

Meanwhile, how brightly looked the world to Mabel and Delamere! How strong they felt each to work in the way they had chosen. Delamere set off the morning after his explanation, to Bristol, and from thence to Waterford, and so forward, to view the district that had been indicated to him as a purchase. Mabel commenced giving singing lessons to her new pupils, and never had her voice sounded so sweet and clear. The memory of what she had witnessed, the consciousness of what she had felt, gave, it might be, that touch of the tender and plaintive to her tones, which startled even the accustomed ears of Miss Germaine, and won her admiration. Nor was the latter really sorry when she heard the frank disclosure of the engagement. She had received a letter from Mrs. Burnish saying in her gossiping way, that, "Delamere chose to be a poor man, his family thought Miss Alterton too good for him." Miss Germaine, left to her own judgment, argued, and rightly—"This noble, high-principled girl has what wealth may want, and never can buy."

No other news came to interfere with school duties for a time. Mabel learned that Mr. Theophilus Burnish resigned his seat in parliament on the plea of ill health; having been worried by his constituents to uphold the interests of "The Trade," and resists all legislative interference or curtailment of their hours of trading; and by religious bodies to protect the right of the people, by preserving their Sabbath to them unprofaned. From this contest between interest and conviction, Mr. Burnish withdrew, laying the blame on his liver. He was gone with his wife and family to try the German waters. Lady Burnish was to spend the autumn at the seat of her son Felix, in Sussex. Some poisonings of children had engaged her ladyship's attention, and made her think of every remedy for the social demoralization she deplored, but one, and that was—entire sobriety for high and low—no tampering with the accursed "mockery" that deludes and debases wherever it goes. She could not see that remedy; for the Burnish brew-house and distillery obstructed her vision. So she went on clipping, as with embroidery scissors, the offshoots of the deadly Upas tree of drunkenness, whilst her sons and their workmen manured and nourished its roots, and kept it in full vigor. However loudly the prison, the hospital, the mad-house, the work-house, said "Guilty" in reference to Breweries and Distilleries, she took a retaining fee—her handsome jointure—and in church and chapel, committees and meetings, she lauded work of benevolence, and glorified the house of Burnish, and said "Not Guilty."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Darkness and Light.

"Thought fond man
Of these, and all the thousand nameless ills
That one incessant struggle render life
One scene of toil, of suffering, and of fate,
Vice in his high career would stand appalled,
And heedless, rambling impulse learn, to think."

—Thomson.

It would have completed the comfort of Mabel if she could have imbued her father with her principles. He was unable or unwilling to understand what he called the "whimsies" of the young people. "Their water drinking, and new fangled notions. Pshaw! what should they know?" As soon as his health improved, he became impatient of the alteration in his mode of life. As he sauntered in the pleasant gardens at Bath, or over the Beechen Cliff, he pined, odd as it may seem, for the noise and bustle of Racket Row. At last, a letter from Susan, telling him that Tom had got Frank Horncastle there, and "the goings on was pretty strong," decided him to go up to town and take them unawares, and, as he said, "Catch them at their tricks." So, once more, with a saddened heart, Mabel took leave of him, mortified that she should ever again have entered that hateful dwelling, associated to her mind with such horrors.

He went, however, little knowing what a reception awaited him. The train was late, and it was nearly eleven o'clock before he stood at his own private door, and let himself in with his latch-key. Susan had a little sitting-room of her own on the first landing-place just over the bar, and there he mounted, and managed to stop the screech with which she greeted him, by bidding her be quiet, as he did not mean to let them know that he had returned until the morning. "I may as well have daylight," said he, "to send that rascal packing." He could hear Frank and Tom's voices mingling with those of several young men having a carouze in the bar, and he felt a kind of satisfaction as he said, half aloud, "Give up my business to them, indeed—no, no, dear Mab! it would be ruin and murder!" Susan bustled about and got him a cup of tea, and in a little time lighted his candle for him to go to bed. The roisterers continued their revel, and there was a call for "More gin!" that sounded clear up the stairs as he retired for the night—ah, not for the night!

Hardly had he laid his head on the pillow when he heard the well known sound of pumping up the spirits into the barrels in the bar, a process that Mr. Alterton never permitted at night, for fear of fire. He sat up in bed and listened, felt quite sure, and then, leaping out, threw on his dressing-gown and opened his door to reconnoitre. In an instant, as he stood on the landing, a bright light shone all around, a flame like a column of fire leaped up the staircase, there was a burst as of an explosion, and

the house was wrapped, from the cellars to the second storey, in a vast sheet of flame. To run through such a blaze of fire was impossible. He fled, half stifled by the overpowering fumes, back into his room, which was over the drawing-room, looking to the street. He flung open the window, forked tongues of fire seemed to lick the wall, and, curling inward, forced him back with their scorching breath. He rushed again to the landing, and met Susan, wild with terror, making her way upward to the roof, the only chance. He heard cries and screams below, and shouted out, "Come up here." Blinded by smoke, heat, stench, flame, and followed by two frightened women and a boy, he contrived to reach the roof. Meanwhile, a cargo of spirits that had that very day been put for a time in the new premises at the back, seemed to have caught fire; for a perfect fountain of flame mounted up from behind the house, swayed over with the wind, and made a fiery arch across the doomed court. Old and dry, it caught like bitumen. Then arose shrieks and wailing—mothers and little children roused from their crowded beds, and looking out in bewildered horror; some hazarding desperate leaps, others screaming for help; the yells and bellowing of many voices below, added to the roar of the flame and the clattering of the approaching engines. In a few minutes the fugitives on the roof had clambered over to the next house, and were calling from the parapet for ladders, as there was no ingress from the roof into the building. Mr. Alterton was recognized, and a ladder was soon brought. He was not the first to take advantage of it. God had given him a nature, and had made him for better purposes than those in which he had passed his life. He helped Susan carefully on, and encouraged her with assurances of safety. She descended, and he saw her alight in safety. Then the other woman followed. The boy had burnt his hands dreadfully in getting up stairs, and could not hold on. Mr. Alterton tore his dressing gown into slips, tied the lad on to his back, and prepared to descend the ladder. It was old, the weight was great, a ravel on which he trode gave way, he clutched at one above, it came out in his grasp, and he fell heavily to the pavement, and was taken up, insensible, the boy fortunately escaping with a few bruises and his scorched hands.

While a party of police were hurrying off to the hospital with Mr. Alterton, the fire, fed by a kindred spirit, raged like an unceasing demon. To save that house, or the court, was impossible—all efforts were made by pulling down the next house, and the engines playing on others near, to prevent the spread of the conflagration. What efforts were made by the brave firemen! those heroes who fight the most terrific foe in the most deadly battle-field. To save life, they plunged again and again into fiery gulfs and under tottering roofs, bringing out little children and frantic women, made destitute in that dread hour.

"Where was Frank and Tom Horncastle and their friends—safe?" Yes!—no! Tom was not to be seen; nor the poor barman, who had protested against pumping up the spirits; nor the sleepy boy, who, looking into the tub, had dropped the candle in, and caused the fire; nor an old cellar-man, who was drunk in the cellar, and sleeping beside a cask two hours before. The next day when the newspapers recorded '*Alarming Fire and Loss of Life*,' they stated that 'five had lost their lives, including Tom Horncastle and a little child in the court, and that Mr. Alterton was so injured that his recovery was very doubtful.'

Once more poor Mabel was in an hospital. This time in a private room, where her father lay trembling between life and death. She was not entirely among strangers; the face of one medical man was that of a friend, Mr. Shafton Keen. Beneath that rough rind there was a sound heart; no brother could be more attentive than he was to Mabel. He was ever ready with skillful art for the patient, and cheering helpful counsels for the young nurse. Autumn faded into winter, and winter was yielding to spring, before Mr. Alterton, a cripple now for life, could be moved to Bath. This fire had greatly improved Mr. Alterton. The carelessness of poor Tom Horncastle, not only in ordering the pumping up of the spirits, which had caused the fire, but in having a large quantity taken into the back premises, without informing the Insurance Company, caused them, very properly, to dispute the claim in their office. But out of the wreck of her father's property, Mabel liberally compensated the funds of the hospital, where he had lain so long; and, on returning with him to Bath, she had the satisfaction to find that all Frank Horncastle's overtures, that he would again embark in that business, were negatived.

Frank, however, not only established his legal claim to a share in the concern, but contrived to get the Burnish family to help him to rebuild and open it. A new and splendid palace rose, in a few months, as he said, "Like a phoenix," from the ashes of that in which his brother was consumed. He was so pleased with his idea, that he did away with the low name, Tun and Noggin, and called the stately mansion "The Phoenix."

Could he ever live, and trade, and swear, and carouse there? Oh, yes! certainly. Why, there's a house in one of the leading thoroughfares in London where the landlord lost his wife, three children, nurse maid, and barman by a fire similarly practised; and great was the justification held on the spot where they perished, when the new roof was reared, and the new gilding and gas shone forth. The recollection of the sighs and groans of expiring infancy seemed to give flavor to the gin, and favored the excuse for "one glass more," that the maudlin drunkard wanted as the story was told. The tragedy made the fortune of the house!