

away; and the old man, after again keenly treated by the burglars, some five or six in glancing around, slung his basket over his shoulder; in consequence of which a reward of fifty pounds would be given for the discovery and conviction of the offenders, or any of them. This handbill, which fell into the hands of Mr. Simmonds' groom, and was transferred by

him to our kitchen table, was the first intimation received in our secluded household that a desperate gang of house-breakers had invaded the outlying rural districts of the broad county. It was not the last, however. Throughout the ensuing winter—it was the winter after the alarm I experienced from the sudden appearance of my old Whiskers' Rents and prison acquaintance—rumours reached us from time to time of similar outrages in different directions, but all at some little distance from Templeton Lodge. Now, it was a lonely farmhouse which was attacked; then, a gentleman's seat in another part of the country, some thirty miles off, the owner and many of his servants being absent; again, the shop and dwelling-house of one of the principal tradesmen in a considerable market town, many miles from either of the former scenes of violence, was ransacked; and before the consternation which these events caused had subsided, another source of alarm arose from the fact that highway robberies were committed on many of the public roads, attended with such circumstances of daring determination as proved that the perpetrators, whoever they might be, were not only expert and practised in crime, but were formidable in number and resources.

For it required no great penetration to conjecture that the principal actors in these and many similar scenes of violence were banded together. Where numbers were required to overpower resistance and ensure success, numbers were engaged in the unlawful deeds; and where, on the other hand, the victims were feeble and timid, one or two only of the robbers appeared in the business. But in all the cases of house-breaking, one powerful and brutal man, as far as could be gathered from the hurried observation and after description of the plundered and ill-used inhabitants, was invariably present. His countenance, it is true, was covered with a mask of rrape, as were the faces of all the robbers; but the threats of fearful vengeance uttered by the leader in these outrages, and the plans he adopted for silencing and securing his victims, so as to prevent immediate alarm and pursuit, were in every case so similar, that identity was almost established. On the other hand, this burglar never appeared as a highwayman or footpad: these acts of crime were principally committed by an evidently young and athletic man, who in the exercise of his profession condescended sometimes to playful levity, though couched in vulgar language, in dealing with those whom he called his customers and clients.

Perhaps I owe an apology to my readers for giving even these brief outlines of occurrences which spread serious alarm at that time through the neighbourhood, for many miles round Templeton Lodge. It will be seen presently, however, that they have a considerable bearing on my personal history; and I must yet add another circumstance or two.

One of these was, that the offer of rewards for the discovery and conviction of the ruffians seemed utterly ineffectual, not only with regard to the end designed, but even in checking the misdeeds. Perhaps this is not to be so much wondered at when the unsatisfactory state of the country police of that day is borne in mind; especially when it is remembered that even now, in spite of an improved system and greater vigilance, some painful instances of atrocious crime have been committed with apparent impunity, so as, at least, to baffie all the skill of men trained to the pursuit of the guilty.

To be sure, a few arrests were made, and some suspected persons were examined by country magistrates, but as they were able to give a reasonable account of themselves, and their identity with either of the miscreants could not be established, they were necessarily discharged.

Another circumstance connected with these events was that competent judges declared, without hesitation, that the burglars must be practised London hands. For there was then, as I believe there is now, a superior execution and finish—if the expression may be allowed—in metropolitan crime, rarely attained by mere country practitioners. In this case, the skill, foresight, and arrangement evidently exercised in these robberies, bore all the marks of superior London training. This, at least, was the deliberate and firm belief of an experienced thief-taker, who was employed in the vain pursuit and detection of the criminals.

And this it was that set my thoughts wandering to Thieves' Castle. My readers will remember the brief description I gave, some chapters back, of that den of infamy, and the correspondence maintained there with house-breakers and highway robbers in different parts of the country; and I could not conceal from myself the great probability that my unhappy

I need not say that I felt relieved when the old ballad-singer had disappeared, though I was still in doubt whether his pedlarship was not a deception to cover some iniquitous design; and I could not feel secure that I was not the primary object of his visit. More troubled perhaps, than I should have cared to acknowledge, I resumed my gardening occupation, until, having worked myself into a pleasant perspiration, I began to smile at my fears. For I remembered that this poor, wicked, but weak old man had been a wanderer through a long life of alternate wretchedness and self-indulgence, of petty crime and appropriate punishment. It had been his boast, years ago, that he knew every nook and corner of England. I had heard him say that he should go on tramping through the country till he would most likely lay himself down to die under a hedge. And what therefore more likely than that, without any definite design, he should once more have set out on a long and toilsome tour—the ruling passion strong in extreme age, without any more definite design than that of indulging his vagrant disposition? And as to the distance from London into Yorkshire, why, he might have been a month, or two months, or three, upon the road.

And then if my existence in England had been suspected at Thieves' Castle, and it were thought necessary for the safety of that criminal community to carry out the threat of the ruffian Kite, they would scarcely have employed a feeble and laggard old man like this "Pinetar," as he was called there, as a spy. My fears, therefore, naturally as they had been raised, rapidly faded away; and when two or three months elapsed, and I saw no more of the old man, and heard nothing to disturb my security, I had almost forgotten the sudden alarm I had experienced.

CHAPTER XLIV.

TEMPLETON LODGE IN FEAR.

"FIFTY POUNDS REWARD. Whereas, on the night of the —th of November last,"—and then the handbill went on to recount how a farmhouse, some twenty miles distant from Templeton Lodge, had been broken into and robbed, the inmates having been barbarously

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