circumstances.”

The only apparent effect which this appeal had was that it gradually increased her excitement and irritability, until at length she exhibited very decided signs of being about to swoon; and when these came under my notice I promptly prepared to summon assistance, but was called upon in a feeble voice to desist and procure her a glass of water which was close at hand.

The quarter of an hour which I spent sheepishly regarding her as she fanned herself wearily, and occasionally sipped the cooling liquid and sighed complainingly, was very far from being an enviable

one; and when at the expiration of that time I made an attempt to withdraw from her presence, as she seemed to have completely recovered, and I had abandoned all hope of being able to prevail upon her to alter her determination, I was peevishly ordered to remain where I was, and give ear to some final remarks she had to make on the subject under discussion, and from which she hoped I would derive some profit.

"I am very sorry indeed to find that you have contracted the very impolite habit of using strong language since I knew you on Earth, you wicked boy," she commenced chidingly; "and now that you have seen the effect that it is likely to produce, it is to be hoped that you will restrain yourself from using it in the future, especially in my presence. Now, before bringing this interview to a close, I wish you to clearly understand the position, so that you may see the utter futility of pursuing the subject which you have broached this evening any farther. And first of all let me assure you that I have no sympathy whatever with the sentimental aspect of the case on which you wholly rely. You talk about it being the natural and proper course for my daughter to adopt to follow her own inclination; and from any such view as that I entirely dissent, as every child of mine would also do, I am sure. They have been too soundly taught the wholesome lesson

inculcated by my own parents, which was that it is always wrong for young people to follow the dictates of their personal desires without the full approval of those to whom they owe obedience, to think of subscribing to any such doctrine as that. When I entered into the holy bonds of matrimony I did so at the dictation of my parents, and somewhat reluctantly too, owing to the fact that I was not old enough to distinguish the realities of life from its unrealities; but so far from our union producing unhappy results it did just the reverse, for our married life was as rationally and serenely happy as I am sure Mr. and Mrs. Penwith's will be by and by. I am firmly convinced that to no other cause can so much marital misery be attributed as to that vicious practice in which people of immature judgment and imperfect discipline are prone to indulge, of contracting marriage for no more substantial reason than that they imagine themselves mutually attracted towards each other; and for that reason I rejoice to know that Bessie and her future husband regard each other in a sober, common-sense way, and with a pleasing absence of that sentimental gush which is so apt to take wings after marriage, always leaving a more or less bitter after-taste. It is so immeasurably better to have even the possibility of being agreeably surprised by the unexpected discovery of some trait of character, the existence of which was

not suspected, than to be cruelly and completely disillusionized when too late to retrace one's steps."

"But surely Bessie and I have known each other sufficiently long to have formed a pretty accurate estimate of one another's dispositions?" I exclaimed indignantly. "You must admit that she has had an infinitely better opportunity of judging me than she has had of gleaning particulars of the man's character whom you wish her to marry, and who is, comparatively speaking, a stranger to her."

"I cannot admit anything of the kind," she replied, "and for this reason: you were both too young when you were thrown together on Earth to be capable of making reliable observations in matters of that kind; but even if it were otherwise, you must remember that you and she were in a state of transition then, and that the actual formation of your characters has taken place since. It would indeed be strange if in the process of development which has been going on in the meantime, no change of disposition or temperament had taken place in either of you; so that in reality you can only be said to have known each other since last evening!"

I was sorely tempted to make some caustic comments on the fact that although this odd kind of reasoning applied with equal force to Mary and Mac, it had not the effect of causing her to refuse her consent to their marriage; but on second consider-

ation I decided to refrain from doing so, as I could see clearly that nothing that I could possibly advance would have any good effect, and it would show a want of discretion to risk producing the opposite of that.

"There are one or two points to which I would like to call your attention before I conclude, and with the grave importance of which I am particularly anxious to impress you," she went on to say. "The privilege of visiting this great but spiritually benighted land has not been granted to you without a motive; and as to what that motive was there can be no doubt whatever. The duty of doing the utmost that lies in your power towards spreading truth and diffusing light among the heathen peoples of Blestland has been imposed upon you; and woe be to you if you neglect it. And it so happens that it lies in your power to do a very great deal, as I propose to show you. By choosing a wife from among the daughters of the soil and imbuing her with the saving faith that is in you, as you naturally would, the very strong probability, almost amounting to certainty, is, that you would be instrumental in converting all the nations on the face of the planet; for let the icy barrier of indifference which the unhappy creatures have presented to the mission be but undermined ever so little, and the salvation of countless thousands of our fellow-creatures would

inevitably follow. Think of it, just think of it; and when you succeed in fully realizing it, you will never cease to give thanks and praise for the inestimable blessing that has been providentially bestowed upon you!"

This, and a great deal more intended to show what an exceptionally fortunate and highly-favoured individual I ought to consider myself in being unable to secure Bessie for wife, I had to listen to with as much patience as I could command; but when at length she invited me to join her in prayer and praise I could suffer the torture no longer, so frankly assuring her that I was in too irreverent a mood to accept the invitation, I abruptly withdrew from her presence.

Hatless and full of misery, I rushed out into the grounds in the hope that a little quiet reflection beneath the unheeding stars would enable me to compose myself sufficiently to permit of my giving a rational account of what had taken place to Wingford and Mac; but my brain was in such a whirl that I found it impossible to realize anything properly, except the dreadful fact that a gulf which seemed at the moment impassable yawned cruelly between Bessie and myself.

The strident notes of the Bishop reached my ears with a distinctness which depended on whether I was in the act of approaching or receding from the

house, as I walked backwards and forwards along an avenue whose silence was only broken by my foot-falls, the timorous rustling of leaves, and the occasional twittering of birds as they flitted from branch to branch; and if Mrs. Wingford could only have heard the words to which I gave audible expression several times concerning the singer, his song, and the mission which he used for his own purpose with such marked success, I fear she would have had very much stronger reason for objecting to the strength of my language than she had when she rebuked me previously.

It was while I was engaged in dramatically delivering one of these forceful maledictions, with streaming hair and wildly-waving arms, that Wingford rather startled me by suddenly appearing before me with a look on his handsome face that clearly showed he had grave doubts about my sanity, as he might well have under the circumstances. He was quickly followed by Mac and Mary, and it was easy to see that they too strongly suspected me of being demented.

"Things are not quite so bad with me as you seem to fear," I said gloomily; "but still, they are quite bad enough to satisfy my most deadly enemy. I have been driven to the very verge of madness to-night; but I managed somehow to keep from crossing the indefinable line that separates sanity from insanity."

Here Wingford took me gently by the arm, and in soothing accents asked me to return to the library, where I could tell them all about it at my leisure; and thither we all repaired forthwith.

I could not complain of want of attention on the part of my auditors when, after having refreshed myself with a much-needed draught of an invigorating liquid with which I was promptly presented by Bob on arrival at his sanctum, I proceeded to detail what took place at my unsuccessful interview with Mrs. Wingford; and before many sentences were uttered, all three were reduced to a state of misery almost as abject as my own.

During the progress of my narrative Mary's gaze remained fixed on a resplendent star which could be seen through an adjacent window on the far horizon; but although she sat, all the time I was speaking, with averted head, signs were not wanting that she wept silently and copiously as she listened.

When my depressing account came to a conclusion, there were murmured expressions of sympathy from Wingford, and a few hurried words of whispered encouragement from Mac; but Mary neither moved nor spoke.

A gloomy silence, which nobody displayed any inclination to break for a long time, followed; but before it had time to become quite unbearable Mary sprang suddenly to her feet, and repressing a sob

with a mighty effort, made an announcement which caused a very considerable sensation.

"If Bessie's life is to be wrecked in this way, I can never be otherwise than unhappy in the future," she said; "and as I like you far too well, Mac, to doom you to a union with a miserable being, I must ask you to consider our brief engagement at an end. I did not arrive at this conclusion without a struggle, and I am sure it is the correct one; so, good-bye, good-bye!"

Before the person most deeply interested in this quixotic deliverance had time to utter a word of remonstrance, the girl had disappeared; and we were left to ponder in astonishment on the unforeseen complication which her short statement provided.

That it was not only possible but highly probable that this could be done by a successful application of the test suggested by Mr. Kniggs, he stoutly maintained; and his hopefulness was so infectious that he soon converted Mac and myself to his way of thinking on the subject.

"If anything were necessary to prove the necessity for exercising the most scrupulous care in keeping uncle and nephew out of one another's sight until they meet here to-morrow night, the events that have transpired this evening would amply supply it," he remarked; "but nothing was required to prove it, and so it behoves us all to leave nothing undone which it is in our power to do, in order to bring the Kniggs scheme to a successful issue. It seems perfectly certain that it would be quite useless to take any further steps towards endeavouring to induce mother to alter her decision, at any rate for the present; and that being so, I think the wisest course for you to adopt is to let matters rest as they are until we see what result the meeting between Mr. Penwith and his adopted son does actually produce. There is excellent reason for looking forward hopefully to the event; for you must bear in mind that even if the Bishop should acknowledge the relationship, we can still convict him of untruthfulness, a thing which poor

CHAPTER XVII

It would be difficult indeed to imagine a more woe-begone picture than Wingford, Mac, and I presented for several minutes subsequent to Mary taking an abrupt departure, after having discharged a rhetorical bomb in our midst.

So dumfounded were we by the latest development in current events, that for a time we were unable to do more than stare stupidly from one to another, and shake our heads in a grave and deprecating way that bespoke our utter helplessness and discomfiture.

The first to recover his self-possession was Wingford, and he at once proceeded to remind us that the case was not to be regarded as hopeless so long as the possibility of inveigling the Bishop into revealing his true character to Mrs. Wingford remained.

mater abhors even more strongly, if that be possible, than do the girls themselves."

Every phase and detail of the subject, which was an all-absorbing one to us, having been thoroughly threshed out in course of time, Mac and I deputed Wingford to say our adieus to the ladies; and then taking leave of himself, we went forth into the starlit night in quite a buoyant, almost joyous mood. This pleasant condition of mind was not destined to be of very long duration, however; for soon after my withdrawal from the influence of Wingford's personality, my fatal tendency towards examining the darkest side of every picture asserted itself, and the discovery of grave reasons for discontent quickly followed. It was no fault of Mac's that I relapsed into a state of dejectedness, for as we wended our way homewards he continued to dwell in a most extravagantly sanguine way on the prospects there were of figuratively annihilating our common enemy on the morrow; and he derived so much evident pleasure from the contemplation of the word-pictures which he so rapidly produced, that it seemed a pity to do or say anything which would have the effect of diverting his thoughts into another channel.

I found it impossible to refrain from telling him of the fresh fears I entertained, however; and the

consequence was that in a minute or two he also was reduced to a pitiable state of mental wretchedness.

"It is all very well, I suppose, to indulge in the glowing anticipations that we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by during the last hour or so," I said; "but the truth is that when the reed to which we are now clinging comes to be calmly examined, it will be found altogether too slender to be worthy of reliance. Supposing that the Bishop will decide to deny all knowledge of his uncle when he meets him; what then? Mr. Kniggs will be at hand to vouch for the relationship, it is true; but what weight can his testimony be expected to carry, seeing that he is as complete a stranger to Mrs. Wingford as is the foster-father of her protégé? Then again, presuming that he chooses to admit the claim which his uncle is to put forward, as he probably will, I cannot imagine a schemer like him being so devoid of resource as to be unable to account for any discrepancies which the old man's shabby appearance might suggest. There is not the slightest use in us buoying ourselves up with hopes that common-sense shows us are certainly doomed to be shattered; so let us look the danger that confronts us fairly and fearlessly in the face, and try to devise some means of overcoming it if possible."

"I don't wish to be understood as meaning to

upbraid you, old fellow," he replied, after a long silence, and as we were about to part for the night; "but I really do wish that you had not disturbed my simple faith. The doubts you have awakened are not quite calculated to hasten my repose. Good-night; good-night!"

The evil influence which the doubts referred to had on the night's rest of both was very apparent when we met at a somewhat late breakfast on the following morning; but although each could not fail to notice the haggard appearance of the other, the matter was allowed to pass without any comment from either.

Having partaken very sparingly of a very tempting meal, it was suggested by one of us that we should go for a stroll through one of the magnificent public gardens with which the great city abounded; and thither we went accordingly, in anything but a rapturous mood.

Floral and other beauties we found in great profusion, and the dulcet melody of rejoicing song-birds was to be heard on every hand; but they failed to attract any but the most cursory attention from Mac and myself, as we wandered listlessly among scenes of enchantment sorrowfully brooding on the sadness of our fate.

This we continued to do until about noon, when,

in accordance with an arrangement which we had made on the previous evening, we proceeded to the railway-station to meet Mr. Penwith and his friend Kniggs, and convey them stealthily to their temporary home.

Very soon after having arrived at our destination the train conveying those we expected glided into the station, and the beaming faces of our recently-made friends could be seen at the windows of one of the cars, from which they saluted us with wildly-waving handkerchiefs as soon as we came into view.

As we approached them, it could be seen that they had a lady for a travelling companion; and that she was not merely a casual acquaintance could easily be gathered from the amount of attention bestowed upon her by the gentlemen, but more especially by Mr. Kniggs.

As Mac and I rightly conjectured, the stranger, to whom we were presently proudly introduced by her brother-in-law, proved to be none other than Mrs. Plantagenet Kniggs, a kindly-faced and rather handsome woman of middle age, who evidently regarded my friend and myself with quite a large degree of motherly interest, owing, no doubt, to the highly-coloured pictures that were presented to her concerning our recent exploits and adventures.

Without waiting to deposit his share of the multifarious parcels, etc., which the widow deemed necessary for the journey in the vehicle intended for her use, Mr. Penwith broke forth into anxious inquiries respecting his nephew; and on learning from Mac that we had met that interesting personage, he called his informant aside, and after having plied him with various questions bearing upon the health and general movements of his adopted son, proceeded to treat him to sundry reminiscences of which his "boy" was always the central figure.

Nothing could have pleased Mr. Kniggs better than this proceeding on his friend's part; for he was anxious to hear if anything of importance had transpired during their absence in relation to the Bishop, and it gave me an opportunity to tell him what there was to tell.

The old gentleman was highly delighted to hear of the lying boast in which Mr. Walter Penwith allowed himself to indulge concerning his uncle's social position on Earth; and the lady's sympathies were deeply touched when I told of the very decided repulse I had received at Mrs. Wingford's hands, and the avowed cause thereof, and also of Mary's peculiar action in cancelling her engagement with Mac as a consequent event.

"I suppose it is a very wicked thing to do," she said; "but I cannot help hoping that the investigations I am here to make, in consequence of the unfavourable report received from my brother-in-law about the young man, may prove that he has not been quite an immaculate steward. It is more than probable, indeed, that he has not; for I know now that he can be guilty of falsehood. He won my confidence to such an extent that I entrusted him with the investment of a considerable amount of money, chiefly because he proved to me when first we met that he knew my late husband's brother; but with gross untruthfulness he represented Mr. Kniggs, not as his uncle's partner, but as that gentleman's mining overseer, or something of that sort."

I could not help hoping, too, that my mendacious enemy might prove to be an unjust steward, and said so frankly, after which I went on to explain that the pronounced nature of my uncharitable attitude towards the man was due to the circumstances which I had advanced to Mac with such depressing effects on the previous night.

"You take altogether too gloomy a view of our prospects of success, I assure you," Mr. Kniggs told me, with a confident smile, "and I hope to prove the fact amply before many hours have passed.

Because of certain terms of affection which he used in speaking of his uncle, you seem to take it for granted that the Bishop, as you call him, will not deliberately disown his foster-father; but in doing so you may rest assured that you are entirely mistaken. The hypocritical remarks upon which you base your opinion were used for the purpose of impressing Miss Bessie Wingford and her mother, and must not be regarded as a genuine expression of what he really felt, as you would readily understand if you knew the man's nature as thoroughly as I do. He will promptly disavow all knowledge of my old friend the moment he is confronted with him; certainly scout the idea of ever having seen me before in his life; and probably conclude by threatening in the blustering fashion characteristic of the man to give us both in charge of the police for conspiracy. Then, and not till then, Mrs. Kniggs will appear upon the scene; and at the instant that she does so, the reign of Mr. Walter Penwith will come to an inglorious end in the Wingford household, and the outlook for all you young people, who are so sorely distressed at present, will become as bright and cheerful as heart could wish."

These words of encouragement were spoken in such a trustful, breezy fashion, that before we left the railway premises he had succeeded in inspiring

me with as much confidence as he professed to possess himself; and when soon afterwards he found an opportunity of having a private chat with Mac on the subject, he experienced no difficulty whatever in reassuring him as well.

dition of society that permitted their existence in particular.

It was amusing to observe the trouble to which those to whom he addressed his distasteful observations went in order, if possible, to make believe that they were paying no attention whatever to his remarks; but if they thought that he was to be deterred by their make-believe from availing himself of an opportunity which he might never get again, they were very much mistaken. He had five representative capitalists more nearly at his mercy than he was likely ever to have them again; and he was determined that the occasion should not be allowed to pass without their being still further enlightened on the subject of the adverse opinions he held of their class and its methods.

Herein lay another reason why the plutocratic members of the party should welcome our arrival in their midst, since our advent was certain to have the effect of diverting the attention of their merciless tormentor; and the reception we received at their hands was correspondingly gracious and flattering.

We did not, of course, require to be told that they were all excessively impatient to hear what progress had been made towards securing their return to the homes from which they had been so very mysteriously spirited away; but Mr. Cringe lost

CHAPTER XVIII

SOON after depositing Mr. Kniggs and Mr. Penwith safely at their allotted quarters, Zeen and Bob Wingford put in an appearance; and we all lunched together subsequently, and prior to redeeming the promise to visit them which we had made on the previous day to Mr. Cringe and his party.

On paying the visit referred to, after having taken the utmost precautionary measures to guard against the possibility of the Bishop becoming aware of the arrival of Mr. Kniggs and his uncle from Earth before we wished him to do so, we found all the members of the party visited assembled in a sort of large summer-house in the hotel grounds, where, raucous of voice and horrent of aspect, little Mr. Fussi was wildly declaiming against the tyranny, selfishness, and unscrupulousness of capitalists in general, and the rotten con-

not a moment in acquainting us with the fact as soon as we entered the place of meeting.

By a sort of tacit understanding the duty of spokesman was relegated entirely to Wingford; who, in his anxiety to break the news he had to tell as gently as possible, proceeded to furnish a reply in vague, hesitating, and evasive terms, which had the effect of arousing Mr. Cringe's suspicion, and eventually kindling his wrath.

"Excuse me for interruptin' you, my good sir," he said, glowering savagely at Bob; "but I want to assure you that we are none of us in a temper to listen even with a small show of patience to a long rigmarole on nothin' in particular. Oblige us by sayin' in a plain, straightforward way, whether you can arrange for our return, an' when. If it does not lie in your power, or you are unwillin' to do us this service, say so frankly, so that we may make other arrangements."

"I am sorry to say that it does not lie in my power to do as you wish," came the reply, after a little more hesitation; "nor is it possible to arrange elsewhere for effecting the purpose you have in view."

"Not possible to arrange elsewhere?" he repeated. "What do you mean by that, may I ask? It looks as if we were about to be made the victims of trickery, if not treachery. Now, which is it? Out with it, like a man!"

"No one has the remotest intention of making you victims of any kind, I solemnly assure you once more, Mr. Cringe," Bob told him gravely. "When I tell you that it is an utter impossibility to make the arrangements you desire, I merely tell you what is an absolute fact, which I wished to communicate without inflicting any greater shock than I could help. It is just as impossible to reach the earth from this planet as it is to reach the sun from either!"

Had a thunderbolt fallen in their midst it could not have created greater consternation than this pregnant announcement created.

Although it could be plainly seen that Mr. Cringe's fears were as completely aroused as those of any member of the party except Mr. Fussi, who took matters very quietly on hearing what Wingford had to say, yet he presently gave evidence of entertaining some doubt about the genuineness of the astounding assertion by hailing, in his old dictatorial way, the hotel manager, who happened to be passing at the time with some friends, and questioning him eagerly as to its truthfulness.

The courteous reply of the genial Boniface would seem to have dissipated whatever remnant of doubt he may have had pretty promptly and completely; for before sufficient time had elapsed to permit of

many words being exchanged between them, Mr. Cringe was seen to reel ominously as if intoxicated, and afterwards fall to the ground in what proved to be a severe convulsive fit of an epileptic nature.

The paroxysm lasted a considerable time; and when at length it passed away, and the sufferer was tenderly conveyed to his room, he was pronounced to be somewhat weak, but likely to be rapidly restored to his usual vigorous condition of health.

During the progress of his restoration the members of our party, ably assisted by little Fussi, devoted all their attention to endeavouring to soothe the distressed mental condition of the remainder of the bereaved capitalists, and the task was found to be a most difficult one.

The old usurer proved quite inconsolable, and howled until he could howl no longer, in grievous lamentation of the lot that had befallen him.

What, he asked in his broken English, and addressing no one in particular, in most doleful accents, would become of his poor wife and family, now that they were left to the mercy of the cruel world, with no one to look after their interests? They would be robbed, robbed, robbed! That is what would happen to them, he felt perfectly sure, should they decide to continue the business; and should they elect to relinquish it, the same fate inevitably awaited his

poor customers, to whom it always afforded him so much pleasure to show kindness and consideration!

Mr. Fussi ventured to hint to him gently that there was little cause to fret on account of his family, considering the very handsome provision he had made for them, and that he thought the customers referred to might safely be trusted to rub along somehow without his disinterested assistance; but he stubbornly persisted in wailing, and conjuring up all sorts of fanciful pictures of the probable means that would be used by designing people to disperse his hard-earned fortune, when they found that it was deprived of the benefit of his watchful care.

Another reflection that troubled him sorely, and which he continued to repeat aloud in a whining voice over and over again, was what was to become of him in a strange land and destitute of capital; and every time the rather pertinent question was repeated it elicited sighs and groans of anguish from each of the others.

Wingford and Zeen gave most earnest assurances that no free citizen of Blestland, such as they would be thenceforward, need have any fear of ever having to contend against absolute want, since it was a recognized function of the State to see that every one able and willing to work was supplied with

an adequate chance of earning a livelihood, and that those unable but willing to labour were suitably protected; but promises and protestations proved of no avail whatever, for they unanimously and flatly refused to be comforted.

It was at length suggested that our efforts to console them should be abandoned as hopeless until some future occasion; and the suggestion would probably have been acted upon at once, had not little Fussi asked and obtained permission to make a special appeal to Sir David Muntch to exercise that fortitude in time of tribulation which is commonly supposed to be the peculiar attribute of the genuine aristocrat.

"I am exceedingly surprised to see you, of all men, giving way in this manner," he said. "Even if the misfortune which has overtaken him was infinitely greater than it really is, I should expect to see Sir David Muntch display a heroism worthy of emulation. An exhibition of weakness, under what I admit are rather trying circumstances, might possibly be viewed without astonishment if given by a plebeian like myself; but when it is given by one possessed of the chivalric distinction of which you are the proud possessor, it would indeed be odd if it did not excite surprise. My opinion of the old nobility is not a very exalted one, I am free to

confess, and it never was; but nothing can be more certain than that your conduct at the present moment does not tend to elevate your class in my estimation. If there was anything to be gained by it, the blubbing display might perhaps be held excusable; but there is absolutely nothing whatever. There is, on the other hand, something to be lost in the shape of valuable time; and that is being wasted, as I understand from these gentlemen that they are anxious to enlighten us on subjects connected with our future home of which it is well that we should have a general knowledge, and they cannot get an opportunity to do so owing to this useless repining."

These remarks, vigorously delivered, had an excellent effect on the man to whom they were particularly addressed; who, after muttering something about his emotion being a natural expression of grief on realizing that he had been torn for ever from all he held dear, frankly admitted the futility of whimpering, and expressed himself ready and willing to hear whatever information we had to impart on the subject referred to by Mr. Fussi.

The force of Sir David's example operated so beneficially on all the others, that before many more minutes had elapsed they were sufficiently calm and reasonable to accompany us indoors, where it was

decided to retire after having ascertained that Mr. Cringe had so far recovered as to be able to receive us, and that he had expressed himself anxious to be still further enlightened with regard to his unhappy position.

CHAPTER XIX

THE afternoon had advanced considerably towards its close before a fitting opportunity to make a statement concerning the nature of the leading laws and customs of Blestland, for the benefit of the latest immigrant addition to its population, presented itself to Bob Wingford, who acted throughout the trying interval with the most praiseworthy patience and forbearance. On the party under his guidance being ushered into the apartment wherein we were told Mr. Cringe awaited our arrival, we found that the occupant was not only more than usually ferocious in appearance, owing to the bloodshot condition of his eyes, and the very scraggy state to which he had reduced his beard and whiskers before he could be prevented, during the early stages of his recent paroxysm, but that he was also more than ordinarily peevish, and not very likely to be easily managed.

"Perhaps I may be informed what compensation I am to be allowed by the governin' authorities of this precious place for the gross and unnatural outrage to which I have been subjected?" he roared, before we had time to be seated. "I have been robbed of family and fortune an' brought here against my will, an' I'd like to know what I'm goin' to get in return. Nothin' that it is in their power to give me could adequately compensate me for the injury I have been called upon to sustain; but I am curious to know what the official estimate of my loss is likely to be, that is, supposin' that it has not been already fixed."

"As I stated a while ago to your friends here, you will all be placed by the State in a position to render yourselves perfectly independent of every one, as of course you would desire to be," Wingford told him quietly; "and in addition to that, you will have the inestimable advantage of spending the remainder of your days among a thoroughly happy and contented people, and in a land that is free in the true sense of the word, and not merely in name."

"It can't be any freer than the land I have just been dragged away from in such a mysterious an' outrageous manner," was the reply bawled forth. "I had enough liberty there to enable me to build up a great business an' amass a vast fortune. Everybody else had the same; so I'd like to know how

anybody could want any greater freedom than that?"

"Precisely the same kind of liberty existed here at one time," Bob asserted gravely; "but in course of time it transpired that the people began to view the thing with very grave suspicion. This eventually resolved itself into a certainty that the alleged blessing was not true liberty at all, but just the reverse; and then reform followed as a matter of course. As soon as it came to be clearly recognized that it would be impossible for private individuals, either separately or collectively, to amass large fortunes out of businesses of any kind where virtual slavery did not exist, then it could be seen that certain changes in the laws of the nation would surely be required if her entire people were to be made truly free."

"Pooh! What of that?" Mr. Cringe exclaimed testily. "Your knowledge of modern history must be scant indeed if you do not know that every civilized nation on earth abolished slavery long ago."

"You must have heard it proclaimed thousands of times in stirring song, that the stock from which you have sprung 'never, never shall be slaves,'" Sir David said pompously; "and I am sure that you could no more listen to the gallant strains without experiencing a feeling of honest pride than I could."

"It certainly did cause me some such emotion,"

Bob admitted; "but since my arrival in Blestland I have learned sufficient to enable me to see how entirely opposed to truth the sentiments referred to really are. I know now that if the words 'ever, ever have been' were substituted for those used, so as to convert the boast into a lament, that particular part of the popular refrain would exactly describe the condition of the world's workers everywhere."

This statement was promptly branded as untrue, and also as socialistic rubbish of a dangerous type, by Mr. Cringe; received with contemptuous smiles by his friends; and applauded with the most astonishing vigour by little Fussi.

"It is true, of course, that the civilized countries of the world have abolished that particular form of slavery which sanctioned the conversion of a human being into a chattel, and a mighty amount of credit some of them lay claim to for the fact," Wingford continued calmly; "but what real good to humanity was wrought by that act, compared with what could be accomplished by emancipating the countless thousands of what I may be allowed to call indirect slaves, who groan for ever in a more cruel bondage in every division of the unhappy globe?"

"Oh, this is very fine indeed," sneered Mr. Cringe. "Very entertaining, an' very accurate as well. I have heard a good deal of bosh talked about the lot of the workin'-man in my time; but never before did

I hear the extravagant statement made that it is worse than the fate of the negro slaves of America used to be, for that I suppose is what is meant."

Deprecatory nods and shrugs were here indulged in by those who sympathized with Mr. Cringe's views generally, and again pitying smiles were ostentatiously exchanged between them; but the little Leveller gave such a vociferous and enthusiastic assent to the tenor of Wingford's remarks, that he incurred the grave displeasure of those from whom he differed, with the result that a verbal squabble promptly ensued, and had of course to be quelled before further progress could be made.

"You may consider the statement extravagant, Mr. Cringe, but it is perfectly true nevertheless," Wingford went on to say. "It was to the interest of those who owned the slaves you allude to, to see that the health and strength of their human chattels were fairly well preserved; and in order to accomplish that it was absolutely necessary to look to the adequacy of their food, clothing, and shelter; but no one except themselves has any particular interest in the physical welfare of the numberless half-starved, ill-clad, and often shelterless human beings who do not even possess the right to labour for their daily bread. But these poor creatures are by no means the only real but unrecognized slaves in the world. Every man, woman, and child who is compelled to share

the fruits of his or her labours with others, either directly or indirectly, is a slave pure and simple; and it was when this principle came to be clearly understood that reform was initiated here, and carried to a successful issue eventually."

"It seems strangely illogical to hold that because a man is poor, or has to work for his living, he is necessarily a bondman," Sir David said, in his superior way. "The inexorable conditions of life render it inevitable that many must be poor and most must work; but I cannot see how that universally acknowledged fact can be construed into a proof of the existence of slavery."

Mr. Cringe very emphatically announced his agreement with these observations, and went on to say sarcastically that it must be a nice place to live in, if such principles as he then heard found general acceptance in Blestland; but Wingford ignored his remarks, and proceeded to deal with those made by Sir David.

"The opinion held by those who instituted reform here seems to have been that the conditions of life depend very largely on the people themselves," he said; "and fortified by this conviction, they valiantly addressed themselves to the task of bringing about such reforms as would in their judgment have the effect of removing certain social incongruities which they found to exist, and which very closely resembled

those of which you and I have had practical experience in our native land. The first law which they succeeded in getting enacted, after a long and bitter struggle, had for its object the permanent abolition of direct slavery throughout the dominion; and having achieved that laudable end, they at once directed their attention towards the emancipation of the indirect slaves, who constituted an infinitely more numerous class, and whose condition was indeed in sad need of attention. It was of course admitted on all hands, except by those whose pockets were likely to be adversely affected, that the workers could never be relieved of their bondage while the stupendous power of capital remained unrestricted; but there was for a time a great diversity of opinion as to the best means to employ to secure this without inflicting injustice. They were all agreed as to the fact that *no human being has the semblance of a right to the unrestricted use of any power, be it derived from the possession of capital, physical or mental excellence, or any other source, so long as it is possible to use it to the disadvantage of others*; but the schemes which were propounded for depriving those who held such rights of their very unjust possession were numerous and varied to a great degree. An Act of Parliament was passed which placed a limit to the amount of interest chargeable for the use of money; but although its provisions were very rigidly and success-

fully enforced, it proved of but little value as an adjuster of social wrongs and inequalities. Experience eventually demonstrated *the utter absurdity of hoping to effect the reforms aimed at by regulating the return which it was possible to receive for capital invested as a loan, while the possibility remained of extorting an unlimited return from investments otherwise made;* and when the self-evident fact came to be sufficiently widely realized, a bill dealing with this phase of the subject in a comprehensive manner was at once introduced into the legislature, and this was followed by a desperate and long-continued struggle for supremacy which ended in favour of the masses."

Mr. Cringe's indignation was too terribly intense to permit of him making any comment on this, not so much perhaps on account of its distasteful nature, as because of the wild delight with which the statement was received by his political enemy, the Radical cordwainer.

The first to speak, indeed, after Wingford paused, was the old usurer, who, trembling in every limb, and with a countenance purple with anxiety, managed to stammer forth a question concerning the rate at which interest was legally fixed; and when the information was supplied, it proved so unsatisfactory to him, although it appeared eminently reasonable to Mac and myself, that he broke out again into great lamentation, and after indulging in

some strong language in a foreign tongue, he declared that his heart was broken, that he knew he must starve, and then shambled from the room, shedding copious tears as he went. He no longer had any interest in whatever information might yet be forthcoming.

"I am not quite sure that I understand the drift of your remarks," Sir David asserted. "You surely do not wish us to infer that there is a limit placed by law to the return which a man can receive from capital invested in business pursuits?"

"That is precisely what I wish you to infer," Bob said; "and I am quite sure that when you give the subject a little dispassionate consideration, you will freely admit that no more just and effectual means could be devised for dealing with the monopolistic evil, and that in no other way could the fullest possible proportion of the fruits of his labour be secured for the worker."

The displeasure of Mr. Cringe reached a height beyond which it was impossible for it to go when he heard these words; little Fussi, almost frantic with joy, ran from one to another, expressing wild surprise that the simple expedient had never occurred to himself or any of his *confrères*; and Mr. Bulgee, having announced his conviction that Blestland was the home of anarchy, and stated his inability to listen to the narration of any further acts of violence,

followed Old Benny's example by retiring, muttering gloomily as he left that all interest in life for him had departed for ever.

"The body politic must be in a deplorably chaotic condition that is governed by such an enactment as that," Sir David said gravely. "No one can be found, of course, foolish enough to invest capital in industrial and other undertakings, since there is no advantage to be gained by doing so?"

"A very decided advantage is to be gained by so doing, Sir David," Bob replied; "for between the amount of interest derivable from money lent to others for business purposes, and the maximum profit which the law allows those who embark in any business to conduct which it is necessary to employ human labour, there is a substantial margin which is in favour of the latter. Several of the great manufacturing establishments to which I had the honour of introducing you yesterday are conducted by enterprising capitalists with hired labour; but owing to the fact that *it is only where human beings are employed for profit-making purposes that the State interferes*, the great majority of Blestlandic industries are conducted on co-operative principles."

Yielding to the pressing demands of the highly-excited Mr. Fussi, Wingford next proceeded to give us some details concerning the operations of the law on the virtues of which he exhibited a decided

disposition to dwell lovingly; and every word he had to say was as attentively listened to by the indignant Mr. Cringe and the disgusted Sir David, as it was by Mac and myself, although they evidently wished to make us believe that the contrary was the case.

"To begin with, it is illegal for any one to employ another for the purpose of deriving a profit from his or her labour without being duly licensed by the State to do so," he said; "and during the currency of an employer's permit he is bound under certain penalties to furnish the Treasury periodically with sworn statements of his business transactions. In the event of these disclosing a profit greater than that allowed by law, the surplus becomes the property of the State."

"Oh, the tyranny of it, the tyranny of it!" was all that Mr. Cringe could trust himself to say.

"It is simply appalling to reflect that we are doomed to live in such a place for the rest of our lives," Sir David exclaimed. "The unfortunate people are evidently governed by despotic anarchists, and such a thing as liberty of the subject is unknown in the land."

"Every one is at perfect liberty to do as he likes here so long as he does not trespass on the rights of others," Wingford replied; "and it is because the capitalist clearly trespasses on the rights of the

worker when he annexes an unfair share of his earnings in return for the services rendered by his wealth, that the State steps in and protects the weak. It would be as grossly unjust to allow a man possessed of the great power which capital confers on its owner to use his strength without restriction, as it would be unfair to permit one possessed of great physical strength to use it against his fellow-men with impunity."

"You might argue from this moment till doomsday, but you could never make me believe that it is anything else than most scandalous tyranny to deprive a man of the right to do what he likes with his own," Sir David said angrily. "No despot of the darkest ages could have been guilty of a greater infringement of the principles of liberty than that, for a man might as well be deprived of his life as to be deprived of his liberty."

"No man ever had nor ever can have a right to do anything which might prejudicially affect others," Bob replied; "and for that reason no one should be at liberty to do absolutely what he likes with his own."

"Then I suppose you wish us to believe that a man acts prejudicially towards another," Sir David said, "when he provides him with employment and pays him the current rate of wages for his labour?"

"The capitalist does no injury to his fellows by

the mere act of giving them employment, of course," Wingford answered; "but when he takes advantage of their weakness to deprive them of an undue proportion of the fruits of their labour, which he cannot legally do here, he does them a very serious injustice."

Mr. Fussi became too excited at this point to remain silent any longer, and the consequence was that he broke forth into a most extravagant defence of the system described by our friend, and then proceeded with gusto and vigour to curse the monopolist and all his works.

vigour and incisiveness of the attack when it touched upon the class to which they recently belonged, and from the scathing nature of the terms he employed when impugning their long-cherished convictions on the subject with which he was dealing; but the impatience of Wingford, Mac, and myself was due to the fact that the time for our withdrawal was rapidly approaching, and the former could not get an opportunity of imparting certain other information which he said he was anxious to impart before he left, owing to the harassing conduct of the little Leveller. Congenial as the task undoubtedly was, however, it had to come to a termination sooner or later, and when at length the speaker talked himself into such a hoarse condition that it became possible for others to make remarks that would not be altogether inaudible, Sir David again proceeded to comment on the observations which had fallen from Wingford, and which had so violently startled himself and his friends.

“I think I understood you to say a while ago, Mr. Wingford, that there are some industrial concerns carried on here by private individuals with the assistance of hired labour,” he said. “It seems incredible that any one could be found who would take all the cares and anxieties inseparable from the conduct of business affairs on their shoulders for the sake of the extra interest to be obtained for capital

CHAPTER XX

WITH the exception of young Zeen, who seemed to derive a very considerable amount of amusement from the oratorical and other vagaries of the fussy little man, every one present was more or less irritated, but not always for the same reason, at having to listen to Mr. Fussi's stock whirlwind of abuse levelled against capital in its relation to labour under prevailing earthly conditions; but although the fact was made as plain to him as it possibly could be, he was too full of resentment against his former enemies to desist until he had thoroughly relieved his feelings, so that there was no alternative but to sit patiently by watching his vigorous and grotesque gestures, and wondering at his rugged fluency and unique powers of vituperation.

The annoyance of Sir David and his friends at having to submit to the infliction arose from the

so invested. It seems to me to be an absurdly inadequate return to allow a man for the exercise of that energy, and the employment of those business qualifications which are essential to success, especially where the amount of money invested is not very large."

"It would be unjust to insist on any free man giving his services for nothing under that or any other condition," Bob replied, "and for that reason every employer of human labour is permitted to credit himself in the statements furnished by him to the Treasury with such an amount as the official adjusters of such matters report his services towards the conduct of his business to be worth."

"Nothing could be fairer than that," shouted Mr. Fussi. "If any fault is to be found with such an arrangement, it is that too much consideration has been shown to an undeserving class. Still, as an admirer of fair play, I am not disposed to quarrel with it."

Wingford's explanation was favourably if silently received by the others also, even Mr. Cringe seeming to become slightly mollified.

"We hear so much of universal justice an' fair play, that I suppose I needn't ask whether the employer is guaranteed by the State against loss," he presently said sarcastically. "It would be lopsided justice indeed if he wasn't."

"You would be strictly correct if you said that it would be lopsided justice indeed if he was," Wingford answered calmly. "He takes a certain risk by engaging in business for purposes of gain, and as he does so of his own free-will, it would be scarcely fair to hold his fellow-citizens responsible for any loss he might make, seeing that they could not participate in the legitimate profit which might possibly result."

"They forcibly deprive him of part of his profits under certain conditions, you tell us," Mr. Cringe continued, "an' that bein' so, it would be only right to compensate him in the event of his sustainin' a loss instead of makin' a profit."

"The State does not deprive him of anything which properly belongs to him," Bob replied; "because whatever profit he makes in his business in excess of what the law declares to be a fair and just return for the capital invested in it, represents money unjustly extorted from the public at large, and which should consequently be returned to them by the only equitable means available."

"It is to my mind a very questionable means indeed of raising revenue," Sir David remarked severely, "but I should not be surprised to hear that a sufficient income was derived from that source by the State to defray all governmental expenses, or at least a considerable proportion of them. That,

surely, cannot be held to be a fair and just method of taxation?"

"Practically speaking, the source you allude to yields no revenue at all, and for two reasons," Wingford informed him. "One is, that co-operation among producers is very largely in vogue, for obvious reasons, and as the reformers intended it should be; and the other is, that employers of hired human labour invariably prefer to give their workpeople the benefit of any surplus profit that may arise to paying it into the public Treasury, which is but natural."

This elicited frantic applause from Mr. Fussi once more, who, after having indulged in rapturous extravagances for a time, fiercely demanded to be told by Sir David who had a better right to surplus product than those who were its actual producers? The question was treated with contemptuous silence by him to whom it was addressed, and the Leveller resentfully launched out into a fresh denunciation of the enemies of labour, before Mac, who kept guard over him to prevent a repetition of that kind of thing if possible, could prevent him.

On being reminded that his future home contained no enemies of labour, however, and that there still remained something to be learnt about the social system of Blestland, he became appeased, and the conversation was continued.

"The man who employs his capital in the work

of production here is a very much truer friend of the people than he would be on Earth," Bob continued; "for while it is not to his interest to impoverish those who work for him by cutting down their hire, his presence acts as a foil to the conductors of co-operative concerns who might be tempted to enter into business combinations which would have a prejudicial effect on their fellows. The monopolists, in short, have here been transformed by law into foes of monopoly; and the workers, instead of being oppressed, have been converted by the same process into possible, but very improbable, oppressors."

"And even if the operation of the law did give the worker a little advantage over the bloated capitalist," Mr. Fussi interjected wildly, "would it not be infinitely better that a million men should be allowed to tyrannize over one man, than that one man should be allowed to tyrannize over a million? It would be just a million times better, I take it; but I freely admit it to be better still that neither should be allowed to tyrannize over the other. I think you have said sufficient, Mr. Wingford, to give us all a tolerably clear idea of the legal position occupied by labour and capital in Blestland; would you mind explaining what attitude the State assumes with respect to the ownership of land?"

"The laws passed by the reformers prohibit the private ownership of land, the supreme control of which is vested in the State," was the reply. "The commonwealth itself is the universal landlord."

"I felt sure before you spoke that that would be your answer," Mr. Fussi said gleefully; "because the principle that permits any one to set up an exclusive claim to the smallest atom of land, and the law that upholds his pretensions, are equally unjust and abhorrent."

Mr. Craftson, whose interest in the conversation had hitherto been rather passive than active, became suddenly very alert on hearing these remarks; and he presently manifested a disposition to become inquisitive.

"I have been in dread of such a development all my life," he gasped; "and here it is at last! I have always prayed fervently that the reign of public robbery and spoliation would never overtake me; but I have lived to be overwhelmed by it nevertheless. After what I have heard of the scandalous bondage to which the man of capital is consigned in this accursed place, I should not be in the least surprised to learn that the area which a man may lease, even, is circumscribed by law. Is it so, pray?"

"It is quite competent for any one wishing to invest money in that direction to lease any area,

so long as its magnitude does not become such as to menace the rights of the public," Wingford replied cheerfully; "but I need hardly tell you that capital so invested for the purpose of making money is subject to precisely the same legal restrictions that govern it when invested for the same purpose in general industrial pursuits. That is to say, the moment that a man employs another for the purpose of deriving a profit from his labour by the cultivation of the soil, that moment his responsibility to the State becomes exactly the same as that of the manufacturer who employs his fellow-creatures with the object of making money out of what they produce."

"Then of course he prefers to invest his capital in house property," Mr. Craftson continued. "Speaking from experience, I can safely say that it is a highly remunerative and altogether satisfactory form of investment."

"It is not one whit more remunerative here than any other available form," Bob explained; "because it is illegal to demand any more rent for a building than could be received for the amount of capital it represents had the money been invested in any other way, added, of course, to the ground-rent payable to the State for the site it occupies."

"Suppose a number of workmen clubbed together and erected a structure without any aid whatever

from others," the ex-landlord asked again, "what amount of rent could they charge for the use of it legally?"

"Just as much as they could receive for the sum at which it would have to be officially valued before they could let it at all," Wingford replied, "supposing the amount to be invested in a producing pursuit, plus ground-rent, as in the case I have just mentioned."

"And in the event of their wishing to realize it," Mr. Craftson went on to say, "is there anything to prevent them doing so, and to the best advantage?"

"Nothing whatever," was the answer. "They would be at perfect liberty to sell and make the best deal they could."

"It seems to me that a door is left open to fraud there," Sir David remarked; "for could they not effect a sham sale at many times the value of the building, and so obtain a much higher rent for their property than they otherwise could?"

"The whole thing is a sham an' a fraud from start to finish, Sir David," Mr. Cringe said savagely. "Such laws are too far beneath contempt to be worthy of any sensible man's attention. They embody everything that is cruel, unjust, an' tyrannical; an' it's dreadful to think that for the future we shall have to obey them."

"Devices of the kind you mention would in no way assist them, I am happy to say, had they dishonest designs on their neighbours, Sir David," Bob said, entirely ignoring Mr. Cringe; "for the simple reason that the State takes no cognizance whatever of transactions between buyer and seller. The authorities are guided solely by their official valuers in such matters."

"Supposing that I chose to rent a holding from the State at an annual rental of, say, ten pounds, and that something subsequently happened to increase its value tenfold," Mr. Craftson asked once more; "what would be the result to me?"

"Your ground-rent would be proportionately increased, of course," Wingford replied. "You could not fairly expect your fellow-citizens to give you for ten pounds something valued at a hundred."

"In the event of my leasehold being sub-let at the time of its increase in value," he further inquired, "my tenant, and not I, would have to bear the increased tax, I presume?"

"Your leasehold could not be sub-let, because sub-letting is prohibited by law," he was informed; "but the occupier of any premises belonging to you which might be erected thereon, would, of course, have to pay any increase in the ground-rent of whatever land was devoted to his use, just as he

would have to get the benefit of any decrease in its value that might take place from any cause."

"A grand system, isn't it, Sir David?" Mr. Cringe asked. "A man enhances the productive value of his holdin' by his labour, the use of his capital, or both combined, an' he is straightway taxed for his pains by a paternal government, whose aim, we are told, is to do justice to all!"

"I was just about to explain that he is not taxed for anything of the kind, Mr. Cringe; but you did not give me time," Wingford continued. "He is not called upon to contribute a farthing to the State on account of any honestly-earned improvement which may be brought about in the value of his leasehold; but he is compelled to pay a proportionate tax on any value that may be added to it without his assistance, financial or otherwise. In other words, he is heartily welcome to what is actually his; but no claim that he may make to what is not, can under any circumstances be allowed."

Various other details which it is unnecessary to record here, were touched upon by the speaker before we retired for the evening; but nothing that he could say could reconcile our plutocratic friends in the smallest degree to the social system whose laws they were destined thenceforward to obey. They could see nothing in such a form of government, they alleged, but what was tyrannous and unjust;

and they were unanimous in bitterly deploring the fact that their future lot was to be cast in a land of universal slavery.

Precisely the opposite effect was produced, so far as Mr. Fussi, Mac, and myself were concerned, by the unfolding of Wingford's statement; and the consequence was that the farther it progressed the more pronounced our expressions of approval and manifestations of delight became, much to the disgust of the gentlemen who viewed the matter differently.

The enthusiasm of the little Leveller rose to such a pitch, indeed, by the time Bob completed telling us what he was there specially to tell, that his conduct became such as almost to justify Mr. Cringe's roughly-made charge against him of being demented.

"You need have no fear for my sanity, Mr. Cringe," he said, in a good-natured way; "although to think that I can never convey what we have just heard from Mr. Wingford in a message to the unhappy masses on Earth, is quite calculated to make me mad. I heard of the impossibility of my return to the scenes of misery to which I have been accustomed all my life with perfect indifference, for I had no family ties to be severed; but now I would give ten years of my life to be back among my comrades in the cause of reform, so that I might direct their

efforts into a channel wherein there is some possibility of meeting with that success which their good intentions deserve, if their methods do not. I can see clearly now that it is hopeless to expect much good to come from the fight in which they are engaged, so long as it is conducted on its present lines. The measures of reform advocated by my late colleagues will never meet with general acceptance, because they invariably imply the working of an injustice to somebody; but if they asked the people to pass such laws as Mr. Wingford has described, they could not fail to win general sympathy and attention, and having once secured these, the rest would surely follow. What would I not give to take part in such a campaign! The motto of its conductors should be reform of the three L's—*Labour, Land, and Lucre*—and they should carry the war not into one, or two, or ten countries, but into every inhabited country on the face of the globe! What a glorious prospect that would be! Fancy entering upon a political warfare with a reasonable hope of emancipating millions upon millions of the human race from the thralldom to which they have been consigned, and to which their ancestors were consigned, by the capitalist and land monopolist! Fancy being able to do something, however little, towards restoring all the land on the face of the earth to the people as a whole, to whom it really belongs, and

towards putting a reasonable limit to the truly enormous coercive power of capital! It is indeed maddening to think that although the knowledge of how best to abolish tyranny and oppression has come to me at last, I am, and always shall be, utterly unable to use it where it is so sorely needed."

These remarks were made in pathetic tones indicating genuine distress; but when the trend of his thoughts led him to reflect solely on his want of success as a reformer, and the causes that were responsible for his failure, his large dark eyes suddenly blazed with fury, and he again launched into a bitter attack on those who had been his political foes, and who had never missed an opportunity of persecuting him for the views he held on the subject of social reform.

The sweet-sounding chimes of a distant clock announced that the hour had arrived at which the members of our party had to withdraw while the torrent of his declamatory eloquence was still in full flood; but as Mr. Cringe and his friends retired too, the moment we rose to leave, he would probably bring his attack to a close before long for want of an audience.

taking our departure, he burst in upon us smilingly, and triumphantly directing our attention to a bundle he carried, gleefully announced that it contained an excellent imitation of the working clothes which Mr. Penwith had been accustomed to wear in his gold-digging days, and that he had had considerable trouble in procuring exactly what was wanted.

And hereupon consternation was promptly spread amongst us; for instead of smiling approval at his friend's announcement, as every one else who was present did, Mr. Penwith expressed sorrow for the fact that Mr. Kniggs should have put himself to any inconvenience with reference to the matter mentioned, since on giving the subject further consideration he had arrived at the conclusion that the proposed masquerading had better be omitted from the programme, for more reasons than one.

"In the first place," he said, "it is not by any means a pleasant idea to contemplate having to meet ladies in their drawing-room in the working garb of a miner; and in the next, I would not like to do anything, as I have so often said before, which might seem to imply that I harboured the least doubt about the lad's loyalty. It would grieve me very much to hear of his being made the victim of a false pretence by any one else; and that being so, I cannot consent to take any action calculated to give him an erroneous impression myself."

CHAPTER XXI

IN accordance with an arrangement made during the course of the day, Wingford and young Zeen dined with our party on the eventful evening to which we were all looking forward so anxiously; but although every one seemed to be in the best of spirits, and Mr. Kniggs and his friend especially so, there was too strong a feeling of impatience in existence among us to permit of our lingering long at table. The same feeling was responsible for impelling us to make premature preparations for our forthcoming visit to Wingford's, and also for making every one who intended to join in it exceedingly restless and fidgety. Not by any means the least impatient of the party was Mr. Kniggs, who flitted hither and thither with surprising alacrity and for no ostensible reason.

At length, when the time had almost arrived for

It was curious to note how slow the old gentleman, in common with his friend Mr. Kniggs, Sir David Muntch, and Mr. Cringe, was in realizing the complete change that had taken place in his financial position since his arrival in Blestland. It did not seem to occur to him for a moment that he was practically as destitute as it was possible for a man to be; and it certainly did not occur to Mr. Kniggs, for if it had he would certainly have lost not a moment in reminding him of the fact.

Looks of the deepest distress were exchanged between most of those present, but Wingford gave no sign of being in the least taken aback on hearing Mr. Penwith's announcement. After a little hesitation, the cause of which we soon afterwards understood, Bob proceeded to give reasons for dissenting from the decision of which we had just heard, and which, if adhered to, would cause us so much bitter disappointment.

"Pardon me, Mr. Penwith," he said, "for directing your attention, which I am anxious to do as delicately as possible, to one very important matter which you seem to overlook. A few short days ago you were a man of very considerable wealth, I am told; but you must remember that a great change has come upon you since then. Not only do you inhabit a different planet to that which you have hitherto inhabited,

but your financial position has also undergone a very radical change."

Mr. Kniggs, who had been nursing the rejected bundle of clothing dejectedly, on hearing these last few words, jumped excitedly to his feet, his face all aglow; and Mr. Penwith started violently at the same time, as if in dire affright.

"Why, of course it has," the former said delightfully; "I never thought of that. The simple fact is, my dear old friend, that you and I are as poor as mice once more. We shall have to take a fresh hand in the battle of life in which we have fought side by side so long. This we are not afraid to do; nor need we have any fear as to the result, for from what Mr. Wingford has been telling us, those who have to work for their living get the fairest of fair play here."

Cheery words of encouragement were also addressed to the old gentleman by Wingford and the young Blestlander, and the result was that in the course of a few minutes the philosophic side of his nature asserted itself, and he expressed himself as perfectly reconciled to the altered position, especially as he could in the future be near his adopted son.

"You said something awhile ago, by the way, about being disinclined to give him a false impression concerning your social position when your meeting takes place presently," Mr. Kniggs went on to

remind him; "do you not think that if he met you dressed as you are now, he would be rather apt to form a somewhat erroneous opinion on the subject, to say the very least?"

The simple old soul mused over his friend's question, which seemed to stagger him a little too, for a minute or two, at the end of which he frankly admitted that what Mr. Kniggs suggested would certainly take place under the conditions mentioned.

"Nothing could be more natural than that he should jump to the conclusion that fickle fortune had at last smiled upon you," Mr. Kniggs continued, "if he met you in the garb of a prosperous man; and it would but add to his disappointment to be told that the jade had done so, but that, unlike my sister-in-law, you were not permitted to bring the fruits of her smiles to Blestland."

"There is a good deal of force in what you say, Kniggs," Mr. Penwith replied gravely. "It would be very cruel to excite hopes in the poor boy's breast which would afterwards have to be ruthlessly shattered. Time is about up, so bring along your bundle."

Had he not been the most simple-minded of men, he could not but have suspected, from the injudicious expressions of joy which his significant command elicited from all present, that we had some secret reason for wishing him to act in the way he had

determined; but as it was, the guileless creature attributed our evidences of satisfaction to a desire to witness what promised to be a somewhat romantic encounter.

This, of course, did not apply to his friend Kniggs, who, as he well knew, was actuated by an entirely different motive; but it applied to every one else present, for even young Zeen took the deepest interest in the business we had in hand.

"I shall soon be able to prove now, even to your satisfaction, Kniggs, what a grossly unjust estimate you have allowed yourself to form of poor Walter's character," Mr. Penwith remarked, as we all drove off to our destination. "I will show you presently that the boy is no ingrate, and that you have done him a great wrong in thinking differently."

"And when you do, I shall have the very greatest pleasure in acknowledging my error and apologizing for it," his friend replied; "and I shall certainly do in the future everything that lies in my power to make reparation, should any amends be proved to be due to him."

Having in due course approached Wingford's abode as closely as was deemed expedient, it was decided that Mac, Zeen, and Bob should reconnoitre; and that I should remain with the widow, whom we picked up on the journey, her brother-in-law, and

Mr. Penwith in the vehicle, where we should be secure from observation until their return.

Strategy had to be resorted to, in order to house our friends without letting them be seen by any one; but after a little delay the task was accomplished, and all three being securely ensconced in Bob's library, the remainder of the party retired to the drawing-room.

On entering we found the Bishop engaged in an animated conversation with Mrs. Wingford, on a subject which we rightly conjectured had a bearing on the mission of which he was the leading light; and the girls sat listlessly by, devoting but very little attention to his remarks, judging by appearances.

At the conclusion of the formal greetings which took place on our arrival, Mr. Walter Penwith favoured Mac and myself with a glance or two each of ferocious hate, and then proceeded to explain, with a vindictive gleam in his dark, evil eyes, that he had been telling the ladies before we entered of a ray of sunlight that had that day penetrated the sombre pall in which Blestland was spiritually enveloped, and that he was quite sure we took sufficient interest in the salvation of souls to hear of any forward step made by the mission with pleasure.

"The ray is a tiny one, no doubt," he continued; "but oh, so precious, and pregnant with encouragement! In the pursuit of my labours in a certain

large inland centre of population, I have noticed during the last month or two a growing disposition on the part of some of its inhabitants to give ear to the glad tidings of which I was the bearer; and the consequence has been that I have recently devoted a very considerable amount of attention indeed to the dear people. Beyond the disposition referred to, however, nothing very definite occurred to denote a proper awakening among them until this morning, when, on my arrival in their midst, I found the poor creatures in an actual state of ferment. The moment I alighted from the train I could see that there was a considerable amount of unwonted excitement in the air, but I had no idea what this was to be attributed to until soon after arriving at my hotel, when a deputation of the inhabitants waited upon me, and to my unbounded delight courteously but very seriously requested me to discontinue my missionary labours amongst them, alleging as a reason for preferring the request that I caused dissension to arise where none ever existed before. My soul was filled with exceeding joy as I exhorted my benighted interviewers to reflect on the awful consequences of not repenting while there was yet time; and you may be sure that it did not detract from my delight to hear, soon after I dismissed the first deputation with a well-merited rebuke, that another with opposite aims, and chiefly composed of members

of the fair sex, to their credit be it said, wished to speak with me, and acquaint me with their views. Needless to say, I had no hesitation in giving these a solemn promise, to the effect that the good fight would never be abandoned by me so long as I possessed strength and freedom to carry it on. Everything proceeded very satisfactorily up to this point, and I felt perfectly justified in assuming that my good friends were in fact and in deed converted; but I soon found that in doing so I was greatly mistaken. They are willing enough that I should continue to hold my meetings, and express themselves ready to attend them and listen to my arguments; but they gave me plainly to understand that I have not yet succeeded in completely convincing them. Here, then, is the most vulnerable point in the armour of unbelief in which Blestland is encased, so far as I have been able to judge, and towards it the best efforts of the mission must be directed. I shall, of course, follow up whatever little advantage I have gained to the best of my ability, but I am very much afraid my progress will be slow, since I am so sadly in need of assistance. It is just possible that I may be fortunate enough to win a recruit or two from Mr. Cringe's party; but the possibility is a very remote one, I fear, unless the recent change in the current of their lives has chastened their hearts, and cured them of their worldliness. I was very much

gratified to learn from the young ladies a while ago that they have hopes of ultimately inducing you, gentlemen, to join in the meritorious work; and that being so, let me implore you in the name of all you hold sacred not to waste precious time, especially in view of this day's developments to which I have alluded. Do not, I beseech you, fly in the face of your Maker by refusing to toil in the vineyard. An opportunity now presents itself for your acceptance, the like of which——"

Before he could proceed any further with his onslaught, which I clearly foresaw he would make, Wingford and Zeen, both of whom had withdrawn at the opening of the Bishop's address, re-appeared upon the scene, and with well-simulated excitement, the former announced further arrivals from the planet Earth.

"On glancing at a list of their names my eye rested on that of Penwith," he went on to say; "and as it struck me that the owner of this might be in some way related to the gentleman present who bears the same name, I interviewed him without a moment's delay. It gives me very great pleasure to announce, and I am sure it will give Mr. Walter Penwith endless delight to hear, that the new-comer is none other than his uncle and foster-father!"

At the first mention of his surname the Bishop

turned deathly pale, and he directed a searching glance of hate at the speaker at the same time which was not withdrawn for several seconds after he finished speaking.

"I should feel very much obliged to you, Mr. Wingford, if you would but select some one else as a butt for your practical jokes, if you really must indulge in that form of inanity," he snarled savagely. "Time is far too precious, and the subjects to which my attention is devoted are altogether too serious to make tomfoolery in any shape acceptable, so far as I am concerned. Besides, it is very unkind of you to ruthlessly awaken the saddest memories of my life, merely to gratify a passion for practising senseless deception."

As could easily be seen, he made a powerful effort to utter this stern rebuke in calm and dignified tones; but try how he would he could not completely disguise the fact that he was the victim of a grave apprehension.

"The best way to prove that what I have stated is true is to produce the gentleman in the flesh, I suppose," Bob replied coolly; "and as I have made preparations for such a contingency by bringing him along with me, I can soon do that."

So saying he stepped briskly towards the door leading to the library, in the midst of a profound silence; and a moment later Mr. Penwith came

rushing forward with outstretched hands and beaming visage to greet his long-lost nephew.

The latter contemplated his uncle's approach with a cruel expression of countenance and a hard, stony stare; but he made no attempt whatever to meet the affectionate advances of his foster-father, nor did he give the most remote sign of having recognized him.

"Why, Walter, my boy, what is the meaning of this?" the old man presently asked, in grief-stricken tones. "Surely you have not so soon forgotten your poor old uncle; or can it be that Kniggs was right when he predicted that you would disown me? Speak, my lad, speak, and say you are not ashamed to acknowledge me, shabby though I be."

"A very pretty conspiracy, upon my word, and well worthy of the man who originated it," the Bishop said, glancing viciously at Wingford. "Although I have never complained, ladies, I assure you that I have been subjected to many persecutions since the inauguration of our mission; but nothing to approach this attack for flagrant audacity and sinister spite has hitherto been made upon me. It is not perhaps much to be wondered at that a lazy ne'er-do-well, such as this tramp evidently is, should brave the rigours of the law for a monetary consideration; but it is sad indeed to think that any one who has been gently nurtured could be found to induce

such persons to offend against the laws of the country by conspiring with them. The risk is a great one, for the punishment due to conspiracy is severe; and the objects those who took it had in view are alike discreditable to all the parties concerned."

Here he turned to Mrs. Wingford, and relapsing into the snuffle which usually characterized his tones when addressing that good lady, proceeded to make some special comments on what had just taken place.

"Nothing could more clearly show how extremely liable the minds of persons, even in the higher walks of life, are to become ill-regulated," he said, "when they reject the restraining influences of true religion. I have had the misfortune to incur the enmity of your son because I initiated a movement for the conversion of the benighted creatures around us, a movement which from its inception has met with his strongest opposition; and the incident which you have just witnessed is one of the very disagreeable results. It is really distressing in the extreme to think that I shall have to appeal to the law for protection against the brother of my affianced bride."

"Oh! my God! my God! It was I, and not Kniggs, who was wrong after all," his uncle wailed.

In a state of the greatest perplexity, and evidently considerably alarmed, poor Mrs. Wingford inquired tremulously what the meaning of the whole thing was; and in reply the Bishop assured her that Bob had been to the trouble, which must have been very considerable, of finding a lazy, worthless vagabond, whom he had bribed to come there and represent himself falsely as his uncle, in order to humiliate him if possible in the eyes of herself and her daughters.

"I need not ask you, of course, my dear madam, to believe what I say in preference to the uncorroborated statement of a person whose worthlessness of character may be gathered from his appearance," he continued; "and if I am right in assuming that your confidence in me remains undiminished, you will not hesitate to adopt a suggestion which I am about to make. Your son has seen fit to insult yourself and his sisters by introducing a low fellow like this to your drawing-room; give me permission to show on your behalf that you resent such conduct, and the intruder will be bundled from your presence forthwith."

"Not so fast, my fine fellow, not so fast," Bob said sternly, and with a warning gesture. "It so happens, unfortunately for you, that the gentleman's statement can be corroborated, and that too without a moment's delay."

Here Mr. Kniggs was promptly introduced, who, having saluted the ladies with old-fashioned gallantry, gave a rapid sketch of the Bishop's career, and ended by fiercely denouncing him in scathing terms for what he termed his cold-blooded treachery and ingratitude, and informing him that he, at least, had never been deceived as to his true character.

"Don't be too hard on the poor misguided boy old friend," the unhappy uncle said. "The temptation that has caused him to act as he has done must have been terribly strong, too strong for a mere mortal to resist. Let us rather hope that the day may come when he will repent his unkind conduct of to-night. Let us hope so, let us hope so."

The subject of these remarks tried hard to wear an air of injured innocence while both men were speaking; but the success he attained was very indifferent, for the cynical smile that flitted across his pallid features every now and then was not to be repressed.

"Oho!" he cried. "The band of conspirators is more formidable than I suspected, it would seem; and I must say the members of it have rehearsed their parts most excellently. It seems a pity that so much energy should be wasted for such an evil purpose; and it grieves me very much indeed to think that such industry as they must have displayed

should meet with so poor a reward as a long term of imprisonment."

This additional reference to pains and penalties had the effect of terrifying our poor bewildered hostess to a painful degree; and in faltering accents she begged him who made it to refrain from repeating it, on the ground that an explanation which would render his threatened action unnecessary might be forthcoming.

"I cannot believe that a child of mine would be guilty of the conduct which you impute to my son," she said; "and on the other hand I am loth to believe you capable of acting the unworthy part with which you are charged. There is a terrible mistake somewhere, quite evidently: the question is, where does it lie? The account given by Mr. Kniggs is a very circumstantial one, and he seems to have not a shadow of doubt as to your identity; while you express yourself equally positive that the gentleman is entirely mistaken. It is really the most perplexing condition of things I ever encountered."

"As he is so ready at denying things, madam," said Mr. Kniggs, "perhaps he will not admit that his uncle ever had a friend and partner of my name?"

"If your prompter had told you that he had a mine manager with a similarly-sounding name, it would be nearer the truth," was the Bishop's retort;

"and your attempt at personating that individual is as clumsy as it is wicked."

"It is just as well that there is some one close at hand who can throw some important light on the subject, at this point at all events," Wingford remarked significantly, as he rose to visit the library once more.

A moment or two afterwards the widow was in our midst.

CHAPTER XXII

WHILE the usual feminine greetings were being exchanged between the ladies, the wistful gaze of the Bishop followed Mrs. Kniggs's every movement as it might be expected to follow those of a wild beast whose spring he feared; and the colour which had returned to his cheeks when he arrived at the opinion that he had the battle won, and that his enemies were completely baffled, for a time at least, fled again precipitately, leaving his now curiously-distorted face even ghastlier than it became when he was previously confronted with his uncle.

He was in imminent peril, and knew it, of being dethroned from the high position in Mrs. Wingford's estimation to which he had attained by scheming and hypocrisy; but although such a fall would mean all in all to him, he never for a moment lost

his self-possession, nor was forsaken by his innate audacity.

When the interchange of salutations and tokens of affection between the ladies of the house and their friend came to an end, then he briskly advanced towards the latter, and with a hideous apology for a smile coolly held forth his hand for her acceptance.

The lady viewed him scornfully from head to foot several times without speaking, but made no attempt to respond to the gesture.

"I could never consent to extend the hand of friendship to any one base enough to act as I know you have acted to-night," the widow Kniggs said at length. "You have shown not only that you are capable of descending to the use of the most contemptible falsehood to gain your ends, but also that you can be guilty of the very basest ingratitude that it is possible to imagine; and if anything further were wanted to show you in your true character, I have in my possession conclusive proof of the fact that you can be truthfully charged with even graver delinquencies."

The Bishop, who, on hearing the first part of this denunciation, had slunk back to his seat and tried hard to maintain a calm exterior, palpably quaked with fear when he heard the latter part, and with a pitiless glance of scorn at him the widow turned

away and addressed the remainder of her remarks on the subject of his shortcomings to the astounded Mrs. Wingford.

"These gentlemen have not misrepresented themselves, my dear friend," she continued. "One is the uncle and foster-father of this erring young man; and the other is the oldest friend and fellow-worker of the former, and brother of my late husband. For the false statements that have undoubtedly been made to you, the younger Penwith alone is responsible. You certainly have been very grossly deceived by this designing and unscrupulous person; but it may afford you some consolation to know that you are not the only one who has been deceived by his specious profession of religious enthusiasm. I, too, was misled into reposing confidence in him by the same means; and the consequence was, that a few months back I entrusted him with a considerable amount of money for investment, and readily believed him when he represented it as safely invested in a certain direction. Something came to my ears within the last few days, however, which caused me to think that it would be only prudent to verify this statement without delay; and this I did to-day, with the result that I find the whole thing to be a fabrication. Capital which was intended for the future use of my poor children has been mis-

appropriated; but the law of the land is powerful to avenge the injury done to my little ones, and it shall forthwith be requested to do so."

The emotions created in Mr. Penwith's breast on finding himself decisively repulsed by his nephew, gave way to one of terror on the latter's account when he heard the widow's threat. The consequence was that, rising hastily, he advanced towards her, and assuming a kneeling posture at her feet, begged of her for mercy.

"Oh! no, no! Not that, for mercy's sake! Not that, not that!" he moaned. "Do not, I beg of you, publicly disgrace the unhappy lad. He will repent, I am sure, of the criminal folly that has led him to do you and your family such a grievous wrong; and then he will join me in doing everything that it is possible to do to make reparation for the consequences of his act. As you hope for mercy yourself, madam, have mercy, I implore you, on the erring lad; and if you grant my prayer, I can promise you with confidence that he will show by his conduct in the future that your clemency was not exercised in favour of a hardened sinner."

"Drat the man!" exclaimed Mr. Kniggs, as he rose and went towards a window to stare into the outer darkness. "He will succeed in getting the rascal off; I am sure he will."

Every one else present, with the single exception

of him in whose behalf it was made, was also more or less deeply touched by the pathetic tones in which the appeal was made, and the spirit of forgiveness and pure unselfishness that prompted the man who made it; and it was rather amusing to watch the various and transparent tactics adopted by the masculine members of the party in order to hide their emotions.

Having gently raised her suppliant to his feet, and motioned him back to his seat, the kind-hearted widow told him with a little sob that for his sake she would consent to pardon the unjust steward; but that she wished it to be distinctly understood that on no other consideration whatever would she have refrained from putting the law in motion.

Her decision was received by the Bishop with a deep sigh of relief; and the look of intense anxiety which his face wore from the moment she entered the room, disappeared as if by magic, when he heard it.

"Although I do not admit that the lapse of which I have been guilty was a very heinous one," he said jauntily, "for the object to which the money was devoted, namely the advancement of the mission, is a good one, I none the less recognize the magnanimous manner in which you have acted towards me, my dear Mrs. Kniggs; because there can be no doubt that from a purely technical point of view I

have rendered myself liable to prosecution, and I might find that the legal tribunals would have but little sympathy with me for allowing my zeal to outrun my discretion, even in the best of causes. I have no fear of not getting credit for the purity of my motives from those who laboured with me in the cause for which I have sinned; and if a lifelong repentance can be of any avail, as it surely can, I shall also obtain forgiveness from on high for my thoughtless transgression. I have been too completely upset by the events of the evening, my dear Mrs. Wingford, to proceed further to-night with the interesting report which I was engaged in making when the rude interruption took place; but to-morrow afternoon (D.V.), and if it suits your convenience, I shall have very much pleasure in giving you the remainder of the details to which I refer."

Glancing at him with withering scorn, she rose to her feet before replying, and assumed her stateliest pose.

"You may consider your acquaintance with me and every member of my family as for ever terminated," she said coldly; "and on no account will your presence beneath this roof be henceforth tolerated. My eyes have been opened before it was too late, providentially. Go; and never let me look upon your face again!"

Here the ladies all retired, our hostess leaning on her son's arm; and so elated were Mac and I in consequence of certain glances exchanged with the girls as they left, that we were quite unable to repress signs of our jubilant feelings.

"Curse you both!" the Bishop hissed. "I have hated you cordially from the moment I set eyes on you, and the part you have taken to-night in hounding me down is not likely to lessen the bitterness of my feelings towards you. You and your friend Wingford, instigated no doubt by this hoary old reprobate Kniggs, have scored a strong point to-night; but as sure as there is a heaven above us, I will get even with all of you sooner or later. No rest can be mine, either by day or by night, until this night's outrage has been fully avenged; and when the time of my triumph arrives, as it will when they least expect it, my arch-enemies will have bitter cause to repent ever having aroused the demon within me. Again I say with all my heart: curse you, curse you, one and all!"

The moment the last word of this ferociously-uttered malediction was spoken, the fearfully angry young man rushed scowling from the room which he was never to enter again; and I for one breathed more freely when relieved of his presence. He slammed the door viciously after him as he vanished; and as he did so his poor old uncle, who had been

watching the progress of events in a dazed sort of way, rose hurriedly and went in pursuit.

"Walter, my boy, come back to me," he cried; "let me stand by you in your time of trouble."

There was no response, as we anticipated; and then telling us that his place was by his erring boy's side, he bid us a hasty good-night, and fled into the darkness without.

"He is an awful old fool, that mate of mine," Mr. Kniggs said; "but with all his faults I cannot help feeling proud of him. I cannot think of trusting him alone with a man in such a savage temper as that scoundrel of a nephew of his is at present, so I will follow him at once."

The young Blestlander volunteered to accompany him, in the event of it becoming necessary to direct Mr. Kniggs to the Bishop's abode; and when they took their departure the room was deserted by all save Wingford, Mac, and myself.

The renewed manifestations of delight in which we indulged when left to ourselves bordered very closely on the childish; but taking all things into consideration, they could not fairly be called inexcusable.

We were still merrily commenting on the complete and satisfactory nature of our enemy's discomfiture, when the widow Kniggs came upon the scene again and beckoned me to follow her. The summons

was responded to with eager alacrity, for I had no difficulty in divining the object of her errand. Silently she led the way until we had almost reached the entrance to the room wherein my request for Bessie's hand was so decidedly repulsed by her mother, and here she came to a sudden stop.

"I suppose it is safe to assume that your feelings towards Bessie have undergone no change since you entered this room before?" she said, and I nodded assent. "Very well then. Sue again for her hand, and I can promise that you will find Mrs. Wingford more amenable to reason than you found her previously."

The fact of her idol having been shattered wrought even a greater change in the dear old lady's attitude towards me and my suit than I expected it would. So great was it, indeed, that the moment I entered, and before I had time to utter a word, she came towards me leading Bessie; and placing my sweetheart's little hand in mine, she fervently invoked blessings to descend upon us. Her hot tears flowed freely as she imprinted a motherly kiss on my heated brow; but that they were tears of joy and not of grief and sorrow, I knew full well.

When at length she had given us sufficient evidence of her parental solicitude to satisfy her

for the time being, she returned to her ample arm-chair; and I was about to press the supple figure of my future bride to my wildly-beating heart, and rain hot kisses on her ruby lips, when, at the instant that my hand touched her slender waist, I received a shock as from some deadly serpent's fangs, which quickly made my blood run cold, and checked the fierceness of my ardour.

* * * * *

With a violent start I sat bolt upright in my easy-chair; and on casting an inquiring glance around me, the first object on which it rested was Mac's retriever Carlo. He stood close by with lolling tongue and wagging tail, regarding me intently with his big, brown, loving eyes; and I knew as I gazed at him reproachfully that the shock which was responsible for recalling me so suddenly from Blestland was inflicted by him when he saluted my hand, in his canine fashion, on his return from a long ramble with his master.

The feelings that oppressed me as I sat watching the vagaries of some withered leaves that were urged into eddies by the wanton wind, while I awaited the return of Mac, whom I could see leisurely approaching in the distance, are simply indescribable. Suffice it to say that when my friend arrived a few minutes later and threw himself into a chair close by, it would be difficult to find a

human being more thoroughly dejected and completely dissatisfied than I was.

A glance served to show my chum that I was exceptionally depressed; and he promptly attributed this circumstance to the assumed fact that I had been engaged in discussing social and political subjects with our very conservative landlord during his absence, and that I had failed, as usual, to bring that obdurate person to my way of thinking in any single particular.

Having disabused his mind on this point, I announced as the true reason for my gloomy mood that I had had a most peculiar dream. Then I proceeded to describe in tones of awe the leading features connected therewith, and before my narrative concluded the cool shades of evening began to make their presence felt.

During a pause in the conversation which followed my recital of the strange, unreal events, the sullen tones of a bell reached my ears; and at the same instant the workers began to swarm like bees from Mr. Cringe's great factory.

While we were still engaged in silently watching the eager movements of the human hive, the advance-guard of the merry-makers began to file past.

Prominent amongst them was the lord and master of the great industrial establishment to which our

attention was directed, reclining in luxurious ease in his sumptuous equipage.

Bitter smiles were exchanged and sighs of dissatisfaction escaped the lips of both; but neither made any oral reference to the significance of the incident, and each was soon rapt in a most depressing reverie.

THE END

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