

was unwell; or if I had offended him; he only answered 'No;' but still remained gloomy and sullen. Thinking to distract his attention and please him, I took down my books, and brought them to him for a lesson. With a scornful laugh, he darted across the room, and hastily left the cottage."

"He must be ill!" said Ben, anxiously. "I will go to him at once!"

"You will come in and see my father first," said Jenny; "besides, you have not told us the good news you hinted at in your letters!"

"Not told you!" exclaimed Ben. "Well, I never could write a letter properly; but I did not think I was as bad as all that! Never mind, it won't take long to tell; and while I am doing it, I can let uncle know that we are engaged, and that we must be married soon. One kiss before we go in, though, Jenny—just to give me courage."

After this, the lovers, hand-in-hand, entered the cottage, where they found the parent enjoying his evening pipe and a glass of grog.

"Why, Ben, lad! come back at last, have you?" was the greeting of old Shelton, shaking hands warmly with his nephew. "I'm glad to see you again; but what kept you so long in that dirty, smoky place, London, eh, lad?"

"London's not so dirty as you think, uncle. It's a fine place, and a noisy one; but folk soon get used to it; and then there are such sights to be seen, such buildings, such horses and carriages; and oh! such beautiful ladies!"

"Ben!" said Jenny, archly, and her lover paused.

"But what have you been doing there, lad?" inquired Shelton. "I know it's a fine place to spend money in, but I did not think you were the lad to waste your cash, and get your head turned with such like vanities?"

"You're right there, uncle!" replied Ben. "I stopped in London to make money, not to spend it!"

"You must have been a sharp lad indeed if you did that," rejoined old Shelton.

"All I can say is, I have made money, and a good sum too!"

"Well, light your pipe, fill your glass, and tell us all about it!" said old Shelton.

Ben, obeying his uncle's command, entered into the minutest particulars about his stay in the metropolis, stating that when he got there, he went to the shop in Regent Street where he was to purchase the musical instruments, and soon made his outlay in the goods he required. But just as he was about to leave the shop, he happened to see an ophicleide which was in the window. It was such a beauty, he could not resist the temptation of trying it. He preferred his request for permission, which was readily granted by the shopman. Never before had he touched such an instrument; he could do anything with it, and played away without thinking, when, suddenly a side-door opened, and a little gentleman—his face lathered ready for shaving—popped his head in the shop, and asked who was playing. The query surprised him, and recalled him to his senses. Ben was about to apologize, when he was asked politely to follow the speaker upstairs, and take the instrument with him.

He was ushered into a handsomely furnished sitting-room, out of which led a bed-room, in which the little gentleman—who was a foreigner—finished his toilet, asking Ben his name, business, and a hundred other questions. He then made him sit down to breakfast, and during the meal talked of nothing but music. Ben, of course, felt quite at home.

When they had finished the repast, Ben was desired to play over several pieces of music selected by his entertainer. Though he had never seen them before, he was able to please the listener so very much, that he told him he was the great Lafond, the composer and leader, and asked him to play at a concert that day week, for which he promised him five pounds.

The offer was refused, on the ground that he was anxious to return to Seabourne.

The little man was not so easily put off. He pointed out to Ben it was unwise to decline, as his forte was music, and fortune was within his reach.

The astonished fisherman laughed incredulously; but an offer of six guineas a-week, for two years, to play when and where required, with travelling expenses, made him hesitate; not at the smallness of the salary, but with utter amazement at the liberality of the professor. Assured, however, of its genuineness, Ben gleefully accepted, and an engagement, in accordance with these stipulations, was drawn up and duly signed.

"His duties commenced immediately, and he played almost nightly, with increasing success, at concerts given for the most part by Mr. Lafond, to the great satisfaction of that gentleman, and his own pecuniary profit.

The first two "off-nights," as they call them, he hurried down to Seabourne, to tell the news, and to ask consent to marry Jenny directly.

When Ben concluded his startling narrative, the old man shook him warmly by the hand.

"Hoity, toity!" said he; "this is a nice finish to your story, indeed! So I'm to be left alone, while you run off with my little Jenny? Who do you think will look after the old man when she is gone?"

"But you will go with us, sir," Ben broke in. "Of course, she would not leave you."

"I suppose I must consent," said old Shelton, rising. "But we must not be in a hurry. You have to return to London in a day or two; we will follow you in a fortnight, and then matters can be arranged. Somehow, I don't like leaving Reub, though."

"You can bring him with you," proposed Ben.

"I know he wishes to be in London; besides, his book must be out by this time, and said he should go to town then."

"I know nothing about his book," said Shelton, gravely. "All I can say is, he seems much altered lately. He won't speak to a soul unless he's obliged to, but keeps himself shut up in the lone school-house, with not a person near him. Do you know, Ben, I think he's not right in his head. There's a strange hollowness in his voice, and he has a wild glance that I don't like. He's changed wonderfully of late."

"I sincerely trust you are mistaken," Ben exclaimed, with some uneasiness. "I have noticed that on many points my brother seemed carried away to an extent that appeared almost ridiculous. Indeed, I fear he studies too much."

"Perhaps you're right, Ben; but he's a very different man to what he was."

Ben was greatly depressed by this intelligence, and soon after he took his leave, and hastened to see his brother.

When he arrived at the school-house he rapped at the door, but not receiving an answer, raised the latch, and entered the room with a quick step, but paused at the sight he beheld.

Seated at one end of the table, on which the upper part of his body rested, was Reuben Twyford, his arms outstretched, and his hands clenched. Before him was a black bottle and a glass; several newspapers were scattered about, and at his feet were two books, their leaves crumpled and torn.

The pale light of the oil lamp fell over this scene, giving it a weird, desolate look. At first, Ben thought his brother was asleep, and approached him gently; but Reuben sprang to his feet, making Ben recoil at the sight of his ghastly face.

"What is the matter, Reuben?" he asked, with an evident distrust at the answer he expected.

"So," cried Reub, with a hollow laugh, "you have come at last to crow over me—to tell me of your success, and laugh at my downfall!"

"I do not understand you, Reub. I came to tell you some good news," was the quiet reply.

"Good news? Oh, I know all about it! Ha, ha, ha! They pay a man to blow a wretched trumpet, whilst genius is left to starve. The papers go into raptures over his performances, whilst they laugh at a work which is the result of years of study and thought."

Groaning as if in pain, he threw himself back in his chair, and leant on the table in the same attitude as that in which his brother had discovered him.

"What has happened, Reub?" demanded Ben, kindly, as he drew a chair up to the table. "I've only now come back from London, and therefore have not heard anything of your affairs."

"London!" repeated Reub, with a sneering laugh—"a good, just place that is, where they lead a man into bankruptcy, and then hound him on to madness! Curse it!" he muttered, seizing one of the newspapers. "Look here—that. One will do, for they sing the same song—'trash, presumption, ignorance.' One fellow asks, 'How can a country schoolmaster know good society?' Ha, ha! These critics are very clever!"

"Ben read the part of the paper pointed out to him, and found a critique wherein his brother's book was severely handled, being held up to ridicule as a piece of absurdity. While he was thus engaged, Reub, with feverish anxiety, poured out glass after glass of brandy from the bottle, which he drank rapidly.

"Dear Reub, I am very sorry for this—indeed, I am," observed Ben, sorrowfully, as he laid down the paper. "But you must not despair. You say you have heard of my good luck. Share it with me; I have sufficient for all. We will go to London, and there you will have a greater field open for your talents. You must succeed. I feel certain you will."

A quick flush, as if of hope, passed over Reuben's face, but it was gone in an instant; and, taking his brother's proffered hand, he said, mournfully, "No, lad, no! I have no ambition now, and but one hope left—to live and die in peace and unknown! They have broken my pride—my heart—Ben! Oh, if you had known how I loved that book! But it's all over now—all over!" said Reub, and he emptied his glass and refilled it.

"Nonsense, Reub; while there's life there's hope!" replied Ben, gently, preventing his brother drinking again.

"Yes; I, too, have one hope. I have told you that I have given up ambition. Never again will I court the public favor. I am determined to remain down here, to attend to nothing but my school!"

"But you cannot remain alone," urged Ben.

"No, Ben; I have no intention of being alone," replied Reub. "You will, of course, go to London, where, I see by these papers, a fortune awaits you. I shall remain here, and take Cousin Jenny as my wife. I had longed to offer her riches and fame; that can never be. But Jenny is a good girl, and loves me, so I will be content."

Ben gazed at his brother. What could he say? What could he do? At length Reub, struck with his silence, looked up; and beheld his changed face.

"Why, Ben, what is the matter? are you not well?" he asked.

"Oh, Reub, Reub, my poor Reub, how can I tell you?" replied Ben. "I must speak, and yet I dare not!"

"What is the meaning of this?" exclaimed Reub, springing to his feet, trembling. "Speak! Do not keep me in suspense! Does what you have to say concern Jenny?"

"It does," was the sad response.

"She is well, is she not?"

"Listen, Reub—hear what I have to say, and bear it like a man. Jenny cannot be your wife; she is engaged to me!"

As if struck by a thunderbolt, Reub fell back into his chair. For some time he remained with his face buried in his hands, sobbing like a child; but when Ben approached him, he sprang to his feet, and turning upon his brother, exclaimed, "So you, my brother, have been in the conspiracy against me; and Jenny, too! She whom I loved with all my soul; she for whom I was ambitious! Oh, how I have longed to tell her my troubles; which she alone could comfort! And now I find her false with the rest! I have no one now to trust and confide in! My love, my brother, my hopes, all turn from me! I am alone in the world!"

"Do not speak in that way," said Ben; "no one has tried to betray you. Trust me!"

"Trust you!" ejaculated Reuben—"you who have deceived me more than all! My dreams of happiness are wrecked by you. I see your wish. You would lock me up in a madhouse, so that your baseness should not be discovered. But all shall know it! I will fling myself at Jenny's feet! She will—she shall save me!"

Springing past his brother, he rushed to the door, but before he could reach it, sank senseless to the ground.

Ben lost no time in fetching some neighbours, and then hurried off for the doctor, with whom he returned in a few minutes, but, alas! too late; Reuben Twyford was dead!

"I suppose, doctor, my poor brother's fit was brought on by worry?" asked Ben.

"Hem; yes, and other causes." Here the doctor looked hard at the brandy-bottle. "Your brother was a very excitable man. The least thing put him out of temper. Drink would have a dreadful effect on his brain; worry and disappointment would aid it. The death was caused by apoplexy. I will forward you a certificate to that effect. What caused the death we must state; what caused the disease no one need know."

In the cemetery of the quaint old fishery of Seabourne repose all that is earthly of Reuben Twyford; his untimely end deeply deplored by the toilers of the sea. Ben, and Jenny, and Uncle Twyford pursue the even tenor of their way: the ophicleide player and his family being in the full enjoyment of the easy affluence which well directed energy places in the path of talent properly applied.

SILWOOD GRANGE.

In a private room of the "Swan Inn," Hamersham, two gentlemen were engaged in no pleasant conversation.

"I am sorry remarked one, addressing the other, considerably his junior, who was pacing the apartment; "but as necessity has no law, I must have the twenty pounds to-morrow, or—"

"Or what?" demanded the second, turning quickly towards him.

"I shall be compelled to place in John Oxley's hand the cheque I hold, forged by his adopted son."

The fair countenance of the listener became dark with rage; his hand clenched; but evidently aware of how useless was such ebullition of feeling, he restrained himself, and slowly said, "If you do that, Tom Chester, you will spoil your own game, and ruin me."

"You bring the ruin on your own head, my dear fellow. Certainly you are cool. You first pay me a just debt with a forged cheque, which I—fortunately for you—discover before presenting it to be rejected. I overlook that, and now you want me to forego twenty pounds more. Why don't you ask John Oxley? You told me once he could refuse you nothing."

"Once!" repeated the other, sullenly. "That time has long passed."

"I suppose," laughed Chester, "you were too generous in asking?"

"Far more so than he in giving," replied Gilbert Burt. "I tell you my adopted father is as great a miser as ever trod in shoe-leather. He loves to hoard his money, to look at, and count it. I am to inherit all at his death; until which, I must not exceed my allowance."

"Board, lodging, and two hundred a year pocket-money. Not bad to one who has no other claim on him but that of being the son of the woman he loved. I fancy the nephew he disinherited for your sake, Burt, would be glad of your place."

"And I'll tell you what," ejaculated the other, resolutely; "say no more. He'll get it. How, I cannot imagine, but some of my doings must have reached John Oxley's ears. He often converses upon the subject, and expresses opinions I feel are levelled at me. And besides, his manner is different."

"More reason, my dear fellow, for you at once to pay this twenty. I'm not rich; I can't afford to lose it, and John Oxley might alter his will."

Gilbert Burt's face changed at the suggestion. He walked thoughtfully to the window.

John Oxley, the owner of Silwood Grange, was sixty-five, and a bachelor. In his youth he had loved devotedly; but the object of his affection,

having bestowed her heart elsewhere, he made a vow of perpetual celibacy—a resolution by no means opposed by his relations.

Ten years later, however, the woman who had won his heart died within a few days of her husband, leaving her only child Gilbert, an orphan. On the intelligence reaching John Oxley, he adopted the boy, and brought him up as his own son.

When, however, the lad grew to manhood he was idle and dissolute to an extent which ill-accorded with his foster-father's notions, and greatly estranged him from one who, for his mother's sake, he would fain have shaped to his own purpose.

But Oxley was forced to the conclusion that Gilbert Burt took more after his father than his mother. The disappointment grieved him more than he cared to say. Nevertheless, hoping for amendment when the wildness of youth was passed, he retained him in favor, keeping a secret watch on his proceedings, which brought anything but a satisfactory result.

Thus a difference had risen between them, and Gilbert Burt was assured if ever John Oxley knew of the forged cheque, his ruin was certain.

He thought of this as he stood by the window, and coned over Tom Chester's words. He shuddered at the idea. Never had it so forcibly presented itself to him, or seemed so probable. He leaned his hot forehead against the glass, and pondered.

"Come, Burt, I want your answer," broke in his friend, who started at the haggard countenance abruptly turned upon him.

"Meet me here at twelve to-morrow, and you shall have the money," said Gilbert; and without another word, he left the room.

On quitting the inn, he struck into the quiet lanes of Hamersham. Maddened, driven to desperation by his position he wandered about till after dusk, when he returned to Silwood Grange.

Entering the hall by a side door, he looked around, then approaching the library door, listened. Not a sound was to be heard, and turning the handle, he entered.

The lamp was lighted ready for John Oxley's coming. The shutters were closed, the curtains drawn.

Swiftly crossing the room, Gilbert Burt unfastened the former, and also undid the window, after which, he re-arranged the draperies, as if guilt were already on his soul. He hastened from the apartment to his own, after one glance at the old bureau, in which reposed John Oxley's will, and well-filled cash box.

The hour was past one when the young man, cautiously descending into the grounds from his bedroom window by a trellis, went round to the library.

He kept in the shade; but once, when he had to pass a patch of light, it might be seen he wore a coat buttoned to the chin, and had a gauze over his face.

He listened. There was profound silence. Noiselessly he opened the library window, and pushed the shutter back. All was dark within. John Oxley had gone to his room. Assured of this, he entered more confidently. There was no one there. The fire gave forth light, and flashed as with directing finger on the old bureau. With beating heart the intruder advanced to it, inserted an iron bar he brought in the lock, and, with an effort, forced it open.

Already was his arm extended towards the cash-box, when a hand, suddenly laid on his, arrested him.

"Thief—burglar!" cried a voice.

Gilbert Burt, turning, beheld John Oxley. Affrighted, he strove to cast off the hold upon him. Impossible!

"No," ejaculated the other; "I am old, but strong. You shall not escape me."

What was the detected thief to do? Stay to be identified and ruined? No. Wait! There was no need. He read recognition already in John Oxley's face before his startled lips pronounced his name—"Gilbert!"

"He still held the iron bar in his hand, which he uplifted.

Suddenly, the firelight gleamed on the upraised weapon. It fell; and, with a heavy thud, John Oxley sank to the floor.

Horried, the would-be assassin stooped over him, when approaching footsteps sounded in the ante-room, and alarmed, he fled.

The next moment, the door was flung wide open, and John Oxley's old, confidential servant rushed in.

On perceiving the scene before him, he began to call loudly for help, when, slightly raising himself, John Oxley exclaimed, "Hush—hush, James! The thief—the slayer! But the villain must not be taken. It is a snake I have warmed in my bosom that has thus felled me. It is Gilbert Burt, my adopted son. Hush! not a word. My moments may be numbered; I have none to lose. Though, for his mother's memory, he shall go free of this crime, yet I have a duty to perform to one I have wronged. Help me."

With difficulty, he approached the bureau, took out the will, and flung it in the fire.

"Now," he exclaimed, as he fell back in his servant's arms, "if I die, I die intestate. My nephew, and not my would-be assassin, will inherit Silwood."

Gilbert Burt was never again seen in Hamersham; and, to the surprise of all but Tom Chester, John Oxley's nephew is now regarded as his uncle's heir, and the future inheritor of Silwood Grange.