

ther's, he went to his room later than usual; but a beautiful full moon looked at him so gloriously that, instead of lulling him to sleep, it inspired his poetic imagination. All at once he jumped up, exclaiming, 'What an idiot I am! I have left those lines in the pocket of my office coat! If Tom Coles in arranging the office should knock the coat off the peg, the letter might fall out. He would be sure to show it to Joe Briscoe, and then how he would laugh at me! I should be a regular butt for all his jibes and sneers!'

He lay down again, but not to sleep. We have said that Howard was particularly sensitive to the feeling of being laughed at, and the idea now that his beloved Mildred would be included was agony to his mind. At last he determined that he would get up very early in the morning, before the office was opened. He knew the window of a little closet adjoining the clerks' office was fastened for security with a peculiar hasp, which was so troublesome that Mr. Page had more than once found that Tom Coles had omitted fastening it at all. It was just possible that it might be the case now. At all events he determined to try; for, if it were so, he could slip into the closet through the clerks' office, to the place where his coat hung, and return again, without any one knowing he had been out.

He rose accordingly very early, and cautiously descended the stairs; but not so cautiously but that the wakeful ear of his mother heard his steps, and thinking one of her daughters was ill, she opened her door just when her son was passing.

'Howard, dear! where are you going so early?'

Howard knew his mother would call him a silly fellow, if he told her the object of his very early rising; so he only said, 'I cannot sleep, mother, and I am going to take a walk.'

'You had better wait a little longer, I think,' said Mrs. Latimer, and Howard went out.

As he crossed Farmer Bray's field—that being the shortest way to Mr. Briscoe's—the farmer's large watch-dog barked so furiously that the farmer himself opened his window and called out to know who was there.

'It is only me, Farmer Bray—Howard Latimer: I am taking a little walk, this fine morning—that is all.'

'Fine morning! why, Mr. Howard, it's raining fast, sir.'

'Raining, is it? Ah! so it is. Well, I'm not so tender as to mind a little wetting; so, good-morning farmer.'

'It was Mr. Howard,' he explained to his wife. 'He must be rare put out to call this a fine morning, when it's raining hard enough to float our young ducks in no time.'

'Pooh! pooh! John; don't be going to make a story out of nothing at all,' said his wife, and there the conversation ended.

Meanwhile Howard reached the office without further interruption. His surprise was great, on going to the window where he intended to make an entry to find it not only unfastened, but wide open.

'Well,' thought Howard, 'that is lucky for me; but how Tom Coles will catch it in the morning! for I dare not shut it for fear of arousing the house.'

He climbed up the knotted stem of the old American creeper and was soon in the room. He passed through the clerk's office, seized his coat from the peg, eagerly thrust his hand into the pocket and found the envelope; but, not content with this, he determined to see if its contents were all right. He sat down on a ream of paper which had been brought in and not unpacked the day

before, and opened his treasured packet. The beams of the rising sun streamed across the spot where he was sitting, and enabled him to read it; but some great improvement suggested itself, and he took out his pencil and began making the alterations. While thus engaged he thought he heard a noise proceed from Mr. Briscoe's office. He listened, but hearing nothing more supposed it must have been fancy; and, having finished his corrections to his heart's content, without even passing the passage that led to Mr. Briscoe's office, he proceeded to retrace his steps as he had entered.

Just as he had got one leg out of the window Mr. Page turned the corner and directly faced him. Howard remained in the same position, for he was struck with the awkwardness of it, and the strange appearance it must have. Mr. Page looked steadily at him and said,—

'Latimer, you getting out of the window at this hour of the morning!'

'Yes, Mr. Page. I came for a paper I had left in the pocket of my office coat, which I particularly wanted; and when I came here I found the window open; so I went in and fetched it.'

This was all strictly true, as we know, but it appeared strange to Mr. Page that he should have any paper of sufficient importance to cause such unusual proceedings; and he knew that the window was properly secured the night before, for he had particularly seen to it; but he only said—

'It would have been better, I think, had you come in by the house, or even asked me for the private key, rather than steal into it in this way.'

Howard felt angry at the implied imputation and made no answer, but, stepping from the window to the American creeper, and from thence jumping to the ground, retraced his steps home.

Howard found the servant sweeping the passage, so he passed her and went to his room.

When they all went to breakfast, his mother asked him where he had been for a walk. As he had not told her his object before, he thought it useless to mention it now; so he only said he had been strolling through the fields.

'Was it not raining?' asked Bertha.

'Well, I believe there was a bit of a sprinkle,' replied her brother.

'You funny fellow!' said Amy. 'On fine mornings you are so lazy, and now because it was raining you took a fancy to stroll in the fields.'

When Howard reached the office, Mr. Page opened the door instead of Tom Coles; and his peculiarly serious countenance at once arrested his attention.

'Is anything the matter, Mr. Page?' said Howard.

'That question, sir, may be best answered by yourself; but Mr. Briscoe wishes to see you directly.'

Howard was surprised, on entering Mr. Briscoe's room to find two gentlemen with him. One he recognized as Sir Peter Brookes, a magistrate for the county; the other was a stranger to him.

'Mr. Latimer,' said Mr. Briscoe, 'may I ask you to inform me what was your business at my house at so early an hour this morning—that, the street door not being opened you were so obliging as to break a pane of glass in order to open the window, and then wrench the iron bar off its hinges which secured the shutter, to get in that way?'

'I assure you, sir, I did nothing of the kind,' exclaimed Howard. 'I wanted a paper I had left in the pocket of my coat;

and, finding the window open, I got in rather than disturb anyone so early.'

'A likely story that you should come, as you confess you did, and find the window open to receive you! And now, young man, tell us of your pleasing morning amusement in breaking open my desk and carrying off so much money. It must have been very fatiguing to you as the bags were very heavy,' continued Mr. Briscoe, ironically: 'but perhaps the same kind of person who prepared the window assisted you with the gold?'

Poor Howard was so overcome by the charge brought against him that his consternation might indeed be taken for guilt. He turned deadly pale and was obliged to hold the back of the chair by which he was standing, to support himself; while Mr. Briscoe tauntingly added, 'This, then, is the end of all your profession—A Thief!'

Howard began to speak, persisting in his innocence, but Sir Peter Brookes stopped him, and said: 'Young man, this is indeed a serious charge against you; and so many different circumstances concur in marking you as the culprit that it will be my painful duty to commit you for trial. I advise you to say nothing now, as, in the state of agitation you are in, you might disclose more than you would wish; so, reserve your defence for your trial; and I can only say, I trust for the sake of your widowed mother, you will be able to prove your innocence.'

His words recalled Howard to himself. He drew himself up with much dignity, and said: 'Gentlemen, I declare before God that I am guiltless of this horrible charge. What I stated is the truth—the whole truth—and I never even entered the passage which leads to this room.'

'That will do, sir; that will do,' said Mr. Briscoe; 'don't add falsehood to your other villainy.'

Who may tell the feelings of Mrs. Latimer and her daughters when the news reached their ears? They could not believe him guilty for an instant—the thought of it alone entering their minds seemed doing him injustice. But how was his innocence to be proved? So many things seemed to point to his implication in the outrage.

CHAPTER V.

'My conscience is my crown;
Contented thoughts my rest;
My heart is happy in itself:
My bliss is in my breast.'
—Robert Southwell.

LETTER FROM HOWARD LATIMER TO BERNARD SYLVESTER, BARRISTER-AT-LAW.

'Levington Jail, Aug. 18—

'My dear Sylvester,—Here is a pretty place for me to date a letter from! Levington Jail! Yes, it is true enough, that is my abode for the present.

'By a most extraordinary combination of adverse circumstances, I am just now in a rather painful position; though really I know so well my perfect innocence of the false charge brought against me, that I do not feel so cast down on this my first visit to one of Her Majesty's asylums as I should have fancied. I know now what it is to have the "answer of a good conscience toward God." I am sure that he will, in his own good time, show the world, and my mother— Ah! there it is, Sylvester; that is the point that grieves me. Not that she thinks me guilty; but, still, I feel the agony she is suffering, and will suffer, till all is made clear. And there is also one other who, though never doubting my innocence, will, I know, be miserable till it is proved.'