

waggon, which the latter had brought to the former's house. When within about a mile of the mound, and on the borders of the forest, they put their horse up at an inn, the host of which, who apparently waited their coming, immediately joined them, and the three sauntered slowly towards the place of meeting.

It was a strange, a melancholy scene. There, in that glorious and silent forest,—the bright stars shining down among them, the leaves stirred by the gentle breath of heaven, eloquently though silently speaking of Him who made them,—were gathering men who had outraged every law which God had given them. The maddest and the meanest of human passions had taken possession of their souls, and they worshipped the Mammon of Unrighteousness, with a devotion that, in a better cause, would have elevated and ennobled them. Regardless of the words of him, who said that “the way of the transgressor is hard,” they had rushed upon destruction,—they had coveted their neighbours' goods, and scrupled not to plunder the poor and powerless, the weak, and the unprotected.

Within the cave, which was dimly lighted by a single lamp, that sent its struggling rays through the dull and pent-up atmosphere, was a rude table, or rather a couple of planks raised on tressels, upon which were placed liquors and drinking cups, although no sign of debauchery appeared among those who, having arrived early, were seated round it. Among even them, however, were many degrees and shades of villainy. The greater portion, indeed, were actuated and impelled by the mere love of gain, the hope of enriching themselves by plunder. Some appeared still oppressed by a sense of shame, which they were not yet sufficiently steeped in guilt to be wholly able to stifle; and among these were some who were eagerly anxious to make a yet deeper plunge, in the hope that greater familiarity with crime might enable him to enjoy it.

Some appeared meant by nature for no other trade than that they followed, while others, had they been better instructed, and able to resist temptation, might have been moulded to other and better things. One, he appeared to be the only exception, was a gay and thoughtless youth, who had been lured and tempted into the band, and when he joined it, had probably never thought what the result might be. Already, he felt how fallen he was from such companionship, but he would not, or could not, retreat, and with the natural joyousness of his character had mingled a spirit of recklessness he made no attempt to curb. He sat beside a man who was in all things a contrast to him. He was a tall and muscular man,

though lank and slim, with a cold grey eye, and a mouth whose every movement was constrained as if it had something to conceal. His creeping and stealthy manner gave an idea of distrust and treachery, which was felt even by those who were bound with him in the same bonds of guilt. He was a money-getter in every sense of the word, and had no thought beyond the mere gold itself, no matter how he won it. He had been a dealer in money, before he became a thief, and held bonds and mortgages upon the houses and lands of many of those who were now his associates in the band.

“Why, Whitley,” said the youth, “what makes you carry such a hang-dog visage? Has any of your customers drowned himself—or are you afraid that you were not born to be drowned yourself? Cheer up, man; your face is enough to give a man an ague-fit.”

“I wish it could, if it would stop your tongue. This is no place for nonsense.”

“And what's it for, then? Would you have us all as sour and sulky as yourself? Try for once, now—do; and see if you can look less like a hang-man.”

A dark scowl passed over Whitley's face, but he made no reply.

“That's worse,” said the tormentor. “Try again; you wont, eh! Take some brandy and water, and you'll brighten up at once. ‘Care killed a cat,’ man. I don't think it ever killed a snake,—a copper-head, I mean—or the warning might have served you.”

“Snakes can bite; and copper-heads are not safe to play with,” muttered Whitley.

“We can take their teeth out, though,” said the youth, laughing. “But here comes Craighton; he's going to take the chair, so I'll not make the experiment at present. He looks as sad and solemn as yourself—though not by any means so ugly. You ought to be chairman, if every one had justice. I don't think the Old Gentleman you'll know some day, would let any one but himself take the head of the table, when he's by. Wasn't he the first *snake*, Whitley?”

Whitley did not reply, but seemed struggling to keep down his passion, and the young man ceased his banter.

With the exception, as we have before remarked, of this wretched and reckless youth, no sign of levity appeared among the band. They seemed met upon some serious business, the importance of which they felt. Indeed, this was a singular feature in the character of their associates. There was little of mirth, even on the surface of them. Of happiness, it is needless to say, there was none. And few of those who were assem-