

if not exactly worthless, still, one of so fickle and undomestic a character, that she would simply make a happy married life an impossibility.

And now there began to steal in, under cover of these suspicious and alarms, a speculation that sadly troubled Paul. Mistress Preston had certainly seemed, just for a brief space, while talking about the mercer, to put on quite a new character—to become clear, decided, energetic, business-like, calculating. What could that mean? He didn't know. All kinds of fancies disturbed him, and he was obliged to dismiss the subject without obtaining any kind of satisfaction, for he could not bear to realize, even to his own fancy, the odious idea that she was literally neither more nor less than a hired mercenary spy.

And then, as the fumes of his spiritual intoxication passed away—as dreams began to pass into reality, ideal moonlight into prosaic day—he began to note, by sensible but sure steps, the nature of the descent he had been accomplishing.

No doubt of it. He was going down, down, deeper and deeper, and that, too, immediately after his wonderful redemption from the natural consequences of his crime. He had vowed to himself he would never see Mistress Preston again. It was that intention that had enabled him to carry things with such a high hand before the mercer. He had felt so strong, so indignant with his master at his desire for interference. Well, how was it now? Why, he had justified everything the mercer said and did. Paul saw this, and seemed to sink utterly.

He was losing his master's friendship, if, indeed, it was not now absolutely gone. He would presently be without the means to earn his bread, except, possibly, by the most severe and degrading labour. Daniel Sterne and he were evidently separating in feeling. All things were going from him, except Mistress Preston; and, when Paul looked at her from that stand-point—the ruins of the industrious home he had possessed—he seemed no longer to have any faith in her.

Poor fellow! The fact was, his nerves were so utterly unstrung, that no part of his intellectual being was faithful to him—no part was fit to give him true counsel. An intense depression overwhelmed him the instant he escaped from the influence of Mistress Preston's fascinations. He wished himself dead. Ay, young as he was, he began to find a kind of morbid pleasure in recurring to the thought of suicide.

Strange! his first thought always was, in connection with it, how it would shake the mercer!

Was he, then, so vindictive? No; it was rather from the strength of his natural love for his master—the earnestness of his desire for his respect; and, when the love and the respect were both alike hopeless, and had been replaced by painful and unseemly images of justice, constables, whipping-posts, and other amenities of the kind, Paul naturally felt a strong revulsion of his former feelings, and became for the moment intensely antagonistic.

Whatever the temptation, the fancy grew upon him. "Cato" was played about this time, and Paul borrowed a copy of the play, and hung upon its words relative to suicide with a morbid yearning.

Still, he was too manly to play at suicide. Consequently, he guarded his thoughts so jealously that Daniel Sterne, imposed upon by his gay, light conversation when they met in the garret at night, had not the slightest thought of what was working beneath in Paul's mind.

But when Paul was alone in his bed-chamber, the evil occasionally going to Blackheath, he would sit for hours together on his bed, not reading, but simply yielding to the terrible stream of evil thoughts that were striving to carry him to destruction.

At times he would break out into a flood of passionate tears, and throw himself on the bed, and there lie hour after hour, asking from God that he might die without having to compass his own death by an act of wickedness. All Cato's reasoning had not sufficed to destroy

Paul's natural and true instinct. He wanted now but a single determining incident to lead to a catastrophe; and that incident was not long in coming.

Growing more and more annoyed at Paul's behaviour, justly incensed at his ungenerousness in not perceiving that he had been allowed to postpone his return to the less honourable labours of the shop, in order to give him a chance to win the knight's favour—or, if he perceived it, then at his obstinacy in refusing to take advantage of the kindness—the mercer suddenly called on Paul one morning, when he was passing through the shop to go to his accustomed place in the parlour, to take his place under Smeox, and serve.

Paul coloured, said nothing, took his place, and after a few minutes, became the very life and soul of his comrades, with his sly whispers and jests, his satirical humour, his buoyant spirits. The very men who had been prepared to punish him, by making him drink to the dregs his cup of humiliation, were delighted with him, and became genial, kind, respectful.

Once, when Paul noted that, a ghastly change came over his face, that those who saw it could not understand, but asked him if he was ill.

"Never better in all my life! I'm not fitted for pen work. I shall stick to the counter in future. You won't catch me going back there!"

Paul glanced with his eye in the direction of the parlour, but there was so much meaning in the tone and the look, that the kindly fellow to whom the remark was addressed felt quite uncomfortable.

Just about the time when it was Paul's turn to go to dinner there was a great bustle outside. Paul glanced through the window, and saw Christina alighting from the mercer's coach.

In an instant he was out of the shop, then madly leaping up the stairs, two or three at a time, till he reached his garret. The door was then closed abruptly after him, locked, and bolted.

His features were violently distorted, his limbs trembling, his hand shaking violently, his accents hollow and broken, as he said—

"No better time! No better time! She hasn't seen me there. She will see me in an hour's time, if—"

Paul sat down and wrote with some difficulty, and not without more than one outburst of tears, the following lines on a piece of paper, which he intended to leave just where it was:—

"I have spoiled my life by my own act. I have nothing good to live for. I see, if I live, I shall live only for evil. It is a cowardly thing to fly temptation thus. I know that. I wouldn't do so if that was all. If I was now true, honest—anything but what I am—I would fight on. But as it is—"

"To any real friends I may have—any who will care for me—I beg to give my kindest regards, and I ask humbly their forgiveness next to God's. If they need any excuse from me, let them believe I am very miserable.

"If, indeed, my master should be shocked, and even feel inclined to grieve for me, then I would say—Farewell, dearest and best of men and masters! Do not too long think harshly of your miserable servant,

PAUL ARKDALE."

When Paul had finished the writing of this paper, which was not accomplished without many tears as he approached the end, he seemed to dismiss it determinedly from his thoughts, and began to look about him, as if asking—Was there anything he had forgotten that ought to be remembered at such a time? But even while he thought, and while various things seemed to begin to trouble him, he put his hand to his head, as if he was getting hopelessly confused, and then he dismissed them without further effort.

He then, in a strangely furtive manner, as if suspicious of eyes secretly on the watch, drew forth a phial with a label, on which was written a prescription, how obtained was not clear, as the name above it had been so defaced as to be illegible. One saw in that prescription that the essential feature of the medicine was laudanum

—that it was a powerful preparation of the drug, as if for some very special disease, and finally, that the proper dose was a few drops in water, whereas here was a phial full, and ready for more sinister uses.

Yes, Paul knew well enough that, when he looked upon that little phial, he looked upon that which was quite powerful enough, if the whole were taken at once, to kill him.

After a glance at it, as if only to satisfy himself he had it, and that he had not accidentally broken the bottle and spilled its contents, he returned the poison-medicine to his side pocket, and went to gaze out through his little window upon the river.

It was a fine, bright, sunny, breezy noon, when the very air seemed to have something in it of the spirit of music and dance, and to be full of promises of enjoyment, present and future.

How full of life the world seemed to Paul, at the moment when he was going to quit it! The watermen's wherries were flying about in all directions. A civic barge, gleaming in gold and rich in gorgeous colouring was moving slowly along, with the even, strong, magnificent sweep of oars held in many hands visible on either side, as the vessel appeared in a foreshortened position. A superb band was on board, and it was playing as though the whole world just then had nothing to do but to play or to listen.

Paul felt he would never again make one in such an excursion! Never again handle with practised craft the oars of the wherry! Never again be, what he had often been, the delight of his companions—their leader in a thousand follies; the *beau ideal* of many a younger pretence, who thought to himself of the wherry's handsomeness, good humour, courage, hardihood, and irrepressible gaiety of Paul Arkdale, and strove vainly to imitate.

Paul's head dropped on his hands, with his elbows on the window-sill, and there he remained a long time, a single tear glistening in the sunlight, but with no other manifestation of his feelings or intentions. He seemed himself to have forgotten, or put aside for the moment, the momentous question of the hour.

"No," he murmured, after a long pause, "I see but too clearly I have ruined my life by that one act. I am not of the stuff out of which to make criminals—not criminals, at least, of that most infamous class. Were I less sensitive I might accept my fate. If men looked at me at wondering, 'Is this the secret thief?' I might look at them again, and grow brazen by insensible degrees. As it is, I don't feel inclined for any such struggles: I don't feel inclined to acknowledge that my honour, happiness, position, hopes, aims, love, life—everything I possess in the world—are at any moment, for aught I know, to be at the mercy of brutal, detestable wretches, who would not mind pointing at me under the slightest provocation—perhaps, even only because they knew I was doing my duty. Why, then, do I stay my hand? Am I afraid?"

"No, I can answer that. I am not afraid, as regards my miserable body; but I own it would be to me a priceless blessing if my life would now pass out of my hands by some nobler road than this cowardly, tricky one—this shameful suicide!"

"Could I not join the army, taking care to get to where fighting is going on, and then easily settle the business by dying in a kind of halo of honour, such as desperate valour might give even to a man stained like me?"

"Ah, yes, that would be delicious, were it but practicable! But the relief must be now. I am not going to trust myself to delays. No, it is now or never!"

And yet doubt and perplexities innumerable shook the unhappy youth, and caused fresh and fresh hesitations. The shock to his brother, the mercer; to Christina—even to his next acquaintance, Daniel Sterne, did at times appal him, as with a sense of the cruel wrong he proposed to commit. But then, he always came back to the same ultimate solution—that which his friends could not prevent they must bear. If he lived he would only disgrace them; and summary measures, therefore, were best.