

THE HISTORY OF A LOAFER.

CHAP. III.

Early morning on one of the blackest days, in the "Black Country" of England. The sun was supposed to have been up for two hours, but his Solar Majesty evinced no disposition to shew his face, nay, seemed inclined to keep to his bed-room all day, a habit to which he was much addicted in this neighbourhood during the month of November. Black were the roads, as though macadamized with coal; black were the cottages, and grimy and sooty the men and women. One solitary, stunted tree stood by the way side, but seemed woefully out of place. It looked like an undertaker's wand, with a few sable plumes growing out of the top. The locality of which we speak was called by courtesy "a Common," though about as unlike an English Common as it was possible to be. No grass, no sheep browsing, no cattle grazing:—animals require nourishment, and cannot feed on the fragments and dust of coal. Around the Common were a series of small dwellings, occupied with a busy industry of their own. The tenants of these were all nail makers, but the effects of machinery were fast diminishing their number. A shed was in the middle of the Common. This covered a windlass and other gearing, at which were working three men, drawing up "iron stone" from the bowels of the earth. All around would have been one vast plain, had not man discovered the treasures which lurked in the depths beneath. Here were to be seen tall gaunt chimneys, which had once been red brick, but were now as black as ink. These were of every imaginable size and shape, but had one peculiarity in common. There were none of them upright and perpendicular, but all partook of the characteristics of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. They would play tricks too, these roguish chimneys! One day, one would take a freak and right himself like a ship; another day it would lurch and lean over on the other side. Sometimes part of it would topple over and injure several people; but this was not a common occurrence. The houses, factories, and other buildings were addicted to similar eccentricities. To a stranger this was incomprehensible, but to a native of these parts, who knew that the whole country was undermined for miles, it was looked upon simply as a matter of course. But it must not be supposed that the whole neighbourhood was one of Cimmerian gloom. Fires were burning in every direction—some issuing from the tops of tall shafts—others seeming to come, like volcanic eruptions, from the inmost recesses of the earth. Here and there a whole building seemed on fire. The clang of mighty steam hammers, and the rumble of huge rolling mills betokened the places where are made the rails which are destined to carry the passenger over miles of road, through English fields, or Russian plains, Indian jungles, or, perhaps, American primeval forests. Here is a range of chemical works. The fires are burning red, and blue, and green, like a stage illusion; the smells, or rather stench, are pestiferous and suffocating; but from hence come drugs for the doctor, materials for the calico printer and dyer, acids for the metal worker, pigments for the artist, and cosmetics for "the Girl of the Period." Let us turn round again. What are those rows of huge, black inverted funnels with flaming summits? These are the works from whence issue window glass to make the poor man's dwelling cheerful and light, and mirrors for the toilet of beauty.

But how is it that the mouths of the coal-pits seem quiet and idle to-day? Blaspheme not, oh, stranger! This is Monday; and Monday, as well as Sunday, is a sacred day with the black country collier—a day to be kept holy after his fashion—a day consecrated to beer in enormous quantities—to frequent potations of ardent spirits—to loud talking

and cursing—to eyes blacker than usual—to encounters of man with man, of dog with dog, and of dog with rat and badger. "To-night, 'twill be his pleasure to be drunk," very drunk, and woe to his wife, if she have not a hot supper of something profusely flavoured with onions, when her lord comes home. He will curse her, will beat her, and will break chairs and tables to pieces.

"To-morrow she will say a bitter thing,
Pulling her sleeve down lest the bruises show—
A little thing, but meant for an excuse—
'My master is not worse than many men.'"

And then the man will go to work and will toil hard for five days, digging coal from the sides of the mine, or lying on his back, "tapping" at the natural ceiling.

The morals of the "black country" are better than they were, but there is infinite room for improvement. Ministers have done but little. They have been frightened away. I make a suggestion to muscular Christianity. Let some stalwart, well trained (I mean physically) and self-denying Minister take his stand in the "Black Country," and commence to preach a sermon. In the space of about a minute and a half one of his hearers will "Eave arf a brick at him." Let him instantly challenge that man to a fight. He will have gained a sort of rough respect already. If he comports himself bravely, and takes his drubbing like a man, these men will come and hear him preach next Sunday. Should he, which is not, however, probable, succeed in thrashing his opponent, he will be able to do what he likes with them. Now, this may appear very fanciful, though true, and very brutal, which it certainly is; but this is the way to get at a "Black Countryman's" heart. He loves "pluck" and courage, because he understands it. He ranks it as the chief virtue of man. This is not a mere admiration of brute physical force, not a mere delight in a row. He always insists on fair play. A fight is not with him a matter to be improvised in a hurry, it must be organised in a business-like manner. A collier of this district has some qualities which do not raise him much above the beasts of the field, some which degrade him below that level; but for this he has surely some excuses. His enormous beer-drinking propensities originate in that inordinate thirst which is common to all men whose daily occupation is the handling of coal. His brutishness comes from the mother of all evil—ignorance. He has learnt enough to enable him "to get on in the world" after his fashion. By working piece-work for five days in the week he can earn, on an average, two pounds sterling. He is thus far better off than a mechanic. His wants are beef, beer, gin, boiled rabbits smothered in onions, coarse clothes, and last, not least, a bull terrier pup. But he is not altogether a brute; he has some of the characteristics even of a gentleman. He fights with fists alone; he neither robs nor murders. He has no sympathy for revolvers, shillelaghs, bowie-knives or stilettos. He never steals. In a country with rather a bad reputation for lying, the collier is known for his truthfulness.

But to return to our story. A genuine fight is going on in one corner of the Common, between two lads of fifteen. One of these is a native of the place; the other is—Gerald Winter.

(To be continued.)

"RUBBISH SHOT HERE."

"In the present day, on the other hand, the direct tendency of knowledge and science was the perversion and destruction of God's truth. * * * He was bold to say that, in all the dreams of Hindoos, and all the false religions—corrupted, degraded, and ridiculous—that were among the Pagans, there were none so frivolous and childish as those unto which the science of the present day had reduced our scientific men."—(From a recent sermon preached, in Carlisle Cathedral, by Dean Close.)