

"If the remittance is large we shall all be paid."
 "Not so; they have overtraded their stock, and there is scarcely sufficient to liquidate the claims of my band. William Etherington, I owe you my liberty—perhaps my life. I should like to see you happy with the old squire's black-haired girl. Join me like a man, and claim your share. I can do without you; but is it not better to have eight or ten thousand pounds of your own, than to borrow five of a needy friend?"

Etherington spoke not. His eyes, fixed upon the dark impenetrable gloom, seemed starting from their sockets; his parched tongue essayed in vain to convey the slightest message to his shrivelled lips, and his hard, quick breathing sounded in the still night like the ticking of a huge clock. He remained for some minutes convulsively clutching at the long grass, when, leaning towards Johnson, so that his hot breath coursed over the rough linaments of the smuggler, he said in a low, unceremonious tone—

"No—no blood?"

"No," said Johnston, "unless they fire, and then God help them all at home."

The smuggler suddenly started, putting his ear to the ground, and motioning for silence, he listened for some moments with great attention. Jumping up, he said,

"'Tis coming. Off with your coat and vest, and tie a handkerchief round your head. Do not hurry. They must walk up the hill, and we shall catch them at the top. When I whistle, run to the horse's head and do not quit it for your life. Should the driver have a companion, we may have sharp work. Here is a bludgeon, but remember, strike not at those in white."

The pit pat of a horse's feet broke the silence of the night. The smuggler gave Etherington the flask, after using it himself, and suddenly vanished in the gloom. Draining the contents to the last drop, Etherington threw the flask away, and proceeded immediately to doff his coat and vest, and tie a kerchief round his hot and throbbing brow. Scarcely had he finished when the horse rounded the top of the hill, slowly dragging after him the small, heavy cart then used for carrying the cross country mail. The driver was cheering the animal in his arduous task, when a low sharp whistle was heard, and two men jumped from opposite sides of the road, dashing simultaneously to the sides of the vehicle. Etherington rushed to his post, and seized the horse's rein just as the driver received a blow on the back part of the head, and fell senseless on the horse's back. One of the ruffians seized him by the collar, and hurled him into the road, close to Etherington's feet, who, frenzied with unnatural excitement, struck the unresisting driver a violent blow with his bludgeon.

"Hold hard, Lawyer; he's quiet enough," said Johnson. Look sharp and light the lantern, Bite. Let us get the box and be off."

Etherington shuddered as he recognised in the man thus addressed, a notorious villain who had twice broken jail, and for whose apprehension a reward had long been offered. He received his peculiar cognomen from the fact of having caused the death of a police officer by the many and severe bites he had inflicted on the man when arrested by him in the very act of robbing. On the present occasion, he was, like Johnson, efficiently disguised by wearing his shirt outside his other clothes.

Bite mounted the cart; a small lantern was lighted and search made for the expected treasure.

"It is not here," said Bite.

"I know better. He never deceived me yet. Perhaps it is locked up in one of the mul-bags. Draw the cart out of the road, tumble the bags overboard, and we will soon overhaul them. Lawyer drag that fellow out of the way."

Etherington passively did as he was told. Raising the body by the clothes, he was hauling it on to the greensward, when the light of the small lamp fell upon the face, and disclosed a deep gash on the side of the head, from whence the blood was flowing profusely—evidently the effects of the blow struck by Etherington when the unfortunate driver was on the ground. Etherington let the body fall; large clammy drops of perspiration stood upon his ashy cheek, and he stood gazing on the wound as a man entranced. He was roused from this lethargy of horror by the smuggler, who said, in his usual clear, low tone,

"Lawyer, have you a penknife with you? if so, hand it here for my shjick makes that had work of this man's big leather. That's it. Here's the box, and now for business."

The small cash box was forced open, and a huge roll of notes given into the hands of Bite; the gold was transferred to the smuggler's pockets, the light was extinguished, the horse fastened to the gibbet post, and the body of the maimed driver lifted into the cart.

"Is he dead?" whispered Etherington.

"Not yet," said Bite, with a grin, "but I'm afraid

that he'll have the headache, as long as he lives."

"Lawyer, we must have your horse. Bite must be in London, and change these notes before the hue and cry is given. Then over to Franco, you know, Bite; get to Churbourg, and wait the arrival of the bushy Sue. Off with you, and don't let the grass grow beneath your feet, unless you wish to swing upon the vacant stick here."

Bite walked off towards the fire close, and in a few seconds the rapid gallop of a horse was heard proceeding down one of the obscure cross-roads.

"Now, then for a short cut over the Downs, Lawyer; we have done the job well, and may defy detection. We have enough here for our purposes till we get our share of Bite's notes. What is he matter with you, you have not spoken for an hour."

"Is he dead?" said Etherington, fearfully.

"Let us hope for the best. I wish it had been otherwise. But we must now part—it would be dangerous to be seen together."

Without any division of the booty, or a word in explanation, the smuggler darted across the fields, and was soon lost to Etherington's sight. Jaded and heart smitten the young man reached his own house, and betook himself to bed—but not to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRD.

"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain."

Shakspeare.

The next morning as Etherington was sitting at the breakfast table, gazing with bloodshot eyes at the untasted meal, the principal partner in the banking-house was announced. Etherington jumped up wildly from his chair, and throwing open the window, evidently meditated escape; but, actuated by second thoughts, a faint smile overspread his ghastly features, and he returned to the chair. The gentleman entered the room.

"Mr Etherington," said he, "I suppose you heard of our double misfortune—robbery and consequent failure. I have called upon you as an active lawyer to solicit your co-operation with the magistrates in attempting every thing in the power of man to discover the scoundrels who last night robbed the mail. I am more interested in this affair than regards the actual loss. Our bank experienced a partial pressure, I had written on for funds, and this morning we could have met every demand with instant payment. I am now a ruined and disgraced old man. The people will not believe but that the robbery was planned by the bankers; and after a long life of honourable industry, my gray hairs are tinged with sorrow and with shame. Mr Etherington, I care not for my sudden fall from eminence, could I have preserved my honour, but ruin is spread around—hundreds will point at me as the robber of the poor; and I shall descend to the grave with the burning execrations of the ruined tradesman, the impoverished widow, and the beggared orphan, ringing in my ears."

The old man leaned his head upon the table and wept like a child. Etherington attempted to speak, but was frightened at the unearthly tones of his own voice. The banker, ashamed of his weakness, shortly rose and left the house, earnestly requesting Etherington, to use his utmost endeavours to bring the criminals to justice. After swallowing a larger stimulant than usual in a vain attempt to still the first sharp gnawings of the worm that never dies, Etherington was about to leave the house, when his aged and infirm parent tottered into the room, and with the painful sorrow of extreme old age, garrulously lamented the ruin which the failure of the bank had brought upon her few remaining days. More falsehoods were used to quiet her fears. As he quitted the house his servant requested to know what he had done with his horse. He had lent it to a friend. The man retired with an expression of surprise, and Etherington felt that he was unable to look his servant in the face.

Crowds were collected in the usually quiet streets of that little town. Agitation and excitement sat on every face, and knots of whisperers met at every corner, or opposite the doors of the principal tradesmen, who were all, more or less, sufferers by the banker's failure. Surmises, doubts, and open allegations were freely bandied about, and the expressions of vengeance and despair that broke from the various sufferers struck deeply into Etherington's heart as he walked through the excited throng. He wished to enquire how much they knew, where their suspicions pointed, and, above all, to ascertain the life or death of the driver—but he did not dare to trust himself with speech.

He found his Ellen in tears. Her father had lost heavily—in fact all he possessed, except the house he lived in, and a life interest, of little value, in some property in the adjoining county. Mr Norris met Etherington with evident embarrassment; he wished

the match to be broken off—his pride would not allow his daughter to go a beggar to that man's arms, who, when she was rich, had been refused consent unless he could command a certain sum. Etherington expostulated; absolved Mr Norris from this part of his contract, but insisted upon its full performance as regarded his immediate marriage. The old gentleman's reserve instantly vanished; he seized the lawyer by the hand, and said that he regarded the loss of the money as nothing compared to the satisfaction of having found so honourable and generous a son-in-law. Etherington endeavoured to smile, but was unable to return the cordial grasp of the man he had ruined.

Several days elapsed, but the excitement did not subside. Etherington suffered the worst of tortures in being obliged to hear the hourly statements of the wretchedness and suffering which the robbery had produced. Many of the small tradesmen declared themselves insolvent, factories were stopped for want of money, and hundreds of workmen were discharged; panic and desolation ruled the day. The indignation of the working people assumed so threatening a shape that the bankers were obliged to fly the country. Etherington had been busily employed in drawing out depositions in evidence, and attending to the surmises of every thick headed, officious fellow who thought he could see farther into the affair than his neighbours. The young man's soul sickened at this daily practice of foul hypocrisy.

Johnson was not forthcoming, nor had the smallest appropriation of the booty been forwarded to the wretched Etherington, who now felt too late that his participation in the fatal deed had not only destroyed his own prospects, but had ruined the happiness of all around.

The servant again enquired for the safety of the horse, a valuable and favourite animal. Etherington repeated his former statement, that he had lent him to a friend. The servant asked if he knew where this friend had taken the horse, and when was he expected back; for Bill, the old ostler at the Red Lion, had gone to live at K—, a town some forty miles across the country, and he had sent word by the stage, that lawyer Etherington's horse had been left there quite knocked up and over-worked. An ill-looking fellow rode him into the town, and had gone off by the early morning's coach to London. He knew the horse by the star on his forehead.

Etherington was unable to conceal his confusion. The servant was ordered down stairs; but the story spread from mouth to mouth, and at the next meeting of magistrates, Etherington was questioned as to the truth of the report. Lu succeeded lie—he tried to spread probability over the story he had coined about selling his horse to a stranger, but it was evidently disbelieved. Mr Strust was aroused; there was no definite charge, but although he continued to attend, he was not again requested to assist in the mail-robbery investigation.

The marriage day arrived, and Ellen, who had insisted upon the performance of the ceremony in private, never looked more lovely than in the simple white dress she wore to grace this humble festival. The father's broken fortune admitted not of display, and Etherington, who had ruined a whole community to put himself in funds, had scarcely been able to raise the bare expenses of the day. Still he hoped that Johnson would keep his word, and though his soul loathed the crime he had committed, and he abhorred the foul train of consequences it had engendered, he could not give up his claim to the profits of his guilt.

The sun was gilding the fading leaves of the graveyard trees as Etherington left the village church, his young bride hanging upon his arm. He had bought her at an awful price; but when he saw her animated countenance beaming with delight at their expected happiness, he felt that her smiles dissipated somewhat of the gloom of guilt, and the load of crime sat lighter on his heart in the presence of his beloved. He made an effort to be cheerful, and had succeeded in forcing a laugh at one of Mr Norris's hearty sallies, when a funeral procession, of the most humble pretension, entered the gates of the church yard as the bridal party endeavored to pass out. A young widow followed the coffin; she was weeping piteously, and dragged by the hand a curly haired boy of tender age, whose round and innocent face reflected the sad impression of the place while he was unable to appreciate the severity of his loss, Ellen's sympathy was affected at the sight of this poor mourning relict, and her orphan boy and her husband found some little trouble in drying up her tears.

"It is indeed a dreadful case," said Mrs. Norris, "and the heavy difficulty which has fallen on our town prevents the possibility of doing any thing for her by subscription—although I trust that government will not forget her claims."

"Who is she? what are her claims?" said Etherington.