

THE HISTORY OF A LOAFER.

CHAP. IV.

THE PORTLAND ARMS.

And how came Gerald Winter into the "Black Country?" As we have said before, he ran away. He laid his plans craftily. The master with whom he boarded lived in Bloomsbury Square. Gerald, by chance, was the only boarder in the house, who had a room to himself. This was a little back one on the ground floor. Among the rest of his baggage was an old tourist's knapsack, which had belonged to his brother. Into this he stuffed two shirts and sundry small articles of clothing, and then began to reckon up his finances. His father, indulgent to him in everything, was especially so in the matter of pocket money. Besides this, he had had money sent to him the previous day, the which was intended to defray his expenses to his native village. He had three sovereigns, three-and-sixpence in silver, besides a gold watch and chain and a gold pin. It wanted yet some hours to daylight. He stealthily crept to the door, unlocked it, closed it after him, and ran as hard as he could—he knew not whither. It was raining, or rather drizzling—the gas lights, though burning, were hardly visible through a dense November fog. On he ran—along Great Russell Street, along Oxford Street, as fast as his legs could carry him. He could hardly see before him. Once he ran up against a costermonger's donkey, whose master dexterously applied the whip to his shoulders. At any other moment he would have thought of the pain, but now he had no time. Still on he ran, but at last met with an obstacle which would baffle the swiftest and most scientific of runners. He had by this time swallowed a large quantity of genuine London fog, which did not agree with his country stomach. He had no wind left, and ignominiously gave in just as he arrived at the portico of the Pantheon in Oxford Street, under which several people were "standing up," (as the Cockney phrase has it,) in the drizzling rain.

"Where are you a running to, young Hopeful?" enquired an individual with a blue scarf and high carbuncle pin, cut-away coat and tight trousers,—a gentleman evidently connected in some way with "osses."

"What's that to you, Ned; can't you let the boy alone?" said another gentleman, considerably more than half-drunk. He was a much younger man, with unmistakably more of the air of a gentleman than his companion, though that same air was getting rather foul by contamination.

"D——n it, Ned, I can stand this no longer; let us have one more before we go home."

"As you will, Mr. Parsons; only if they says down in Blankshire—if they says that as 'ow Mr. 'Enry got into bad habits in London,—don't say it was all Ned Wright's fault, that's all."

Gerald had been startled by the name of Parsons, and still more by the mention of Blankshire. He knew now who his new acquaintance was. He was Henry Parsons, supposed to be studying medicine in London,—a young gentleman of whom he had often heard, and the son of a friend of his father's, the Rev. George Parsons, a clergyman of Ritualistic tendencies, and private chaplain to Viscount Cipher, of Cipher Hall, in the northern portion of the County of Blank. London public school boys are never deficient in shrewdness, and Gerald was no exception to the rule, especially when he himself was not concerned. In a very few moments he divined three things: That young Mr. Parsons was fast going to the bad. That Mr. Ned Wright was doing his utmost to conduct his friend to that desirable end; and still further, that Mr. Wright was making money by the operation. The pair adjourned to a gin shop called "The Portland Arms," which was yet open. Gerald was invited to share in

the refreshment; firstly, because he was cold; and secondly, because he was anxious to know more of his companion.

A regular gin shop, Gerald had never before entered, and a gin shop in Oxford street, between four and five o'clock on a November morning, is a sight to startle any one. Alas for human frailty! it may there been seen in every shape. It is not a pleasant sight, no, friend artist, not even a picturesque sight. Rags may be picturesque, dirt often is, but gin rags and gin dirt—never! Hogarth painted "Gin Lane" to the life. It is only revolting,—not even impressive. There is nothing "sensational" about a gin palace at the hour above named, on a foggy morning. The gas burns dimly,—the huge tawdry mirrors are clouded with fog-vapor,—the once cheerful fire in the grate behind the bar is nearly out,—the fog is so intense that you can hardly read the big letters which label the large yellow barrels behind the counter,—every face seems besmeared with fog,—every throat is hoarse with fog. But the company is the same as usual. Look at that group sitting in the corner to the right. They are professional pick-pockets, the *fly fakers*, the despised of *cracksmen and star gazers*,—what Americans would, I suppose, call *mean thieves*. But all thieving in London is now mean. Highway robbery has ceased to exist, and burglary is very rare. I cannot see the difference between taking a watch out of a shop window, or the handkerchief out of a coat-tail pocket. I never tried either, but surely the latter feat must be the more difficult of the two. Therefore, ye pick-pockets, be on your dignity, and insist on your rightful position of honor,—of "honor among thieves." There are few juveniles among them. This is not a juvenile house. Boy thieves will be found about the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, Saffron Hill, and still more about the East and North of London. The neighbourhood of juvenile thieves is always indicated by "penny gaffs." The gentlemen at the "Portland Arms" are decidedly unprepossessing. Many wear patches over the eye. This is, I fancy, more often a disguise than a necessity; if it be not, then, pick-pockets suffer more from black-eyes than most people. These gentlemen do not come to the gin shop to practice their profession. Their evening work is done; they have come here for rest and refreshment after their labors. They have a tacit understanding with the landlord that they will behave while within his walls; for the "Portland Arms" is not a suspected house. A detective rarely finds his way thither.

Another class who bid fair soon to be affiliated with the first named, are some young gentlemen, much too young to be out of bed at this hour. They look pale and, in the fog, almost yellow. Late hours, bad tobacco and ardent spirits, evidently do not agree with them. These youths are now robbing their employers' tills by infinitesimal but almost daily doses. The climax will soon come;—gin hastens these matters.

Another class, no observer could mistake. Men of honest but haggard countenances, and ragged clothes. These are mechanics out of employment, laborers, with none to hire them, often artificers on the strike. Their wives are at the door, calling to them to come home. Go, if you be men! In the days of prosperity these men were frugal; poverty has made them extravagant. Their money, once spent in food, is now wasted in gin. Their money—did I say? Not their earned money, but the price of the saw and the plane, the Sunday coat, or the wife's gown, at the neighbouring pawn shop.

And woman is there too,—old and young. Woman shouting—woman bawling—woman cursing, biting, kicking, scratching—in one word—woman drunk! Many of these are periodically removed by the police, to whom they give much more trouble than the pick-pockets.

And woman in another garb, more hateful still. Poor