

And the effects of that false imprisonment—the legal accident of which I had been the victim—had followed me till now. But for that I should not have fallen in with the old ballad singer, and have been reported by him—as it was plain I had been—as fit for further training in crime. Those thoughts passed through my mind then, bitterly stirring it up, and afterwards I had fuller confirmation of the influence that the 'legal accident' had exercised in these after events. Nevertheless, I did not even then entirely forget how that otherwise disastrous 'accident' had been overruled for good to me; and I trusted that the same good hand of my heavenly Father which had interposed 'to keep me from evil in my former prison, would not be withdrawn from my protection in this new difficulty. He who had been with me in one trouble even when I knew him not, surely would not forsake me now.

'Hooked you there, Rokey, have I?' said Sloppy, otherwise Solomon Stevens, with a malicious grin, when he saw, or fancied he saw, that I hesitated to reply to his taunt.

'No, you haven't,' I said: 'I was sent to prison, but it was a mistake, and the magistrate who sent me there found out that I was innocent.'

Another loud and mocking laugh from my visitor followed.

I need not tax my reader's patience by describing the further particulars of my conference with Solomon Stevens; and I will condense as much as possible the narrative of my imprisonment.

I was in a den of villany. Where it was situated I cannot tell, except that it was on the banks of the Thames, and that the house itself was ancient, and as I judged large and solitary. It seemed to be the remains of some former conventual building and was well calculated for concealment, and, if need were, for resistance. I was not admitted to the secrets of my prison house: but I had reason to suspect, during the many weeks I remained there in duration, that it had secret and subterraneous passages; and that while externally it had the appearance of an innocent relic of antiquity, it was so strengthened and complicated within by bars, bolts, iron-lined shutters, trap-doors, and double doors, that great force would have been required to obtain entrance against the will of the inmates, or I may almost say, garrison; while it was so jealously guarded as to be almost beyond risk of surprise. My readers will remember that I am writing of the early

part of the present century; and probably the building I have described has been demolished, and its site now covered with modern streets. At the same time, similar retreats of crime are not, I believe, unknown in the present day to the criminal section of modern City Arabs; and it may be that the police of London are not entirely ignorant of their existence.

The owner or ostensible head of this establishment was the person whom I have previously described, and whom I heard addressed while there, only by the slang title of the Captain. He kept no female servants, nor were any females to my knowledge, admitted into the house; but he had three or four male attendants, besides an old man who bore the name of 'Twopenny,' who was alike deaf, sullen, and taciturn, and whose chief duty while I was there seemed to be that of dogging my footsteps, and pouncing upon me at unexpected times and places, when I had so far obtained my liberty as to be allowed to quit my place of close confinement, and had the freedom given me of certain rooms on the ground floor at the back of the building, from the windows of which nothing could be seen but a high blank wall, and the small yard or garden which this wall inclosed. With regard to the other apartments in the house, my curiosity would have been baffled, even if I had wished more than I did to gratify it; for I was not only given to understand that it would be at my imminent peril if I attempted to enter them, but to make assurance doubly sure, every door was kept fast locked.

At times, this stronghold of crime seemed to be deserted by all its inmates except my old keeper; but appearances were fallacious, for I accidentally discovered that the Captain was very rarely far distant, and that, in some part or other of the building, some secret business was constantly in progress. I have no doubt now that that business was coining; but I did not know, and could not guess then, how systematically this crime was carried on.

At other times, however, the Captain had several visitors; and with these—though under his sharp and scrutinizing eye—I was compelled to associate. One large room, rather roughly furnished, was common to all who came as well as to the regular garrison; and here all seemed to meet on equal terms of fellowship, in which the host himself had no apparent superiority.

The visitors were a strange and motley crew; and both the time and method of their appearance and departure were silent, secret, and mysterious. Generally, however, as far as I

could judge, it was in the dead of night they came and went: and neither the presence nor absence of any of the number occasioned either remark or confusion in the household.

Why should I assume a thin veil of mystery which every one of my readers can so easily penetrate? I have said that the house was a den of villany. I may add that it was a regularly organized fastness of crime, and he whom I have spoken of as the Captain was the head of the confederacy. Here, then, constantly were assembled, or going and coming as inclination led or occasion required, men who daily and hourly held human laws in contempt, and set them at defiance; burglars returning with their spoils from distant districts, forgers and utterers of forged notes and base coin; highway robbers; pirates; smugglers; pick-pockets, and others who, coming under no particular denomination, were ready for any and every evil work.

I soon discovered, moreover, that the society in this place of infamy differed in some respects from that into which I had first been introduced. That was the entrance hall; this, the inner temple itself of crime. There, comparatively, little discrimination existed—a life of lawlessness giving a sort of title to admission, subject only to general rules having regard to the immediate security of its members; but here none but stanch and desperate villains were eligible, and a suspicion of treachery would have been a sentence of death to the traitor. Here, too, lay concealed for weeks, and even months, men on whom large rewards had been set, and for whom the eyes of the police were constantly and greedily on the watch. Men who were supposed to have left the country remained in safe hiding here, till the scent had become cold and pursuit had been given up in despair; while, on the other hand, those whose safety demanded it, or who had incurred the suspicion of the gang, were speedily and secretly dismissed to distant shores from this haunt of wickedness,—its proximity to the river, and the Captain's intimate connection with lawless seamen, furnishing constant means of thus evading justice.

I found, also, that every kind of personal disguise was kept in readiness, in the secret recesses of this 'Thieves' Castle.' I have seen men who made their stealthy appearance as gentlemen, retreat in the garb of mendicants, and apparent beggars as suddenly and completely transformed into the outward aspect of gentlemen; dark hair and complexion often be-