

## OBSERVATIONS OF REV. GABE TUCKER.

You may noteb it on de paliu as a mighty reaky plan  
To make your judgment by de clo'es dat kivers up a  
man;  
For I hardly needs to tell you how you often come  
across  
A fifty-dollar saddle on a twenty-dollar box.  
An', wukin' in de low-groun's, you diskliver as you go,  
Dat de fuses shuck may hide de meanes' nubbins in a  
row!

I think a man has got a mighty 'slender chance for  
Heben  
Dat holds on to his piety but one day out ob sebes;  
Dat talks about de sinners wid a heap o' solemn chat  
An' nebbber draps a nickel in de missionary hat.  
Dat's foremost in de meetin'-house for raisin' all de  
chunes,  
But lays aside his 'ligion wid his Sunday pantaloo.

I nebbber judge o' people dat I meets along de way  
By de places whar dey cum fum an' de houses whar dey  
stay;  
For de bantam chicken's awful fond o' roostin' pretty  
high,  
An' de turkey-buzzard sails above de eagle in de sky;  
Dey ketches little minners in de middle ob de sea,  
An' you fuds de smalles' possum up de bigges' kind o'  
tree!

—J. A. Macon, Scribner.

## SKELETON KEYS.

BY D. CHRISTIE MURRAY.

## III.

When Tiburce Menseau opened the stolen packet he found nothing but a tiny key and a little scrap of paper with an inscription:

"My dear Nell,—If Walter has been true to you, you will know what to do when you receive this package. This fits a box. The box will be found in the stable wall, five bricks from the fireplace in the left side, and six bricks from the floor. I mean, of course, the stable at Ashford Warren. If Walter has been true, you can have my blessing from the grave and marry him. I am dead more than a fortnight when you get this. Poverty is a great and true touchstone. You will know your friends by this time, I gave a bill of sale to test Walter.—Your dead uncle,  
JOHN LAUNCESTON BARCLAY.

What romance lay beyond this key troubled Tiburce Menseau little. He could weave his own romance out of the letter, and it even more than the key itself, was the key to wealth. The possession of the scrap of paper and the key put heart into his scoundrel body, and he walked like a new man. He began to make inquiries as to the whereabouts of Ashford Warren, but for a week or two he wandered off on false scents, and being at last set on the right track by a passing drover, he struggled on with his thievish fingers itching all the way to be at the box of which he held the key. John Jones's cry of rage at losing the key had such a tone of misery and trouble in it that some men, remembering it, might have found its echoes vexing. Tiburce went untroubled on that score.

Inquiries, carefully directed, led him to Ashford Warren. Renewed inquiries, carefully directed, led him to the fact that a Mr. Barclay had died there about a month ago—five weeks maybe—at a lonely house a long way from the village. Other inquiries led him to the house itself. He went by night, with a tallow candle and a box of matches in his pocket. He had walked about the lonely place by day and had ascertained that it was untenanted, but to his dismay had seen no sign of anything that looked like a stable. Now he prowled round the place in the dark, and having tried two doors and found them locked, he pulled out from his pocket his little rusted bundle of skeleton keys, and stealthily went through the bare and empty rooms. Coming on a third door, hitherto untried, he set his skeleton key to the lock and entered. The air of the room was damp and musty, and there was a scent of old straw in it. He closed the door, lit a match, and looked around. He saw a brick floor and bare walls, and a ceiling with rough whitewashed cross-beams. One one wall the remnants of a rack and manger, a rusted chain still trailing in broken bits of rotting straw, and facing these fragments a wide fireplace without a grate. High above the door was an unglazed barred window, covered by a shutter which closed from the outside. The thief lit his candle, locked the door, and made a survey. It was easy to see that the wide fireplace had never held a fire, for the white-wash on the bricks within its shaft bore no stain of smoke, but was green and yellow with old rains. Looking up it he could see the sky, almost light in contrast with the darkness of the chimney. The shaft had been left uncompleted, and rose to a height of not more than ten feet from the ground. A bar crossed it near the top, looking thin and spidery against the dull night sky. One glance showed this way of escape in case of any chance discovery. Tiburce was a coward, but he kept his wits about him in spite of the awful beating of his heart. "Five bricks from the fireplace on the left side, and six bricks from the floor." There was no mark of removal there. The whitewash was old and soiled, and seemed to have been undisturbed for at least a year or two. To the wooden trough which had once served as a manger, hung scraps of broken hoop-iron which had bound the rough boards together. With one of these scraps Tiburce went to work, and bit by bit he scratched away the sandy, yielding mortar until the brick was loosened and could be drawn away. To sharp wits like those of Tiburce Menseau there were signs

enough of a former removal when once the scratching had carried him an inch deep. It was evident that the brick had not been built into the wall as it then stood, and his heart beat with a pulsation more and more terrible as the obstacle yielded, and he peered into the hollow. He pushed in his hand almost as fearfully as if he had known of the presence of a rattlesnake there, and his fingers encountered a cold, smooth surface. The Box!

His heart gave one awful leap, and almost stopped. The sweat stood on his forehead in great beads. He was faint and giddy with excitement, but recovering himself he began to tear away the bricks surrounding the hollow already made. They came down easily, the sandy mortar having no cohesion in it, and now he gripped the box and held it with trembling hands upon the floor, and with greedy eyes knelt over it, panting and sweating and quaking, like the triumphant, cowardly, hungry, wayworn thief he was. His hand shook so he could hardly hold the key, and he was a full minute, which seemed eternal, in fitting it to the key-hole. It turned, the lid opened beneath his shaky fingers, and he saw a Bank of England note for five pounds spread out straight, and clean, and new. The Bank of England five pound note just fitted the box, and below it lay another, and another and another, for at least a hundred crisp and wealthy pages. Then came clean, crisp, and new, Bank of England notes for ten, for ten, for ten, until his greedy fingers turned up thirty or forty in a fold, and he was among notes for twenty, for twenty, for twenty, until the greedy fingers clutched another fold, and he was among notes for fifty, fifty, fifty, clean to the bottom of the cash-box. He laid his throbbing forehead against the cold wall, and drew the box to him, and feebly restored the notes and smoothed them down. Mechanically he took up from the floor the scrap of written paper which had enfolded the key, and laying that on the top of the notes he closed and locked the cash-box.

Now Ashford Warren enjoyed the advantage of belonging to a Parish Union, the centre of which was four miles away. The official centre of the Parish Union was the union workhouse. Two Irish tramps, woefully broken and amazingly hungry, had missed their way, and had got in the darkness of the early winter night into the road which led to the deserted house, under the impression that it was the road which led to Ashford Warren.

Tiburce Menseau heard footsteps, and listened with his hands on the cash-box, and his heart in his mouth. The steps came nearer, and he blew out his candle and listened again, quaking. Think how the thief and coward shook as the steps drew near! Then came a knock at the door of the house, and fell like the knock of doom on the shaking coward's heart. Could this be John Jones returned? Think how he shook at that fancy!

Messieurs the Irish reapers rapped again, and, finding no response, grew bolder and began to try the doors. Their footsteps came round the house nearer and nearer to the place where Tiburce crouched. Then desperation lent him sudden energy. He buttoned his ragged coat over the cash-box, and pushed one end of it between his hungry ribs and the waistband of his tattered trousers, and with stealthy steps made for the chimney. Up went his head as a hand was laid upon the door and shook its fastening. He felt about wildly with his hands and feet. The chimney was built with projecting bricks, and he began to ascend. He had only two or three feet to climb before his hand could grasp the bar at the top. Messieurs the tramps were setting their shoulders at the door, and he was half-delirious with terror. The space was growing narrower. Could he force himself beyond the bar? At any cooler time he might have hesitated, but now he struggled like a madman to get past it. The door gave way with a crash; he missed his footing, his hands failed, he dropped with his chin upon the bar, and the back of his head upon a projecting brick: three inches to this side or that he would have fallen clear. In the dead silence that followed the crashing fall of the door the tramps heard a horrible gurgling voice and a hollow sound of struggling, and with a superstitious terror pinching at their souls, they turned with one accord, and fled with the widespread fear of the dumb, dark night about them.

## IV.

John Jones, after his second night in a workhouse, walked back along the gloomy road on which he had lost his packet. Day after day, with the stout heart aching, he tramped along, wearily, wearily, and at last reached the little village where he had left his love. She was penniless by this time, beyond a doubt. He had been eight days away. Eight days! It looked like eighty years. He had a week's beard upon his face, and he was caked with mud. He was as forlorn-looking a tramp as one might find in England. It was growing dark as he sat upon a stone fence and looked down at the little village. In the growing darkness a rustic boy of about ten years of age came up hill, making his way to the village.

"Are you going to Ashford?" asked the tramp.  
"Ees," said the boy; "I be." And he edged away with one defensive elbow raised.  
"Don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you. Do you know Mrs. Norton's cottage?"  
"Ees, I do," said the boy across his elbow, resentfully.

"Miss Barclay lives there," said the tramp. "Will you go to the house and say that Mr. Mackenzie wants to see Miss Barclay at the railway station? Can you remember that?"

"Ees," said the boy again.  
"Mr. Mackenzie. Don't forget. At the railway station."

"All right," said the youthful rustic, and clattered away in hob-nailed shoon.

Somewhat doubtful of the delivery of his message, the forlorn young man made his way towards the railway-station, and waited in the unlighted lane which led to it. He had not to wait very long. A light and eager footstep came down the lane, and dark as it was he fancied he knew the figure.

"Is that you, Nell?" he asked.  
"Walter!" she answered in a startled voice. "Where are you?"

"Here," he said; "don't be frightened. I'm such a spectacle, I didn't want you to see me in the daylight. I've walked from Liverpool."

"Walked from Liverpool?" she cried.  
He told his story, and told it to his own disadvantage with many terms of self-disparagement. She heard it all, and then to his amazement she laughed—a little laugh of honest humor. If she could have seen him she would not have laughed, but she knew nothing of his hunger or his privations. These he had excluded from his narrative.

"Poor Walter!" she said. "I wondered why you did not write or come to me. I suppose the packet was about the money. It doesn't matter, for the money is found."

"Found?"  
"Yes. Found. Mr. Netherley, the lawyer at Wharton, had a cash-box to be given to me three weeks after uncle's death. It was sealed three years ago, and there was a thousand pounds in it, all in new Bank of England notes. Everybody says it was like poor uncle to leave his money in that way. He made no will, it seems, but he had nobody belonging to him in the world but me. We have a thousand pounds, Walter."

"Was there a key to the cash-box?" he asked.

"No," she said. "We broke the wax away, and the blacksmith came and picked the lock."

"What an extraordinary jackdaw the old bird was," said he to himself.

"Everybody knows about it," said the girl, "and everybody says there must be more money hidden away somewhere in the same strange way. For at one time he was known to be quite rich."

"Ah!" said he, "very likely."

"How strangely you speak," she said. "You have caught a dreadful cold. Come to the cottage."

"No," he said, "I can't come in to-night."

Deadlock again in John Jones's affairs. Was there no way of banishing John Jones altogether?

"Why not?" she asked him.

"I've walked from Liverpool," he said. "I'm a shocking spectacle."

"Nonsense," urged Nell. "Mrs. Norton will let you wash and brush your hair, and you will be presentable enough. She will be glad to see you. Oh! she is such a dear old woman."

"Yes, I daresay."

"How oddly you talk to-night." She seized his arm in a girlish, imperious, loving way. "Come with me. Why, Walter, what is this?"

He felt like a roughest wall. She ran her hands about his sleeves and shoulders, and felt his fluttering rags.

"Walter, what is it?"

"Mud," he said stolidly. "Mud and rags."

Then he added, as though that explained it all, "I've walked from Liverpool."

She began to realize the situation.

"You had no money?"

"Haven't seen a cent this five days," said he doggedly.

"Then you have been hungry! You have walked to find me, starving all the way, to bring that wretched unlucky parcel. Oh! you poor, brave suffering dear."

"Don't cry, my darling," he said tenderly. "It's all over, and it wasn't much for a man. It sounds bad for a girl to think of, but, bless you, lots of men do it every year."

"You are hungry now!" she said reproachfully. "I know you are. And you cruel boy, you never said a word to me about it."

"Had other things to talk about," said John Jones defensively.

"Take my purse," she said imperiously, thrusting it into his hand, "and go away and make yourself decent, and eat something."

"Very well," said John Jones, accepting the situation. He had given her all he had, and he loved her too well to have any qualms about taking help from her. "My uncle has all my things."

"Where is he?" asked Nell innocently.

"He resides in London, my dear," said John Jones gravely. "In Holborn."

"Then you had better go to London," she answered simply, "and get your things from him. You can go to-night. Get something to eat before you start."

"No," he said. "I can't show up anywhere. I should disgrace you. It's only an hour by train. It's about time the train went, I think, isn't it?"

"That's the signal," she cried. Go at once. Good-bye."

The red lamp gleamed high in air two hundred yards away. John Jones kissed Walter Mackenzie's sweetheart, and ran to the station. He slouched the shocking bad hat, and demanded a third-class for London. Then he saw that the purse held several sovereigns and a bank-note or two neatly folded. He reached Enston, and made for the Tottenham Court Road, where many of the shops were still ablaze with gas. Straight into the shop of a tailor who sold ready-made clothing, plunged John Jones, demanding to be clothed. The shopmen were at first for ejecting him, but became civil at the sight of the purse. A neighbouring bootmaker being summoned, brought many pairs of boots in a green bag. New underclothing, a new shirt, a new suit of clothes, new boots, and a new hat being set with John Jones in a private room, there ensued a rapid transformation scene. Walter Mackenzie, barrister-at-law, emerged from the apartment John Jones had entered, and John Jones, of the Seven Dials, went out of being forever.

From that time forth Walter Mackenzie's luck underwent a favourable change. An uncle of his—not the one in Holborn—died and left him money. He prospered at the bar, and he married and had children, and lived respectably and honourably. The dead hand enriched his wife with two more oddly rendered bequests. Nell used sometimes to excuse a little extra expenditure on the pretended supposition that John Launceston Barclay's funds were not yet all paid in, but years went by and the last of the old man seemed long since to have been heard.

The old house at Ashford Warren had been put into the market, but nobody would buy it, so it dropped out of the market again and was forgotten. But as time went on a new railroad happened to be started in that district, and the house had to come down. Walter Mackenzie on a spare day went to meet the company's lawyer—an old acquaintance—and discuss compensation. He would have left the mere business to an agent, but he had a whim about the matter.

"You won't want much for this tumble-down old shed," said the lawyer.

"I don't know, Wre-stall," said the barrister. "I don't know. I valued the old place highly once."

"Oh! Ah, yes!" said Wre-stall. "Love's young dream. Mrs. Mackenzie lived there. I remember."

"They used that place for a stable," said Walter laughingly. "It was intended for a warehouse, I believe, but the old man bought a donkey for Nell when she was quite a baby. I broke the brute in, I remember."

He laughed and sighed at that romantic reminiscence, and setting a foot on the prostrate door, he entered the stable. The wood flew into tinder at his step and let him through to the brick floor—it was so old and rotten.

"Hillo!" cried Wre-stall, "what's that?"

"What's what?" asked the barrister.

His companion had stooped to pick something from the ground. The something brought a little old-fashioned square lock with it.

"Skeleton keys," he said. "Inside the door, too, and the bolt shot. I'm a native detective," the lawyer added laughingly. "Now, you know," he went on, with a half-smiling, mock gravity, "that a man can't lock a door on the inside after leaving a room. The only place of exit is the chimney."

"You establish your mystery," said Mackenzie lightly. "Where's the motive for locking one's self in and going up the chimney?"

"Never mind the motive," said the lawyer, laughing openly. "Let's investigate the mystery."

So saying he stooped and peered up the chimney, and withdrew his head so hastily that he knocked his hat off. Then it was Mackenzie's turn to laugh, but there was such a look on the lawyer's face that the laugh found an abrupt termination.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Look and see," said the lawyer, gasping scared and pale.

He looked and rose after the look almost as pale as his companion.

"There's a skeleton hanging there," he said.

"Ay, said the lawyer, "and a skeleton key to the skeleton keys, I fancy. That seems likely to be a true word, spoken in random jest, when I picked up these keys."

They stood looking at each other a long time, pale and silent.

"The few rags there look ready to fall to dust," said Walter, breaking the silence. He put his stick into the chimney and moved it slightly, when, as if there needed only a sign to bring it down, the whole ghastly thing came tumbling loose into the grateless hearth, and with the falling bones fell something with a metallic crash. The two recoiled and when the smother of woollen dust had cleared itself away, the lawyer advancing, cried, "the motive," and with the crook of his walking-stick dragged up a small cash-box by the handle. The key was in the keyhole, and with wrinkled features of disgust, and a finger and thumb which only just touched it, he unlocked the box, and there before them lay eight thousand pounds, in Bank of England notes, and on the top of them the paper which Tiburce Menseau, habitual criminal, had stolen from one John Jones, a tramp from Liverpool. There was nothing by which to identify Tiburce, but Walter Mackenzie had no doubt of him, nor had the lawyer, when he heard the story.