

When Pont had carefully performed his task and left the room, Nicholas said :

"I'm glad that thing is out of the way. It has always been a pain to me, and I really do not know why I have tolerated it so long. It embodies a lie to every ordinary imagination. There is no evil bond so strong that a man cannot break it. All it needs is a resolute hand. You can never put the serpent together again that I have just crushed."

"Or the men," said Mr. Cavendish.

"I don't wish to. Their contortions would have no meaning without the monster which they resist. There, let me place my beautiful Apollo on that bracket—free, beautiful, divine! What do you think of that?"

There was no more desire that morning to study the fine arts. The men found themselves under a strange influence. They had, first and last, entered a great many rooms of luxury and refinement on their swindling errands, but their minds had been in no mood for receiving good impressions. They had, this morning, been in this room so long, they had been in a mental attitude to receive and had received so many new impressions, that they had almost forgotten who and what they were. They had had the leading parts in a great many low and vicious comedies. Here they had been spectators in a drama of a different sort. They had been led by a beautiful path up to a realization of their own bondage and degradation, and, before their eyes, there had been typified the overthrow of their enthralling vices and their own resurrection from them.

"Fellows," said Nicholas, "tell me about yourselves. I'm sure you never came to this without going through great temptations and great struggles."

"There isn't much to tell. People call us 'dead-beats,'" said Mr. Cavendish, who always spoke for himself and his friends, "and that's just what we are. We have had our trial with the world, and we have all been dead-beaten. The road into our life is straight and easy. There isn't one of us who didn't begin to lie when he came into pecuniary trouble. Just as soon as a man begins to lie to excuse himself for not paying a debt, or stretches the truth a little in order to borrow money, he's on the direct road to our kind of life. He goes on lying more and more, as his troubles increase, and, before he knows it, lying becomes the business of his life. There are plenty of men in New York now, who are shinning around from day to day to keep their heads above water, and who will be among us, and as low as we are, in two years."

"Doesn't it trouble your conscience?" inquired Nicholas.

"Not a bit," responded Mr. Cavendish; and the others laughed in approval.