

For Greed of Gold.

Written by J. S. FLETCHER.

JAMES RUTHERFORD had come back—come home—to Slowford, and the countryside rang with the news. Had there been a great war in progress, its most exciting events would have paled into insignificance before the fact that James' foot was once more upon his native heath. There was more excitement and more commotion when it was known that James had arrived than if the village crier had gone around to herald the approach of a circus or menagerie. No one had ever expected to see James again, unless in hopeless poverty and fluttering rags; but here he was, and it was obvious that poverty and James were not even acquainted. It was a marvellous fact, but still a fact, that Slowford wondered at it and talked of it, and rolled it over on its intellectual palate like a dainty morsel.

Ten years previously, James Rutherford, at that time a young man of three-and-twenty, departed from Slowford, leaving behind him the prettiest of bad characters. From his extreme youth upwards he had always been in hot water; he had terrorized the schoolmaster, and frightened the parson; there was not an orchard that he had not robbed, nor a game preserve that he had not made inroads upon. He would never work; he would make love to every girl—and there were many—willing to listen to his soft speech, and he was as ready for a fight as for a drink. Sometimes he was lucky at the race-meetings and would bring home gold in his pockets—that was the sure prelude to a carousal at the Red Pig, in which all and sundry were invited to share. He was a wild, bad lot, said everybody (except some of the women, whom he had deluded with his handsome face and wicked eyes), and he would end his days in the workhouse or on the gallows. James, however, appeared to be quite indifferent to public opinion, and when he finally cleared out it was with no regret on his part, and with a good deal of relief on his neighbours'. And nobody ever expected to see him again.

Yet here he was home once more after

ten years' absence. He went off, a rather down-at-heel, mocking, dare-devil lad; he returned a very carefully attired, prosperous-looking, well-fed gentleman, with sober manners and an air of distinction. The truth soon leaked out. James Rutherford had drifted to South Africa, had struck oil in the shape of diamonds, had seized his chance with the tenacity of genius, and was now a millionaire. A millionaire in ten years! There was no doubt about it—the parson and the doctor had seen his name in the papers. And his arrival at his native place was marked by events which only happen when millionaires are on the scene. Mr. Rutherford—plain James no longer—went round the neighbourhood and paid off numerous debts which he had contracted during his youthful days—paid them with handsome interest. He further discharged some obligations incurred long years before by his father, who, like the pre-reformed James, had not been very particular about money matters. He gained golden opinions everywhere, the parson almost wept in speaking of him, and the schoolmaster rejoiced that he had had the privilege of teaching him arithmetic. James did things in great style; it was evident that there was nothing mean about him. And the apotheosis of his glory was arrived at when he invited all the principal folk of the village—parson, schoolmaster, farmers, tradesmen—to dine with him in the big room of the Red Pig, while all the rest of the folk, even down to the babes, were regaled to supper in the coach-house outside.

There was much talk of Mr. Rutherford and his glories in the village that day, and the honoured guests who arrived at the Red Pig a while before the banquet was ready shared in it to the full; what other subject could they talk of but that? Everything was done handsomely; gentlemen were invited to take appetisers—sherry and bitters, gin and bitters, and what not—until dinner was ready, and all at Mr. Rutherford's expense. And everybody did, seeing that it cost nothing, and tongues wagged freely