

"When the innkeeper came to this point," continued Mr. Delafield, "he stopped short as if waiting for some remark for me; but, shocked as I was, I had none to make, and he resumed his account:—

"The butler, sir, scarcely waited to see whether his master sat down again or not, and could never remember. He felt so horrified that he was glad to make his escape as fast as possible. And now, sir, you are to know that, after a certain hour of the night, the servants used to go to their own beds, and leave the gambling party to take care of themselves. This was the habit of the house. But, on that particular night,—I call it night, sir,—but, in fact, it was the blessed Christmas morning,—the butler woke from his sleep in a very uneasy state of mind, and took it into his head to get up and look after his master. He had misgivings of—mischievous, was, I believe, his own account of the matter; so he struck a light, and lit the candle in the small lanthorn he used to carry about, and glided down the stairs, and along the passages to the gambling-room. But to the gambling-room he was never able to come, though he wandered up and down, backwards and forwards, searching for the door, for a couple of hours, and knew he must be near; for he heard the rattling of the dice going on all the time.

"At last, however, he got so completely chilled, for the weather was unusually stormy and wild, and became so confused and light-headed, that he thought it best to go to bed again, supposing, of course, it was from his not being thoroughly awake that he could not come upon the proper room. But, sir—"

"And here," said Mr. Delafield, "the innkeeper fixed his eyes upon me and paused till I almost grew frightened, young and bold as I was.

"But, sir,—the room has never been found from that day to this, nor has the door of it ever been seen again, though every inch of the walls has been examined to find the place of it, and although the rattling of the dice has many times roused people up from their beds at night to look for it!—"

"But what on earth can you mean?" cried I; "I do not understand."

"Nobody can understand," was the man's answer; "only the room has never been found again, and yet the play goes on as the wicked lord prayed it might do, as is known to any one that sleeps in that particular part of the castle where the dice are heard."

"But the wicked lord and his friends," persisted I, "what is it that you mean?"

"They will never be seen again till the judgment-day," answered the innkeeper.—"When the grave and the sea give up their dead, then the gambling-room will open again, and deliver up those that are in it,—the wicked lord, those strangers, and my father's own brother."

"It was pitiful to hear him utter these last words," continued Mr. Delafield. "It was the secret of his deep interest in the story, that his father's own brother was involved in its horrors. I also now understood what he meant, but could not resist asking,—"

"And you really think, then, that they are all there now, at this very moment, while we are talking, playing their horrible games, and will go on so to the judgment-day?"

"It matters little what I think," replied the innkeeper; "but wasn't that what they asked for? God hears all prayer, doesn't He? And if He answers the good man's prayer with a blessing, mayn't He sometimes answer the bad man's prayer with a curse—the worst

course of all—the curse of letting him have his own way?"

"I was silenced," pursued the traveller, "and respected very deeply the solemn feelings of my poor old friend; and after many thanks on my part, and a little friendly chat, we both went to bed. And this, boys, is my story of the Game without an End. What do you think of it?"

For a few minutes no one answered; but at last one of the boys, who had been nudged several times by his companions, inquired:—

"Please, sir, is it true?"

Mr. Delafield smiled.

"I do not wonder at your asking. All that I have told you of myself is true, and I have told you truly what the innkeeper told me. But you must have observed as I went on, that the story itself had come through a great many hands. Part of it from my friend's grandfather, part of it from his father, part of it what his grandfather had told his father, part of it what servants let out, or villagers reported. Who could warrant the exact truth of anything got at in such a manner?"

"No! the story is one of those curious legends or traditions of an out-of-the-way country, which are always founded on truth; but which, in passing through many mouths, get mixed up with a great many changes and additions.

"A tradition, you know, is something which is handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth, instead of being written, and so preserved always the same. Now you know, boys, how difficult it is for people to give a perfectly correct account even of what has happened under their very eyes—even in their own street, perhaps. John tells it one way and Tom another, and John contradicts Tom, and Tom contradicts John, and yet they both say they are quite sure. And if Bill has been there as well he comes up, and, ten hundred to one, contradicts them both.

"And if this is so about things which have been seen by people at the same time, you may judge what chance there is of getting to know the exact truth of such a story as I have been telling, the particulars of which were collected nobody can quite tell how.

"But, as I said before, the traditions of a country are always founded on truth; and what I like them for is, that they generally teach a first-rate moral lesson. Nay, in some cases you might even fancy that they have arisen out of some strong moral conviction. And the story of the wicked Lord Warloch is a striking instance of this; and, if not altogether true in itself, teaches what is true. Every man who gambles and drinks is not shut in a gambling-room, to play on to the day of doom, certainly. Nay, I am not prepared to say I believe it, even of the wicked Lord Warloch. But every man who gambles and drinks runs a risk of one day losing the mastery over himself and his own will, and, therefore, of being unable to break away from his vile sins, let him loathe them ever so much. Both drunkards and gamblers often wish to be free, but the evil custom, or rather the devil through the evil custom, has them as fast as my story says he has the people in the wonderful old castle.

"Now, boys, you will do well, as my friend your clergyman has told you, to remember this story for life, for it is the same thing with all other sins too. If you do not, by the grace of God, master them, they will, by the malice of the devil, master you.

"There, now! You have heard both my story and the moral; will it do?"

A murmur of thanks was the answer, for

everybody had been pleased; but then one or two of the lads whispered something to the Curate, and presently he said to his friend:—

"If you're not tired, these boys are very curious to know whether you went to see the castle after all, and whether you were able to find out where the room had been—or was—or is—I scarcely know which to say!"

"Well! yes! I went to the castle the next morning," answered Mr. Delafield; "but, as to making out anything about where the room was, I was not more successful than the rest of the people who have looked for it since it disappeared—so to speak. I was shown over the place by a stiff, middle-aged woman, who was, what you boys would call, as mute as a fish, on every point I wanted to know about. I asked her if there was not some curious tradition about a room which couldn't be found, there. But at this inquiry she turned away and moved forward, saying, 'Oh, of course; there was the hiding-room against trouble.' By which she meant the secret room common in many old fortresses, where the family could take refuge, if necessary, and remain concealed; for its existence was never made known to more than three people at a time.—But I saw by that answer that, whatever she knew, she was not disposed to let out the history of the wicked lord of the place. After this, I asked whether people did not sometimes hear very odd noises in the castle at night. But even this did not do. She didn't know about odd noises, she said. People heard noises there, as they did everywhere else, when the wind blew, and the wainscoting creaked, and the rats ran about in the walls. Old houses were always full of noises. People might please themselves as to whether they thought them odd or not. She slept in a wing of the castle where there were no noises, and where everything was as comfortable as possible. It had been added to the building a few years ago. Now this was, in reality, a great admission, for it sounded as if she was not sure everything was as comfortable in the old part of the castle as in the new; but the good lady looked so testy, I was afraid to say any more about it.

"At last, however, just as I was going away, I ventured to inquire whether a certain William Lord Warloch had not once inhabited the castle, and disappeared rather suddenly. But at the very moment I spoke, and whether on purpose or not I couldn't discover, she let a door she was was holding open, fall to with a tremendous bang—I really half suspect she flung it to—and then darted through another, and called to some Johns and Thomases in the distance, to bring a lead to hold the front saloon doors open. After which came a noise and fuss of one little boy running along, and then a talk between them, of which I could not catch a single word; and then back she came with some large keys, and told me she would let me out by the front hall door; which she accordingly did, leading the way; and it was not till I was safe outside on the steps that she said,—

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir; but I was called away. You were asking about the Earls of Warloch. Of course they resided here for a many years, father and son. The last lord died quite an infant, I believe, and the property's passed into other hands since."

"She made a sort of half-curtsey as she finished, and retreated into the hall, so there was nothing left for me but to be off too. For, you see, I was very young then, as I told you, and her cross manner quite cowed me for the time. But I called her 'old humbug' to myself, after I was out of hearing, and that was a little bit of comfort at any rate."