



CHRISTMAS TURKEYS.

THE HISTORY OF A LOAFER.

CHAP. XI.

THE FAMILY AT HOME.

Gilbert finished his articles, and was, through the instrumentality of his old chief, appointed second engineer on the line. The paralytic father was, of course, obliged to resign his living in Blankshire. The whole family now came to live in a pleasant cottage at Highgate, and, through the Earl's influence, Gerald was provided with a situation in a large and well-known Insurance Office. The parson had become a complete imbecile. It was a melancholy sight to see the once-gifted man with all memory for recent things quite gone, though still retaining vividly the scenes of his early youth. He could now hardly ever bear Gerald from his sight. He could not understand why he should go to the city daily. "He had left school now," he said, "What was that office of which he spoke? He wanted him to read Greek with him. Why was he not ready to do so after breakfast? He was not formerly so disobedient." He never saw him now but of an evening, and not always then. This "not always then" was as ominous as true. Gerald loved his father and sister dearly, but he was perfectly incapable of enduring restraint. He had imbibed a taste for excitement, which his recent escapade had certainly not lessened. To sit reading aloud every evening to an invalid father was anything but agreeable. His home became tedious to him; he sought excitement elsewhere—and where? Not in positive vice,—his mind was yet too pure for that; but he loved the theatre and the music hall. He soon acquired a taste for drink. His salary was ample, and his father, who could not be brought to understand that Gerald earned anything for himself, supplied him liberally with additional funds. He soon came to understand what a "loafer" meant. He was the centre of a knot of this class. The "Champagne Charlie" of the ballad, however ridiculous in appearance, is a character common enough in London. Gerald had now become a thorough Champagne Charlie, ever "Good for anything to-night my boys," with plenty of acquaintances ready to enjoy "anything" at his expense. Gilbert was now much absent from home on affairs connected with the railway, but when able to join the family circle it was touching to witness the extreme deference with which he treated his invalid father. The parson's slightest wish was forestalled. Gilbert never returned to town without bringing with him something which he thought that the old man would like. With the assistance of Lizzy's good taste his father's room was decorated with choice engravings. New and valuable books on subjects which his father loved, were continually making their appear-

ance on his shelves. His greatest object in life seemed now to be to try and obtain some share in his father's affection. It was Esau craving for the blessing of Isaac, of which Jacob had deprived him,—and he partially succeeded. The parson's memory now wandered back to the days when he had considered his eldest son "the fool of the family." All his recent distinctions were to his wandering mind a blank. "Poor Gilbert," he would say, "he is a good lad after all if he were not such a fool. Oh! that he had some of the talents of his younger brother!" And his daughter would listen in silence, trying to make some excuse for Gerald's absence. But Gerald took care never to absent himself when Gilbert was at home. Since the afternoon of that silent ride from Birmingham to London he had stood in awe of that strong-willed brother who could command him by a word. Gilbert suspected nothing, and when he sometimes heard his father complain of Gerald's frequent absences, he attributed it all to the querulousness of illness.

But there was one who knew all. Things of this kind can never be hidden from a woman. Lizzie knew too well whose was that unsteady step which was often heard on the stair at two, three, and sometimes four in the morning. She alone knew that Gerald, some nights, never came home at all. She once ventured to remonstrate with him, and then, for the first time, heard a curse from her brother's lips. This frightened and silenced her, as Gerald intended that it should.

One evening Gerald brought home to dinner one of his new loafer friends, a loudly-dressed, loud-talking individual, whose manners made Lizzie tremble, and quite bewildered her father. The old scholar was slapped on the back, and assured that he had a "jolly nice place." The youth wanted to smoke in the dining-room after dinner, but to this Gerald objected, and proposed a walk in the garden. This, however, his friend refused, saying that he was not going to leave "the old gent's devilish good port so soon." The amount of this that he consumed made the parson stare. After dinner a game at whist was got up to amuse the invalid. The guest proposed guinea points, adding that that was the rate at which Gerald and himself usually played. "Oh!" This exclamation was caused by a very sweet pressure of the heel of the boot upon his friend's toe. Gerald was, himself, getting uncomfortable. During the evening, the young man paid the most unremitting attention to Miss Winter, in a manner which he thought irresistible. He talked of horses, "dawgs," and the last new burlesque, in which Miss Somebody was stunning. He described a comic singer who was, he said, a great favorite of her brother's, and then volunteered to give an imitation of him; but this, again, Gerald succeeded in stopping, to his friend's infinite disgust. It was late when this gentleman took his leave, to the great relief of all. The parson only remarked that his son's friend was rather an original young man, and retired to bed, thoroughly wearied out.

"Gerald!" said Lizzy, "I want to speak to you."

"Oh, put it off till to-morrow; I am going out now."

"No; you must listen to me now. Gerald, how could you think of bringing that man into this house?"

Gerald tried another oath, but this time without effect.

"Oh, you girls are so particular, I am sure he is capital company, and amused father exceedingly."

"You know nothing of the sort, Gerald. Now listen to me. Our invalid father is not to be annoyed by men of that class. Where you pick them up, I know not; but, if another of your dissipated companions sets his foot in this house, I shall—"

"You will do what?"

"Tell Gilbert."

The plucky damsel had reserved her fire, and her shot told.

"You can do as you like," said Gerald. "Gilbert is not the master of this house." But he looked very uncomfortable, for he knew well that his elder brother had a way of making himself master of anybody or anything he pleased.

(To be Continued.)