

THE CITY OF TERROR.

AN ALLEGORY.

(ALBA).

CHAPTER II.

My experiences now led me to serious reflection on my future movements, as I endeavored, not without great difficulty, to extricate myself from the intricacies of the Grove. To return to Sapless-land was out of the question—at least for me. Others might live there contentedly, perhaps, but I could not. The years I had already spent there had only been rendered endurable by the steadily nourished hope of something better. I had sought that something in the "Happy Valley," and with what result? There remained, therefore, only the City of Mammon as a field for my exertions, and a Land of Promise for my aspirations. The counsels I had received in my native land had all pointed in that direction, and I had found the animadversions passed on the Forbidden Valley so amply justified that I began to entertain more respect for the judgment of my friends of Sapless-land. I had, however, by my descent into the Valley, missed the direct road to the desirable centre of prosperity; and there remained nothing for it but to follow the stony-bed of a dry river course which would ultimately bring me into one of the many by-ways that led to the city of Mammon, although, as I guessed, that, in turn, would bring me only to the fag-end of the town. It was a dark and solitary journey; neither moon nor stars could be seen through the murky cloud of lamp-smoke, although a faint ruddy glow, as of the coming dawn, seemed somewhat to encourage me. I should have broken my neck many times but for the aid of my trusty staff. However, I summoned all my courage to the task, and made the best of my situation. But my experiences of the night were not yet ended. I had still something to learn of the delights of the "Happy Valley."

I had travelled a considerable way down the dry river-course, stumbling in the dark against boulders and shelving rocks, when, on rounding a bluff which stood almost at the end of the Valley where it debouched on the road leading to the city, I discovered that the faint glow above mentioned was not, as I had hoped, the morning dawn, but proceeded from a large building, whose pillared portico revealed the brightly illumined and richly adorned interior in which a vast number of persons were moving about. The approach was by several broad marble steps; and of the stream of travellers who seemed to be already on the road, many had turned aside, while a few were descending and pursuing their way. There was no sound of music or of laughter, nothing to break the dead silence, except the tread of feet. Stopping to reconnoitre, I observed that those who made their exit were in an extremely dilapidated condition. One was minus his coat; another had lost his hat; a third was barefoot. Seized with an irresistible desire to unravel the mystery, I passed up the stair and entered the hall. Straight facing the entrance was a gilded throne, whereon sat a richly-robed figure, her head surmounted by a gaily-colored toque of curious shape. Her eyes were blindfolded; but peering closely, I could see that the poering was tilted over the right eye, though in a way to escape a casual observer. In her hands she held bags of netted-work, through the meshes of which could be seen a wealth of gold-pieces, similar bags of various sizes depended from every finger; and she sat with both arms outstretched, as if to display her gifts to the hungry and longing eyes of her courtiers. Before her throne stood a sort of altar, whereon were inscribed in gay colors the words "Give and you will get." Behind this was a large stool on which the foot of the Diva rested; and looking narrowly I perceived that a spring extended from it to a small wheel which turned as the Diva pressed the spring, and communicated, in turn, with the moveable top of the altar. On this the company crowded to lay their gifts. First, they laid money—all they had of it; then, watches, breastpins, keepsakes. Then they began to divest themselves of their attire, beginning, of course, with the more dispensable articles. It was all in vain; the Diva pressed the spring, the wheel went round, the moveable top tilted, and offering after offering disappeared for ever into a seemingly bottomless receptacle, while the treacherous gifts still hung invitingly on her fingers. Once or twice she threw a small purse at some votary who looked as if he had enough of it, and was about to depart, but in every case the meshes broke and the gold-pieces, scattered over the moveable top, were tilted into the merciless receptacle.

I had now no difficulty in accounting for the beggarly condition of those whom I had seen turning their backs on this temple of misfortune. But it amazed me much that any could remain; and, impelled by something more than curiosity, I withdrew behind a pillar to watch how these fared. From where I stood I had a full view of the hall, and of a sort of passageway at one end, which I took to be a side entrance. This passageway was very dark, and there seemed to be some one sitting in it—a dark figure which reminded me uncomfortably of the three sister hags. While making note of these things, I was startled by a fearful cry—not a shout from the company, but the piercing wail of a single voice; and looking towards the centre of the hall, I beheld a man

standing in an attitude of despair, and in a state of complete nudity. He had sacrificed everything to the Diva, in order to win the favor of the Diva. Just then, a wild figure with flaming eyes bounded from the farther end of the hall, and with a many-lashed scourge drove the unhappy victim towards the dark passage-way. A trap in the floor, obedient to the foot-pressure of grim Death, received him out of sight. My heart sickened as I slunk from the hall; and, shaking from my raiment the dust of the Accursed Valley, I fled.

The dawn was breaking grey and cheerless as I reached the great plain which skirted, on that side, the city of Mammon. Even at that early hour I beheld a vast multitude of persons of both sexes, busily employed in digging the soil. Some who had preceded me along the road were already at work, while others were looking around, spade in hand, for a spot where they might dig. The greater part of the laborers were poorly clad, although some presented a very respectable appearance. Quite a number of many, idle curs were prowling about, to whom one and another of the diggers would, now and again, throw something, for which they would eagerly scramble. The scene, altogether, was far from inspiring, but the air was comparatively pure and invigorating—a great relief to one just escaped from the stifling atmosphere of the Valley. Seeing among the diggers many I had known in Sapless-land, the thought occurred to me, could this be the destined field of my own future efforts? The idea was dismaying; not that the prospect was in itself particularly repulsive, for I was not afraid of hard work; but because it contrasted so dismally with the day-dreams and imaginary pictures in which I had indulged regarding my future in the City of Mammon. However, I quickly made up my mind to look things straight in the face; and, as a first step, to obtain all the information possible concerning what I saw around me.

Looking about for some one to address on the subject, I perceived that my nearest neighbor was one of the gentler sex—a circumstance which made me hesitate to intrude myself upon her. She was neither young nor handsome; her hands were hard and horny with handling her spade, and her eyes, which might once have been fine, were sunken, as though with much weeping. But there was on her countenance a look of such peaceful contentment that I felt wonderfully attracted, and stood watching her, unperceived, as she worked. Her method struck me as very peculiar. In common with all the rest, she appeared to be digging up a homely kind of root; but every now and then she stooped down and picked up what seemed to me a very small stone, which she slipped into her pocket. It was done so rapidly, and with so little motion that I did not notice it until after several repetitions. This drew my attention to the fact that the soil was full of these small stones, although of what possible use they were, I could not make out. Filled with curiosity, I carefully regarded such other laborers as were within reach of my scrutiny, to see whether they did likewise. A few did; and what struck me as very strange was that these few all wore the same expression of peace and content as did the woman. The great mass of the people, however, went straight on with their digging, stolidly or savagely, according to temperament, and paid no attention whatever except to the business in hand. To one of these—a sulky-looking fellow in a coarse blouse, who was driving his spade viciously, and tossing the clods about as if he were working strictly under protest—I at length addressed myself.

"What are you digging for, may I ask?" I inquired as civilly as I could. "For daily bread," he answered gruffly, jerking out with the corner of his spade the homely root which, I inferred from his gesture, represented that necessary article.

"Is that what they are all digging for?" I asked again. "Sope so. Don't think any of us would dig if we could help it, do you? There's nothing else to be got out of this ground, and mighty poor it is, and wouldn't care if there was enough of it."

"You have hard times, have you?" asked another who stood near. His face was turned from me, but I fancied I had heard the voice, although I could not say where.

"Hard times! I should think so! They've all the soft times over there"—pointing to the city. "Wonder how they'd like to change places with us fellows!"

"Perhaps they are as sorry for themselves as you are," answered the stranger. "Do you think they have no troubles?"

"Troubles! What can they know about troubles, with plenty of money in their pockets, and nothing to do? That won't wash, Mister; that won't wash. When their day's turns are done they have their money-bags to lie down and rest upon, while I've got to lie down there." And he pointed to a heap of Discontent and other ill-smelling weeds which lay around in large quantities.

"Money-bags don't make a soft pillow," returned the other, "even when there is nothing in them but Cold Coin. You are better off than they are, if you only had the wit to profit by your advantages. Why don't you pick up the stones?" And with his foot he pushed towards the man a little heap of earth that was full of them.

"Stones—pshaw! What good are they?" replied the man in a tone of

withering contempt. "A plug of tobacco is worth a cart-load of them. What would they fetch over there?" pointing again to the city.

"Not much, certainly; but I can take you to a place where they come in handy."

The man looked at the speaker with a scowl. He evidently knew and understood him better than I did.

"You be—!" He did not finish the sentence, but resumed his digging more doggedly than ever.

While this conversation was progressing I had been puzzling my brains over the identity of the stranger. His voice was quite familiar to me, but not so his face; I could not recall that ever I had seen it. It was a bright, beaming face, plump and wholesome-looking. He was dressed in a long, dark-colored tunic, and wore a tallish head-covering of very peculiar shape, but very becoming withal. He saw me looking at him, and smiled.

"You don't remember me?" he said. "Fairheart." And he held out his hand.

"Fairheart—you don't say?" I exclaimed, cordially grasping the same. "How you are changed! I should never have known you. Where have you been all this time? They had it all over Sapless-land that you were—"

"and my voice instinctively dropped—"pining in a dungeon in the black City of Terror."

"Not exactly," he replied, laughing. "Not exactly. There are more things in Heaven and on Earth than are dreamed of in the philosophy of Sapless-land. Have you been long here?"

"Only just arrived. I came to strike out for myself and make my mark in the town there."

"This is the best part of it, he answered, gravely.

"The best part, do you say? Why, it's only the fag-end—can't be said to be in the City at all. Here they only dig for Daily Bread. I should hope to do more than that."

"Well, come along, and we will take a look at the City proper. The road, as you see, does not cut clear across this extensive common, but goes zig-zag, giving a fine view of the town as you approach it."

And certainly, from the Common the City of Mammon had a very imposing aspect. We could see rows of palatial buildings directly in front of us; beyond these, lofty pavilion shaped roofs gaily ornamented with flags; and beyond these, again, a hill crowned with superb monuments. I waited with some impatience the full daylight, that I might adequately enjoy the scene, and I said as much to Fairheart while we walked along. He shook his head gravely, and stooping to pick up a stone, which he slipped into his pocket, said:

"You will not find the prospect improved when you see it more clearly. The atmosphere of this whereabouts is very deceptive, and things look best at a distance. Now, take notice of these lamps, as we approach them."

I did so, and saw, to my surprise, that the magnificent lights which he pointed out from the immediate outskirts of the city, proved, on our reaching them, to be very sorry lamps indeed. The fact was, and I realized it more as the day went on—that over the City of Mammon, as over Sapless-land, there lay a perpetual mist; only it was different in kind. In Sapless-land it thickened in proportion as it went up; it hung like a leaden pall over the sky, while the barren land with all its uninteresting features remained distinctly plain. In the City, on the contrary, it hung low, and gave deceptive, shadowy forms to everything; while in the upper sky a kind of light which was not sunshine, but, if I may use the expression, a promise of it, served to impart a feeling of hopefulness. That light was noticeably brightest just over the Hill of Fame, where stood the monuments. I remarked this to Fairheart.

"We will look at them all," he said again, gravely. "We will look at them all." And again he stooped for a stone.

"What in the world do you want with these stones?" I asked.

"You will find out some day. Meanwhile, take my advice, and gather as many of them as you can."

"Are they of any value?" I asked. "They are precious stones, but only in the rough, at present, so people won't bother their heads about them."

"Perhaps they are ignorant of their value," said I, stooping, also, to pick up one.

"None so ignorant as those who won't believe," answered Fairheart in the serious manner he at times assumed.

"Are they confined to this locality?" I inquired.

"They are very scarce in the City. I found a few in Sapless-land. There are none down there, he added, indicating the direction of the Smoke-clouded Valley.

I now began to look out for the stones myself.

"Only the clean ones," said Fairheart, seeing me about to lift one which did not come under that head. "Only the clean ones. The rest are good for nothing."

Having gathered some, I was about to put them in my pocket when Fairheart said:

"Stop a bit. Have you a clean handkerchief?" It happened I had one, so he made me tie my stones into that. He then showed me that he had a small bag inside his pocket, and it was into it he put what he gathered.

By this time we had reached the palatial buildings which were the main feature of the City of Mammon. They certainly lost a great deal of their imposing effect on a nearer inspection. We were about to enter one of them

when the glitter of a bright golden coin lying on the pavement attracted my attention.

"Hullo!" I cried, diving on the impulse of the moment, to pick it up. "Take care!—don't touch it—it is red-hot!" exclaimed Fairheart hurriedly. But I had already discovered that it was so, and had thrown it from me, along with the skin of my forefinger and thumb, before he had done speaking.

"What sort of coin do you call that?" I asked testily, as I shook my suffering members.

"You will find a good deal like it in this town," answered Fairheart. "Is it all red-hot?"

"No, not all, but most of it. Come in here and see for yourself."

We passed through the wide pillared entrance, and found ourselves in a large and lofty hall. At the further end heaps of shining gold pieces piled up on the polished pavement were being eagerly transferred to bags of various sizes by the fortunate First-comers who stood near the treasure, while the numerous company that filled the hall crushed and pushed to get nearer and help themselves in turn.

Looking about me, I perceived along the wall certain recesses, grates across to about the height of three feet. Within each of the three recesses nearest the entrance, sat a quiet-looking individual of pleasant aspect, throwing out, from time to time, small silver pieces on which the company mostly bestowed very contemptuous looks.

A few persons occupied themselves in gathering them, while avoiding—as it seemed, purposely—the more glittering coin; but it must be confessed, their bags, which were by no means large, did not fatten very fast.

"These," said Fairheart, pointing to the three pleasant faced ones, "are Industry, Prudence, and Self-denial. Their money may be safely handled, for they deal only in Cold Coin."

"It would take long to grow rich upon it," said I, despondently.

"Perhaps so," returned Fairheart, dryly. "But look there, for a change."

Saying which, he made way for me so that I could have a fair view of those in front, and of the impish occupants of the other recesses, who kept shovelling out the gold pieces. The men grasped them by the handful, as many as they could, although I could see their fingers blistered, and deep brands upon the palms of their hands, as they shoved the money into their bags, and stretched out for more. Some whose bags were large and well-filled had hardly any fingers left. They were burnt to the very joints; yet the miserable beings stretched forth, the mutilated stumps as eagerly as ever. Nor was this all. The bags, in spite of their being made of specially prepared material, would sometimes catch fire, communicating it to the clothes of the possessor; and then a howl would pass through the hall, and those nearest the unfortunate would hustle him out to burn by himself—very often with their own bags smoking—lest their clothes might catch at his fire.

"How do you like that for a change?" asked Fairheart. "Dis-honesty, Bribery, Breach of trust, and Extortion," pointing to the impish in the other recesses, "deal only in Hot Coin. What do you say?"

"Let us go away," I answered, for I felt fairly sick. We passed out of the building and into the street, turning up a great thoroughfare that led to the heart of the city.

As we advanced up the wide and busy street I observed that while the pavement on which we were walking was firm and tolerably clean, the middle of the roadway was a perfect quagmire, and became, worse as we reached the Grand Square, which was simply a sea of mud. It was in this Square we found the pavilion-roofed edifices whose flags and other decorations had so fine an effect when seen from a distance. The pretentiousness, however, of the upper story only rendered still more ridiculous the paltriness of the rest. From the bed of black mud arose wooden piles, across which were laid loose boards, some, apparently, pretty sound, others quite rotten. Ladders of various heights reached from the mud to the different platforms; and above the general buzz of the busy town could be plainly heard the voices of the men who were endeavoring to climb those ladders, and the cheers or execrations that greeted them from the crowds who stood below, knee-deep in the mire. When any succeeded in reaching the platforms, they immediately received a shower of mud; and their efforts to address the audience might have been spared, since no one listened. Some times the rotten planks would give way, and the unfortunate be ignominiously precipitated into the deep quagmire, others rushing up to take their places.

"What, for goodness' sake, does it all mean?" I exclaimed in amazement.

"These," answered Fairheart, "are candidates for the honor of cleaning the street. Each man among them has invented and patented some pet apparatus for the purpose, which he is endeavoring to explain to the public; but up to this time none of their experiments have been quite successful, as you may see." Saying which, he pointed to a variety of curious-looking structures that seemed to have stuck fast, like stranded ships, in different parts of the sea of mud.

"You haven't a mind to try your luck among these, have you?" he laughingly asked. "You haven't any particular views on street-cleaning?"

"I'd rather go back to the Common," I replied. "It's a wonder those maniacs don't get smothered in the mire."

"Some of them do," returned my friend, quietly.

We continued our walk around the square, and by-and-by I perceived that Fairheart noticed the frequent looks I cast towards the Hill of Fame.

"Your heart is on that hill," he said, looking steadily at me.

I confessed that it was. Even before leaving Sapless-land I had contemplated endeavoring to make, if possible, a settlement on that inviting spot, where, as I was told, the lots were open to all, and there was plenty of room—especially at the top. The many plantations visible on its slopes indicated a rich and productive soil; while the numerous residences presented a most charming effect, as seen from the lower ground.

"It is not so good as it looks," remarked Fairheart, significantly.

"Some appear to find it very good," I retorted a little sharply, for I felt in no humor to be thwarted or discouraged. "Vegetation seems to thrive amazingly. My only fear is that all the available lots are already disposed of."

"It is said there is plenty of room at the top," returned my companion, dryly. "For myself, I have never been there."

We were now following a pleasant road which ascended a gentle and verdant acclivity. At some distance in front of us stood a large building through which the road seemed to pass, as the edifice extended on each side of it.

"They built pretty far down the hill," I observed, pointing to the structure in question.

"That," responded Fairheart, "is only the Emporium, where you procure seeds, and whatever may be necessary in the way of implements, before beginning the ascent of the hill."

"Are we not now ascending the hill?" I asked in surprise.

"Hardly," returned he, with a smile. "My experiences of the morning recurred to me with disheartening effect. I looked at Fairheart, but he said nothing more, and we walked on in silence till we reached the Emporium. Then it was that, standing in the wide archway through which the road passed, and in which it terminated, I saw that the hill I had imagined myself already ascending rose at the off-side of a deep and rugged ravine, where jagged rocks and thorn-brakes offered a formidable defiance to the daring adventurer; while the hill itself presented a succession of rocky terraces only attainable by steep and narrow path-ways, instead of the smooth and easy slopes I had pictured to myself. These terraces did not appear to entirely surround the hill, but were terminated at each end by a dense jungle.

"It is just practicable," said Fairheart, as we both looked down into the ravine, and then looked upward. "To Keen-wit, Courage and indomitable Perseverance it is just practicable. The questions to be considered are, first, Have you these qualities? and, second, Is the game worth the candle?"

I did not immediately reply. My mind was going, half unconsciously, through a process of summing up, which took in all I had heard and seen since leaving Sapless-land, together with a review of things generally as found in that depressing region itself; and by way of sum-total, the consideration presented itself—"If I turn back, what is there else to live for?" My resolution was taken. Come what might, I would endeavor to ascend the hill. I could but fail.

"Fairheart," I said, "it is not for me to say whether I have Keen-wit, or, indeed, much wit of any kind. But I know I have Courage and Perseverance; and with these, and any wit I may have, I am determined to try the ascent. What is there to turn back to? Daily Bread, perhaps; but I hope to find that on the hill, and a good many other things besides. The prospect must be charming, and the air most salubrious. I am resolved to proceed."

"Very well," replied he. "I will help you to select your seed, and then bid you good-speed."

TO BE CONTINUED.

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