

"Did you really go over that mill?"

"I did, and had a most interesting talk with the owner. He knew a little of me—enough to know that I didn't care a button about all the commercial secrets in the world—and that my amusement is only in the sight of ingenious things, and in gossiping about them."

"What might he talk about?" asked the manager, whose eyes were open to the possibility of picking up yet fresh facts likely to be useful.

"Why, he said that when they first heard of what your people had done, they were in such a towering rage, they half thought of giving you a specimen of an Italian's wild justice, by dispatching somebody to this place, who, I gather, was to have dispatched you! Not you personally!" again laughed Sir Moses. "but you—the firm!"

"Was that all?" asked the manager, after he, too, had enjoyed a hearty laugh at these harmless threats.

"Well, no; he showed me with great glee a new improvement they had made, which, he said, would again take the wind out of your sails."

"Ah! what was that?"

"Well, I don't think I carry it in my mind clearly enough to explain. If I saw yours it might possibly recur to me—I think it would!"

"Would you mind, Sir Moses, waiting here just for a couple of minutes, while I run over to Mr. Richard Coombe's house? he lives here. Perhaps he might show you."

"No, I don't mind waiting, if you won't be longer than two minutes. But I haven't much time; and I beg you to tell Mr. Coombe that it's not the slightest consequence to me, if he has a rale, and wishes to keep to it."

"Very well, Sir Moses. Take a chair; I'll be back immediately."

The manager went away.

Sir Moses followed him with his eye from where he sat on the chair till he was no longer visible. Then he rose with the alertness of a youth of twenty, took one rapid, searching glance round, saw there was not a soul visible from that little ante-room—the men were mostly away at dinner, so happily had Sir Moses timed his call—then he began operations.

The place where he was—a long, narrow room—was connected at each end with ranges of greater rooms; while at the sides were the iron-plated door on the right, and opposite this door, on the left, another door, similarly strengthened.

He ran to this first, opened it, saw it did, as he had fancied it would, open to the outward air; then he took from his capacious pockets some preparation of wax, forced it into the key-hole of that external iron-plated door, took it out, looked at it, knecaded it up again, again forced it into the lock, and again removed it. Putting this in his pocket, he repeated the process on the other and more important door opening to the sanctuary, and he finished just in time to drop the impressions into his pocket, as the manager returned to say—

"I am sorry, Sir Moses, but Mr. Coombe cannot admit any one to see more than we have shown you."

"Give my compliments—Sir Moses Major's compliments—and say I am perfectly satisfied."

CHAPTER LIV.—SLIPS BETWEEN THE CUP AND LIP.

Putting a half-sovereign into the manager's hand, Sir Moses took his leave; both gentlemen seemingly pleased with the meeting.

Unluckily, Sir Moses had occasion, in an indiscreet moment, to use his handkerchief, and, in taking it from his pocket, as in advancing towards the outer door, the manager politely following behind to see him out, he drew something with it that fell.

Sir Moses heard the fall, but was too much master of himself to turn round, guessing only too well what it was that fell. He passed on, hoping most anxiously to hear the manager still following.

No; he has stopped.

Sir Moses can only, in politeness, now turn to see what is the matter.

The impression of the door—the door to the commercial holy of holies—is in the hands of the manager; and how he looks at it, and what he thinks, we leave our readers to judge.

Poor Sir Moses! He turns pale, red, black, even while vainly striving to turn off the discovery with a laugh and a lie.

"Oh, you've picked up something I dropped. Ah, yes; that's a good story. I'll tell it you."

"Stay, Sir Moses," said the manager, taking one of the blunderbusses from the rack, "I think it is probable Mr. Richard Coombe would like to hear the story too."

"Ha, ha, ha! Very good, very good. Is he so fond of a jest?"

"Very Particularly, when there's an element of the grim in it."

The manager pulled a bell-rope that Sir Moses had not previously noticed, and a loud ring was heard in some distant quarter.

Sir Moses seemed to grow fidgety, to try to speak, to try to smile, to try to feel the money in his pocket, as if to try a bribe, but he seemed to feel it would not succeed, so said, with a certain recovery of his audacity—

"Well, come, my friend, tell me—what are you going to do?"

"Send for Mr. Richard Coombe."

"And what'll he do?"

"Set the dogs on you!"

"Murder me?"

"No, not exactly murder. We don't call it murder if you should be killed."

"And you really mean you'd serve a poor fellow like that, who, after all, has only wanted to make a bit of a start for himself at the outset—I mean, at the decline of life, having been always one of the most unlucky devils under the sun? Hang it, man, let me off for once. Take a five pound note—my whole capital—and I'll swear never to come here again in this way as long as I live."

"Can't be done," said the manager.

"Well, old fellow, mind one thing—Mr. Richard Coombe will think not of me alone, but of you."

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"Haven't you let me take these impressions?"

The manager changed colour a little at this, and there was a pause, during which the mock Sir Moses urged his suit again. At last the manager said—

"Come, I will give you a chance while doing my duty. I've got the impressions, and I'm smashing 'em together in my pocket while I speak—and see there?"

He opened a window, and threw the lump of wax out, and it was heard to fall in the waters below.

"Now you may say what you like, my noble Sir Moses, and who'll believe you?"

"Well, that's magnanimous, I confess," observed Sir Moses, with increased audacity.

"Magnanimous?" said the puzzled manager.

"Certainly, if you are going to give me a chance for my life and limbs, my soul and body, my skin and bone."

The manager could not help a dry laugh at the impostor's good humour and confidence, even under such trying conditions.

"Well, look you; you see where you now are. There is the door ready open for your escape. I am going to the kennel. I shall open the door. You will be then a good hundred yards in advance, for you may start at once!"

"Hold, I entreat you, one moment!" said the anxious Sir Moses. "You are armed; you—you'll fire at me if I attempt to escape before you give me leave. Give me, then, one boon, and I ask no more. Let me have one look outside, that I may not rush instantly into destruction."

"Well, that's fair. Go, then; but take my word for it, I'll fetch you down if you start; and then, if I miss you, there'll still be the dogs!"

That last argument penetrated, and was accepted as final in Sir Moses' brain. So he walked very slowly out, arranging his dress, handling matters in his pockets, and so on, and then took a good look out.

He seemed so familiar with the scene as not to have the smallest need of instituting the ex-

amination he had spoken of. But his attention seemed to be directed to the question of the people likely to be met, for the dinner hour was nearly over.

"One rapid glance satisfied him, and then he turned, and said coolly to the manager—

"Age has its privilege. I am an old man in constitution, if not in years. You cannot want those brutes to tear me in pieces. You want to frighten me. I deserve it I own. But I am frightened. Won't that do, without your taking any more trouble?"

The manager could scarcely resist an answering smile to the smile that accompanied these words, but he said—

"Well, if you can escape to that hill there are many chances for you, and the dogs don't care to go much further. If you go to the edge of the pond, you ought to be able, even though you are not very active, to reach the hill. Fear, my friend, is a fine incentive. Good-bye. I'm off for the dogs! I'll go slow, and advise you to go fast!"

Sir Moses needed no further hint. In an instant he sprang out like a shot from a bow, and the manager, seeing the movement, was aware that he had been twice humbugged. His pity and gentleness vanished. He really had meant to take care no harm should happen beyond the horrible fright, for he had ordered the human brute who led them to be ready to go with them, and restrain them; but seeing this second deception—the old man change into a young one—his whole spirit soured, and he ran, with a real thirst for vengeance, to the kennel, shouting aloud—

"Now, Butcher, now! Unchain them! There's an interloper here!"

The door was opened and the dogs unchained simultaneously. Butcher ran out, the dogs with him, till they were all in the open air, and saw the fugitive career along at a great pace, leaping every obstacle in his progress—fences, ditches, water-courses.

Away went the dogs, soon leaving Butcher behind.

Sir Moses cast out one glance behind him; saw nothing just for one moment, then saw the two black monsters, side by side, crossing a little knoll, and obviously rapidly gaining on him.

There was no cry from either of them, and the unhappy Sir Moses remembered vividly just then the story the manager had told him of their silence while worrying the sleepy artisan in the mill.

On, however, he sprang, determined to make yet one effort more, before giving it up, to win upon the dogs in speed. He had as yet purposely avoided putting forth his whole power. At first he fancied he was gaining a little, and that gave him new courage to attempt more severe efforts. Now he grew sure of it. He does not see them; he does not hear them. He will rest for one moment.

"Ha! He hears their deep breathing—they are panting within a few yards. He is lost! He stops! All is over!"

"No! He had forgotten himself in the anguish of the moment. He draws forth a double-barrelled pistol, and murmurs to himself—

"Even with this I am lost, unless I can take deliberate aim one at a time."

The first dog is upon him. Sir Moses fires. The dog rolls over on his side. The other is but a second or two behind the first. He, too, leaps on the fugitive, who meets him, open mouthed, and not having time, or perhaps coolness, to fire properly, misses him, or seems to do so.

He has no time to strike with the pistol. He can but thrust it right into the dog's red throat, while with the other hand he grasps at the animal's neck. An instant more, and he has instinctively quitted the pistol, leaving it in the mouth, and is grasping the throat with both hands.

The animal gives way, pulls Sir Moses upon him, and then the explanation of the easy victory is perceived—the shot had fatally injured him, though not for the moment; then the pistol thrust into the mouth had caused a great