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BIRCH DENE:

A Novel

BY

WILLIAM WESTALL,

AUTHOR OF

“FAIR CRUSADER” “HER TWO MILLIONS” “A PHANTOM CITY”

“TWO PINCHES OF SNUFF” ETC.

NEW YORK

HARPER & BROTHERS, FRANKLIN SQUARE

1889

[NP]

TO

THE MASTER AND MISTRESS OF BIRCH

THIS STORY

Is Affectionately Inscribed

[NP]

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGS
I. THE WAIFS.	7
II. THE PITY OF IT	15
III. COMMITTED	19
IV. NEWGATE.	25
V. THE BLACK PEW.	29
VI. MR. CHUBB.	34
VII. HOPE.	38
VIII. THE TRIAL.	43
IX. THE VERDICT	51
X. A BOOTLESS QUEST.	55
XI. BARTLETT'S RESOLVE.	60
XII. A CLUE.	67
XIII. MOSES WEEVIL.	74
XIV. ANOTHER LOSS.	78
XV. SOLOMON'S ADVICE.	84
XVI. BOUND APPRENTICE.	88
XVII. ROGUES IN COUNCIL.	93

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

XVIII. ON THE ROAD.	98
XIX. A NEW FRIEND.	104
XX THE APPRENTICE HOUSE.	112
XXI. ANOTHER MISFORTUNE.	117
XXII. THE FACTORY.	123
XXIII. JIM RABBITS.	130
XXIV. OLD DICK'S ADVICE.	134
XXV. A BATTLE.	139
XXVI. THE OLD WAREHOUSE.	147
XXVII. BEFORE THE BENCH.	153
XXVIII. A FRATERNAL QUARREL.	161
XXIX. ROBIN AT CHURCH.	168
XXX. MIRIAM.	174
XXXI. IN LOVE.	181
XXXII. A VISIT AND A VIGIL.	189

[vi]

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGS
XXXIII. A FRIEND AT COURT.	199
XXXIV. PROMOTION.	205
XXXV. AT OAKEN CLEUGH.	212
XXXVI. REBUFFS.	221
XXXVII. A MOMENTOUS VISIT.	227
XXXVIII. AT DENE HALL.	234
XXXIX. A SENSIBLE LASS.	244
XL. WILL ROMFORD.	251
XLI THE HUSH SHOP.	257
XLII. A CONFESSION.	268
XLIII. PERPLEXITIES.	274
XLIV. FATHER AND SON.	281

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

XLV. OLD BETTY TALKS NONSENSE.....	290
XLVI. LOVE AND WAR.....	295
XLVII. A PRESSING INVITATION.....	304
XLVIII. THE LONG STRIKE.....	311
XLIX. BEFORE THE ATTACK.....	317
L. A BAD NIGHT'S WORK.....	324
LI. A RACE FOR LIFE.....	330
LII. A TIMELY OFFER.....	337
LIII. MR. GLAZEBROOK.....	342
LIV. ANOTHER FORTUNE.....	345
LV. THE CAMPAIGN OPENS.....	352
LVI. THE DOOM OF THE RIOTERS.....	357
LVII. THE MISSING LINK.....	363
LVIII. ROBIN'S CHOICE.....	368

[7]

BIRCH DENE.

CHAPTER I.

THE WAIFS.

A WINTER's day in London. During the morning it has snowed, frozen, and thawed in turn. The streets are slushy, the air is damp and raw, houses and shops loom swart and grim, and a red sun hangs low in a leaden sky.

Among the wayfarers who wend eastward along Holborn — men with pigtails, topboots, and low-crowned hats, women in pattens, with waists as high as their armpits, and coal-scuttle bonnets — are a woman and a boy, whose slow and sauntering pace is in striking contrast with the hurry and rush of the crowd around them.

The woman may be thirty years old; her face, though pale and worn, shows traces of beauty and refinement, and is still pleasing and comely. The boy has seen,

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

perhaps, nine or ten summers; he has a frank and open countenance, his eyes are dark blue, and the curls which hang down his shoulders are almost as black as the broad-brimmed hat which covers his head.

Both these persons are decently yet very insufficiently clad, and their pinched features and tremulous gait show that they are well-nigh spent with hunger and fatigue.

More than once the woman half stops before a passer-by, and, timidly holding out her hand, begs with her eyes. Then, as if ashamed of herself, she blushes deeply, and, with a gesture of despair, gathers her skirts about her and hurries onward. The only answers vouchsafed to these mute appeals are a shake of the head or a movement of impatience — as often as not a muttered curse.

The child, less anxious and preoccupied than the woman, is continually calling her attention to the sights around them, and asking questions — questions to which she almost invariably responds

[8]

with all gentleness. Once, however, as if wearied by his importunity, she speaks sharply, and bids him be silent, but only the next moment to kiss him with passionate fondness, murmuring:

“My poor, poor boy — what *will* become of us?”

“Look there, mother — look there!” he exclaims, as they pass Chancery Lane.

“What are they doing? Why are those people shouting so? — and that cart with the man tied to it!”

“I think — yes, it must be so. They are whipping a man at a cart’s tail.”

“Poor man! What has he done? Is he wicked?”

“That is a question God alone can answer, my dear Robin. It is not for us to judge.” Perhaps he stole something.”

“Then he is wicked?”

“He may be. We are all wicked. But there are degrees. Perhaps he was very hungry or had starving children at home. I wonder whether it is wrong” — lowering her voice to an inaudible whisper — “I wonder whether it is wrong to steal for one’s children. Would God forgive me if —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

As they go on they are overtaken by another cart, surrounded by a mob of howling ragamuffins. Seated in it is a wretched creature, bareheaded and handcuffed — his clothes a mass of filth, his face streaked with blood — whom the mob are pelting with mud, addled eggs, rotten turnips, dead cats, and assailing with foul abuse.

“Oh, that poor man!” cried the boy, excitedly. “They are killing him. Will nobody help him? What has he done that they use him so ill?”

This remark was overheard by a little, caustic-looking, oldish man, who wore a short pigtail, tied up with black ribbon, kneebreeches, and gaiters, and carried under his arm a bundle of books, and on whose beak-like nose was perched a pair of huge, hornframed spectacles.

“That is a very bad fellow, my boy,” he said. “He spoke evil against dignities, so they put him in the pillory, and now they are taking him back to Newgate.”

“Spoke evil of dignities! What is that?”

“He found fault with the king and his ministers, and said something about bishops being wolves in sheep’s clothing; and, what was worse, he printed it all. He pointed the finger of scorn at the great, and now the mob bespatter him with mud and rotten eggs. Serves him right for meddling with other people’s business and not minding his own — don’t you think?”

[9]

The boy, with a puzzled look, answered by asking another question.

“And that other man,” he said, after a moment’s thought —, “what has he done?”

“The fellow they were whipping at the cart’s tail?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, he committed a most heinous offence — nothing less than buying two trusses of hay at a price so low that it was assumed he must have known they were stolen.”

“Did he steal them?”

“No; he bought them.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Bought them! That seems very strange,” said the poor child, looking more puzzled than ever. “If people are flogged for buying things, what is done to those who steal things?”

“They are hanged — hanged as high as Haman, provided the thing stolen be above the value of five shillings. That is the value put upon a man’s life in this country, for whether you kill or merely rob, the punishment is the same. But I must go and look after my shop, or somebody will be robbing me. Good-bye, my little friend, and if you live to be as old as I am, you will often think of the sights that you once saw in the streets of London — sights that could not be matched in any other city in Christendom at the dawn of the nineteenth century.”

And with that the old gentleman gave Robin a patronizing nod, and went briskly on his way.

“A very strange man — isn’t he, mother? Who do you think he is?”

“I have no idea,” answered the woman, bitterly. “He likes hearing himself talk, I think. I dare say, though, there is truth in what he says; only I wish that instead of giving us words he had given us bread.”

“So do I. But I am not so hungry as I was a little while since. I can wait a bit longer. Where shall we sleep tonight, mother — under the Adelphi arches again?”

“Heaven only knows. But we must have patience. God is good. Perhaps there may be news of your father. Let us go on.”

As if the mere suggestion of such a possibility renewed her strength or made her forget her weakness, the woman took the boy firmly by the hand, and increased her dilatory pace to a fast walk.

[10]

A few minutes afterwards they reached Leather Lane, and over a bookseller’s shop, at the comer, Robin (who read every sign he passed) saw inscribed the words

BARTLETT, DEALER IN NEW AND SECOND-HAND BOOKS.

At the same moment he stopped short and uttered an exclamation:

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Look, mother! That must be the name of the strange old gentleman who you said liked to hear himself talk. There he is!”

It was quite true. He stood at the door, calmly contemplating the stream of life which flowed past him, smoking the while a big German pipe, which harmonized well with his horn spectacles and hooked nose. As Robin spoke, the smoker caught sight of him.

“How do you do?” he said, removing the pipe from his mouth. “Glad to meet you again. Here you see me on my native heath — in my own shop, surrounded by my household gods. Won’t you step in, madam, and buy a book for the young master, who, I take it, is your son? I have works suitable for every age, and the meanest as well as the highest capacity — some with very nice cuts.”

“People who cannot buy bread don’t buy books, and I have money for neither,” answered the woman, bluntly.

“Is it indeed so? I should not have thought it — yet when I scan your faces closely — Excuse me, my eyes are dim with much poring over books. You are right — literature is good; but pudding is better for a hungry boy, and, now that the quartern loaf has got up to one shilling and tenpence-halfpenny, as cheap as bread, besides being a good deal more filling for the money. Here, take this” — putting two penny pieces into Robin’s hand — “and get a couple of slices.”

The lad’s eyes glistened, the woman’s filled with tears.

“God bless you!” she said, in a broken voice. “I never thought — this is the first time — But he has eaten nothing since yester-day.”

“Pudding! Thank you, sir,” cried Robin. “But where shall I get it?”

“From the Flying Pieman. But I dare say you can find room for more than two slices between you. Here is another twopence. Buy four.”

“Poor woman!” he thought. “She says nothing about herself, and yet she looks fit to drop.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You are really too good, sir; and if it were not for my poor boy — We will do as you say. But surely that fine gentleman on the other side of the way cannot be a pieman?”

“He is, though. The Flying Pieman of Holborn Hill. I suppose they call him a pieman because he sells pudding,” laughed the bookseller. “But you do right to call him a gentleman. He has genteel lodgings in Rathbone Place, and when not occupied in selling pudding, he paints pictures. I am told, however, that the puddings pay him better than the pictures. But I am keeping you from your pudding, and I think I discern in that portly gentleman, who is coming this way, a possible customer.”

Acting on this hint, mother and son, after again expressing their thanks, crossed over to the corner of Fleet Market, where the gentlemanly pieman vended his wares. He was a fine-looking fellow, with a smiling face, and in his suit of black—dress-coat, knee-breeches, silk stockings, steel-buckled shoes, frilled shirt-front, and spotless white cravat — presented a very distinguished appearance. In his right hand he carried a round tray, on which reposed a sort of baked plum-pudding, smoking hot, which he cut up with a brilliantly bright spatula, handing the slices to his customers with a flourish and a smile, sometimes with a jocular remark.

The slices ordered by Robin and his mother were quickly consumed, and though she would have made him eat three, herself taking only one, he refused to take any unless she took half, and after an amicable contest the portions were equally divided.

This incident was viewed with evident approbation by the distinguished pieman.

“I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance — to my regret,” he observed, in a loud voice, and with much dignity of manner, “for you are a very fine boy, and, if there be any truth in the Fifth Commandment, you will live a long and honorable life. Allow me, as a reward for your filial duty, to offer you another slice of pudding.”

This sentiment was loudly applauded by the bystanders, of whom there were many within hearing, and straightway brought the pieman a large accession of custom, as he may not improbably have expected.

The slice despatched, the woman and the boy resumed their walk.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It is as I said — ‘God is good,’ ” she observed, as they descended Holborn Hill. “We have been very fortunate to-day”.

[12]

Robin. Who could have thought this morning — Ton are not hungry now, dear?”

“Not a bit. I am quite full. I almost feel as if I had eaten too much.”

“Yes, we have been very fortunate. It makes me hope that we may have news of your father. If not — But we must hope for the best.”

Skirting the walls of Newgate, they turned into Cheapside, then up Cornhill into Leadenhall Street, until they came to a coffee-house close by St. Mary Axe.

“I almost dread to go in,” she murmured, after looking at the half-open door long and wistfully. “If there be no news, what shall I do! And if there is a letter, and anything to pay on it, that will be nearly as bad, for I have no money.”

But at last, mustering up her courage, she entered, first bidding the boy to wait outside until she came back.

During her absence Robin amused himself by watching the process of trimming and lighting a street lamp. Two sturdy fellows came up at a swift walk, one carrying a ladder, the other an oil-can. They wore leather aprons, and in each of their belts was stuck a pair of scissors. The man with the ladder reared it against the post, and, leisurely mounting, opened the glass, took out the lamp and handed it to his companion, who, after filling it with oil and trimming the wick, gave it him back. Then the first man lighted the wick and replaced the lamp, and the operation was completed.

But the lamps of the period — at the best poor things, giving a wretched, flickering light — always went out in a wind; and so costly was their maintenance that only the main thoroughfares were lighted at all. People who traversed by-streets after dark did so at the risk of breaking their limbs by falling into untrapped cellars or over heaps of refuse.

As the two lamplighters trotted round the corner the woman reappeared. Robin had no need to ask questions. Her haggard face bespoke the extremity of despair, and she was so overcome that she had to lean against the coffee-house wall for support.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“No news, no letter, no word, no anything!” she gasped. “Oh, my Willy! he must be dead — he said he was ailing; or the ship he was coming home in has been lost. Nothing less would keep him from me — nothing less. Let us go.”

“Whither shall we go, mother?” asked the child, struggling hard to keep down a rising sob.

[13]

“I know not — anywhere. If it would only please God to take us to himself! But for you, darling — We must beg our way back to Hampshire. Come!”

And taking his hand she began to retrace her steps, yet without seeming to give much heed whither she went.

They had not gone far when snow began to fall, and as the sun was already below the horizon, and the blinking lamps served but to make the obscurity more profound, they found their way with difficulty, and had to walk almost at random.

“Newgate again!” exclaimed the woman, after a while, looking up at the sombre walls. “We must have taken a wrong turn and doubled back. I thought we were going towards the river. But let us go along Holborn again; we may as well be there as anywhere else. We are even more wretched than the prisoners inside that gate. They, at least, have food and shelter. Oh, that it should come to this! My poor Robin, you shiver. You must be wet through. Only that thin jacket, and it is snowing faster than ever!”

“It is as thick as your gown, mother,” said the boy, heroically.

“But I am older, and can bear it better. If we have to stay out all night, or sleep again under the Adelphi arches —”

“Oh, mother,” cried the boy, impetuously, “don’t you think that the kind gentleman who gave us the fourpence to buy pudding would give us, or find us, a night’s lodging?”

“I am afraid — Still, he could only refuse. It is a good idea, Robin. Let us go and ask him.”

So they went on, and soon after entering Holborn came to one of those picturesque, old-fashioned timbered buildings, with pointed gables and projecting upper

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

stories, which still survived in various parts of the town. The lower stories were used as shops, and here, being under cover, the two waifs halted for a few minutes' rest.

The woman shook the snow from her dress, and as she looked at the boy her mother's heart melted within her. If he had been dragged through a pond he could not have been much wetter. His teeth chattered, and his face was blue with cold.

"What shall I do?" she murmured — "what shall I do? If we go out again into the snow, it will kill him."

She glanced round. They were close to a tailor's shop, lighted with flaring naphtha lamps. About the door was a great display of cheap garments— one of them a child's cloak. Quick as thought, and as if moved by an irresistible impulse, the woman nipped up

[14]

the cloak, threw it over Robin's shoulders, took his hand, and hurried away.

Nobody in the shop saw the deed done; but a neighbor did and gave the alarm. Yet the woman, had she not been handicapped with a conscience, might easily have escaped with her prize. She had a few minutes' start, and the night was so dark and the snow so thick that by crossing over the street or slipping round a corner she would have been safe from pursuit. The rash act was no sooner committed, however, than she began to rue it. After running a short distance, she came to a sudden stop.

"That was ill done, Robin," she said, "but I did not give myself time to think. Your father's wife must not play the thief. Let us be honest though we perish. We will go back and give the cloak up."

She took it from him, and they began to retrace their steps, and presently found themselves face to face with the tailor's shopman and the neighbor.

"This is the party!" exclaimed the latter.

"That is my cloak; you took it just now," said the shopman.

"I did, and I am very sorry. I was bringing it back. Here, take it."

"I'll take it, sure enough, and you too. You'll have to come along with me. Would you mind fetching a runner (constable), neighbor?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Right willingly. You hold on to her, and I’ll have one here in the twinkling of a bedpost.”

“Oh, good sir, let us go!” pleaded the woman. “I did not mean to steal the cloak — indeed I did not! I must have been mad; but, as you saw, I was bringing it back; and I was sorely tempted. My poor little boy was perished with cold. I am penniless, and we know not where to lay our heads. In the name of your mother, good sir, let us go!”

The shopman, who had an honest face, seemed touched.

“I would if it was in my power,” he said, hesitatingly. “But I dare not; it would be as much as my place is worth. Maybe, when my master, Mr. Lazarus, hears what you have to say, he won’t be hard on you. I will speak a good word for you. Let us go to him before the runner turns up. I wish I had not been in such a hurry to send for him. Come.”

Mr. Lazarus stood in his doorway, between the flaring naphtha lamps — a big man, with a huge stomach, a heavy face, and pig-like eyes.

[15]

“Oh, oh — you have caught ’em!” he shouted, in a strident voice. “I’m glad of it. I’ll teach you, you hussy, to steal my goods. I’ll make an example of you. You shall smart for this, madam.”

“You are mistaken, master. This woman is poor, but she is not a common thief. She was bringing the cloak back when we met her.”

“Come now, Perkins — no gammon. Bringing it back, indeed!”

“She was, though, and I can quite believe what she says — that she took it on impulse, as she calls it, for the sake of the child, who, as anybody may see, is perished with cold and wet to the skin. I am sure she is a gentlewoman in distress” — lowering his voice to a confidential whisper — “she is so well-spoken. I think you might let her off; you have got the cloak back.”

“You mind your own business, Perkins. I shall not let her off. I mean to make an example of her as a warning to others. It is not the first thing I have had stolen, not by a long way, as you well know. I consider it my duty to persecute, and persecute I

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

shall. Ah, here comes the runner! I give this woman in charge, constable, for stealing this 'ere cloak. She was caught in the very act."

"For mercy's sake let me go!" cried the poor creature, clasping her hands in an agony of fear. "I did not mean to keep the cloak; I was bringing it back. Ask this good gentleman."

"Tell that to the marines — it won't go down wi' me," broke in the constable, with a brutal laugh. "You are lagged this time, old woman, and like as not will have to swing for it. Come — none of your tricks." (She was weeping bitterly, and, had the kind shopman not supported her, would have fallen to the ground.)

"Shall I take the boy too?"

"Yes, take him. They are both tarred with the same brush."

A few minutes later the woman was walking through the snow with gyves on her wrists, and the constable by her side, one of his hands under her arm, the other dragging the dazed and almost unconscious Robin by the collar.

CHAPTER II

THE PITY OF IT.

MR. BARTLETT, the dealer in new and second-hand books, was chairman of a small but select club, which had its domicile at the Black Bull, in Holborn. The members of this club called themselves

[16]

Old Fogies, either by way of irony, because they entertained ideas which some folks deemed dangerous and new-fangled, or to conceal the fact of their doing so; for, though they were reformers, after a fashion, they had no desire to become martyrs. And the open profession of extreme opinions at the dawn of the century was as likely as not to bring the professors into trouble, especially if they chanced to be tradesmen, more or

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

less dependent on a public which had been frightened by the horrors of the French Revolution into hatred of everything that savored, however remotely, of innovation. Many of the Fogies were tradesmen, and too much concerned about their wives, their families, and their shops to possess the courage of their opinions — except the bookseller, who was by far the boldest of the lot, never hesitating to avow his sentiments, sometimes even publishing them. But then he had neither chick nor child, nor “wife to trouble his life” — a circumstance which was considered to give him an unfair advantage over the other Fogies.

It is only right to state, however, that there was nothing in the social and political views of these gentlemen which nowadays would be held exceptional, much less reprehensible. On the contrary, they would probably be deemed old-fogyish and behind the times.

On two nights of the week the Fogies had an upper room of the Black Bull all to themselves (by special arrangement with the landlord). Here they met after business hours to smoke the calumet of peace, drink a friendly glass, and discuss the affairs of the nation.

One of these meetings took place shortly after the arrest of the woman and the boy. The first subject of conversation was naturally the weather, of which, during the previous twenty-four hours, there had been a good deal, and Londoners were quite as much disconcerted by a heavy fall of snow then as they are now.

“Anything fresh?” asked one, when this topic had been exhausted. “You go more about than anybody else, Jones; have you heard anything fresh to-day?”

“Nothing in particular. I went to see the new lamps in Old Bond Street last night, and very well they answer. They are furnished with reflectors, and give more than double the light of ordinary lamps.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Bartlett, who sat in a big armchair, complacently smoking his big German pipe, “London wants light

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

in more senses than one. We could do with more light in high quarters — in Parliament, for instance, and at Court. The nation is in a condition of political darkness, and the light given by our ministers and legislators is as feeble and uncertain as that given by common street-lamps, which, bad at the best, always go out when they are most needed. We want searching reforms in every department of the State — abolition of sinecures, reduction of expenditure, extension of education — ”

“You are quite right, Bartlett — quite right,” put in a Foggy of the name of Driver, who made it a rule to interpose whenever he thought the chairman was becoming too outspoken. We want these things, just as we want to be rich or to go to heaven, and shall have to wait a longish time, I expect. One thing at a time; slow and sure goes far in a day. Talking of light, what do you think of this new plan of getting it from smoke they talk so much about? There are folks who say that before many years are over the streets of London will be lighted with some sort of gas distilled from coal.”

“They might as well say distilled from moonbeams,” returned Bartlett, contemptuously. “As a laboratory experiment, I dare say the thing is possible enough; but the idea of lighting a town with coal gas is utter nonsense. Why, even if it could be done, we should all be stifled with the stench!”

“And the whale fishery would be quite ruined,” observed Jones, who, as an extensive dealer in sperm oil, took a practical view of the question.

“You may rest content, Jones; the whale fishery won’t be ruined this century, at any rate, by coal gas. But to return to our subject. I was going to say, when Driver so unceremoniously shut me up, that no reform was so much needed as a reform of our criminal law.”

“You think there is too much hanging. So do I.”

“Yes, I hope we may live to see the day when the offences punishable by death will be limited to five or six.”

“So do I. But don’t you think you are rather too sanguine? If we get the number down to a dozen it will be a grand thing. By the way, did you hear of the robbery at Lazarus’s?”

“No. When was that?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Two or three hours since. A woman, who had a little boy with her — her child, I suppose — took a cloak that was hanging at the door and made off with it; and then, as it would seem, she repented,

[18]

and was bringing it back when Perkins, the shopman, met her, and she was given in charge. Perkins wanted Lazarus to let her off; but the old ruffian refused — said he would make an example of her. Perkins thinks she is a gentlewoman who has fallen on evil days — very well spoken and that The boy was wet through and shivering with cold, and she took the cloak to keep him alive. A pitiable case, isn't it? As likely as not, she will have to swing for it, and, 'pon my soul, I cannot blame her much. I know if one of my children was out on a night like this, starving and half clad —”

“A woman and a boy, did you say?” broke in Bartlett, excitedly. “The woman very well spoken! And the boy — how old about is he?”

“About nine,” Perkins said.

“It is the same — I do believe it is the same. Nay, I am sure. If I had thought — I might have prevented this. I saw them; they passed my shop, and I found out that they were starving — to my surprise, for they looked respectable and did not beg. Well, I gave them fourpence, and told them to spend it with the Flying Pieman, which they did. A shilling more — ay, less than a shilling — would have provided them with another meal and a night's lodging, and then this would not have happened. Yet I never thought of it. A human life will be lost for want of thought — and a shilling!”

The chairman puffed angrily at his pipe until his face was enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

“I shall never be able to forgive myself — never!” he went on. “But I did not think — and, after all, if it were not for these infernal, bloodthirsty, diabolical laws that would disgrace a nation of negroes —”

“Hush, Bartlett, hush! If anybody were to hear you they would say we were all Jacobins.”

“Let 'em! What do I care? Does anybody know what became of the boy?”

“They took him too.”

“You don’t mean —”

“Yes; Lazarus gave him in charge as an accomplice.”

“Hang Lazarus! I wish they would, and two or three hanging judges along with him. There would be sense in that. But about this poor woman — I shall go to the police-court to-morrow morning, and if a lawyer is likely to be of any use to her, she shall have one.”

[19]

“Have you any idea who she is?”

“Not the least. I think, though, there is a history behind her, and I shall try to find out what it is.”

After this the conversation drifted into other channels; but the chairman, contrary to his wont, took little part therein, interposing only from time to time, between the puffs of his pipe, some observation so caustic and revolutionary that the discreet Mr. Driver declared it positively made his hair stand on end, and plaintively besought him to “draw it mild.”

“I will do better,” he said, at length, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe. “I will go home. Thinking of that poor woman and the fate that is probably in store for her quite puts me out. And the shilling I have spent to-night on whiskey would have saved her! The pity of it! Good heavens, the pity of it!”

CHAPTER III.

COMMITTED

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

THE bookseller was as good as his word. He went next morning betimes to the Hatton Garden police-court, where, as he had ascertained, the woman and the boy were to be brought up for examination.

It was a mean place, with sordid surroundings. About the door were several villainous-looking men and wretched women awaiting the arrival, under escort and on foot, of prisoners in whom they took an interest, prison vans being the invention of a later age. The police-court itself was a small and gloomy room, with exceedingly dirty windows, and divided into two unequal parts by an iron railing. The larger section was occupied by the magistrate, clerks, lawyers, and witnesses; the smaller, by a not very numerous public and a few constables (generally called “runners”) — rough-looking fellows with long staves, long coats, red waistcoats, top-boots, and cocked hats. Two of these myrmidons of the law were guarding a witness with leg-irons, whom they had just brought from Newgate — a notorious highwayman and housebreaker, who, having “turned stag,” was about to give evidence against his former comrades.

When Bartlett entered the court the night cases were being dealt with. These were speedily disposed of, and shortly afterwards the woman and the boy were brought in. The former looked ill and

[20]

woebegone, yet she held herself erect, and her manner was composed and resolute. Robin seemed bewildered and frightened, but when his eye caught the bookseller’s, who gave him a friendly nod, he brightened up wonderfully.

“Is this the prisoner who refuses to give her name?” asked the magistrate, looking at the charge sheet.

“She is, your worship,” answered the constable who had taken her into custody. “The boy also refuses to give his name.”

“How is this? Why won’t you give your name, woman?”

“May I make a statement?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“If you like, only it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you.”

“You are very kind. Ail the same, I should like to make a statement. My husband is an officer in His Majesty’s service. He has been a long time abroad, and I have been living in the country, a long way from London. About two months ago I received a letter from him saying that he had been invalided and ordered home; and, expecting to be in London early in November, he asked me to meet him here. He told me to find comfortable lodgings and leave my address at a certain coffee-house where he would call as soon as he landed, the ship in which he was coming home being bound for the Thames. So I came up from the country with my little boy, and we have been here nearly two months. I have called at the coffee-house scores of times — I called yesterday — but always in vain; and now I fear that something has happened to my husband. I made the money I brought with me go as far as I could, and when it was gone I pawned everything I could possibly dispense with. At last I was turned out of my lodgings, literally penniless, and we wandered about the streets, my child and I, cold, hungry, and penniless. Yesterday we were overtaken by the snow-storm, and in a fit of desperation, not knowing what I did, I took the cloak which I am charged with stealing — not for myself, but for my poor little boy, who was wet through and benumbed with cold. But almost the next minute I recovered my senses, and saw that I had committed a theft; and when they took me, I was on my way back to return the cloak to its owner. That is all; and I trust, sir, that you will consider a night’s imprisonment in those horrible cells a sufficient punishment for the offence which, in a moment of madness, I committed, and let us go.”

“But what has all this to do with your refusal to give your name?”

[21]

“I refuse to give my name because my husband is an honorable man, belonging to a highly respectable family, and I would not have it known for the world that his wife had been publicly charged with theft. I would rather die.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“In that case there is no use losing any more time about it. We must do without your name. And now let us have the evidence. As yet I have nothing before me.”

On this the neighbor (by name John Smith) was called and sworn. He testified that he had seen the prisoner take the cloak from the shop door, and make off with it; and that afterwards, when he followed her, in company with James Perkins, he saw it in her possession.

The next witness called was Perkins. He, too, had seen the cloak in the prisoner’s possession; but she was then coming towards the shop, with the cloak in her hand, as if she intended to give it up. He repeated what she had said, and avowed his belief that she spoke the truth. The cloak was worth ten shillings.

“We have nothing to do with your belief,” observed the magistrate. “You can step down. Call the constable.”

All the constable could say was that the prisoner admitted having taken the cloak, but declared that when the other two witnesses met her she was on her way back to give the cloak up.

The prisoner declined to ask the witnesses any questions. She said that they had told nothing more than the truth, and thanked Perkins for having corroborated her statement.

“The case is complete then,” said the magistrate. “The boy does not seem to be implicated at all. He is dismissed.”

“Thank Heaven for that!” ejaculated the woman.

“As for the other prisoner, however, I have no alternative, with the evidence before me, but to commit her for trial on the charge of stealing from the shop of Mr. Jacob Lazarus wearing apparel of the value of ten shillings.”

The woman looked wildly round, uttered an incoherent exclamation, and then, clutching convulsively at the front of the dock, bowed her head on her hands.

“How shall I describe the prisoner in the committal order — as a nameless woman, a woman who refuses to give her name, or a woman whose name cannot be ascertained?” asked the clerk, with a puzzled look. “Such a case has never happened before in my experience.”

“Nor in mine,” said the magistrate. “But how do we know it

[22]

cannot be ascertained? That is pure assumption. Have you made any attempt to find out the prisoner's name, constable?"

"I have asked her."

"How very ingenious! I mean, have you made any independent inquiry?"

"How could I? I only took her last night. None of us knows her, and anybody can see as she is from the country."

"That is true; and there was nothing on her person, I suppose, that might serve as a clue to her identity?"

"Only these papers" — handing him a packet.

"Papers! The very thing. Why did not you give me them before? Pawn-tickets, in the name of Mary Nelson, and a letter with the address obliterated —"

Here the prisoner raised her head.

"The letter!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "Oh, give me back the letter! It is from him."

"Your Christian name is Sophie, then?"

No answer.

"But the pawn-tickets are in the name of Mary Nelson. How is that?"

"The letter! Oh, give me the letter!"

"I am afraid I cannot do that. Both the letter and the pawn-tickets must be impounded. I will read the letter through; there may be something in it."

The letter was dated from Martinique (then an English possession), and began, "My dearest Sophie." The writer, after acknowledging the receipt of a recent letter, and expressing the pleasure it gave him to hear that she and dear little Robin were in good health, went on to say that he had been prevented from writing sooner by an attack of fever, from which he was only just recovering. It had not been a very severe attack, and he thought he should soon be quite well; but the medical board which had considered his case was of opinion that he had better come home. In one sense, this was a

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

disappointment, because it might delay his promotion to a captaincy. Yet he was delighted beyond measure to think that he should soon see his wife and boy and old England once more. It had been arranged for him to leave Martinique in an armed transport, bound for the Thames, which would sail in about three weeks, and be due about the first week in November. As it was a long journey from London to Hampshire, and he might not be strong enough to undertake it, he would like

[23]

her to meet him in London. She could come up by coach a few days before his expected arrival (bearing in mind that it might be earlier or later, according as the weather was favorable or the reverse), and stay at some lodging-house or hotel, leaving a letter for him at the Turk's Head coffee-house in Leadenhall Street, where he should call as soon as he had landed and reported himself. She would not want money before he joined her, and as he had both pay and prize-money to draw, they would be able to enjoy themselves. The letter, which concluded very affectionately, was signed "Your loving Willy," and there was a P. S. to this effect:

"I have mentioned to nobody but you either that I have been ill or am coming home. This purposely, in order that we may have a few weeks together before I go to Down Manor. So soon as I get my step (and it cannot be long delayed), I shall tell them all."

"This letter quite confirms the prisoner's statement," said the magistrate. "No wonder that she does not desire to disclose her name! But these pawn-tickets — still, I doubt whether it is Mary Nelson —"

"It is not," said the prisoner.

"Ah, you gave another name, then? However, that is no business of mine, and I do not see that the name matters very much. It is not a case of disputed identity. All the same, we must call her something. Call her 'Mary Nelson, *alias* Sophie' — and make a note that she has no address, and refuses to give her name."

"Very good, sir. But what must be done with the boy?"

"My boy! Oh, for Heaven's sake, do not take my boy from me!" cried the woman. "Surely, surely, you cannot be so cruel!"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It would be no kindness to let the child accompany you to Newgate, prisoner,” said the magistrate, compassionately. “You do not know — Besides, I cannot. I think you had better take him to the workhouse, constable, unless the prisoner has some friend —”

“Friends! I have no friends. In all this great city there is not one who would stretch a hand to save me from perdition!” exclaimed the prisoner, bitterly.

Here Bartlett, deeming the moment opportune for his purpose, came forward.

“If your worship would allow me,” he said, “I should like to

[24]

make a proposal. I saw the prisoner and her child in Holborn yesterday, and exchanged a few words with them. Could I have foreseen — However, that is not to the purpose. I failed to foresee. I believe her story, and respect her motives. Her refusal to disgrace her husband by giving her name is greatly to her credit, and I shall be glad to render her whatever slight help may be in my power. With your permission and hers, I will take charge of the boy, and find him a home — until such time — until the trial comes off, and afterwards if necessary.”

“I have a friend, then!” murmured the woman. “You are very good, kind sir. I thank you with all my heart, and when my husband knows, he will join his thanks to mine.”

“I shall certainly interpose no objection,” said the magistrate. “It would hardly be less cruel to send the poor child to a workhouse than a prison. At the same time, as the prosecution may possibly desire to call him as a witness, we should know where he is to be found.”

“My name is Thomas Bartlett, and I am pretty well known in this neighborhood,” answered the bookseller.

“Mr. Bartlett is an old inhabitant and a responsible householder,” put in the clerk.

“That will do. Remove the prisoner. The next case, please.”

Five minutes later the worthy magistrate had forgotten that the decision which he had pronounced, committing the prisoner for trial, would in all probability involve

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

the sacrifice of a human life. Albeit by nature kind and sympathetic, familiarity with “hard cases” had deadened his conscience and hardened his heart. The administrators of a bad law can no more escape demoralization than its victims can escape their doom.

Before leaving the court-house Bartlett had a few words with the prisoner. Though she had borne herself bravely during the proceedings, she was now almost in a state of collapse, and, as the bookseller thought, on the point of being seriously ill — which, seeing that she had eaten next to nothing for twenty-four hours and spent the night in her wet clothes, was not to be wondered at.

“Have no fear about the boy,” he said, gently, as he led her to a seat; “I will take good care of him, and bring him to see you, and you shall have legal assistance. When do the sessions begin?” (to the constable.)

“Next week.”

“The sooner the better,” she murmured. “I could not endure

[25]

this suspense long. It would kill me; and the jury, when they hear my story, are sure to acquit me, don’t you think, sir?”

“I hope — yes, I think so, decidedly. To do otherwise would be wicked — positively wicked. When the circumstances are properly explained, they must acquit you.”

Bartlett spoke much more confidently than he felt. He had not the heart to discourage the poor creature, and though too old to be over-sanguine, he hoped for the best. Juries did sometimes refuse to convict, even when the evidence in favor of a conviction was as overwhelming as in the case of this unhappy woman.

“I am glad to hear you say so,” said the woman, with a smile of gratitude and an effort at cheerfulness; “and now that God has provided us with a friend, and my boy with a home, I shall be able to await the issue with patience.”

Here the constable made a sign of impatience, as if he thought the conversation had lasted quite long enough.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Robin, dear, we must part,” she continued. “This kind gentleman will take you to his house, and bring you to see me. God bless you, my darling!” And then, drawing him to her and putting her arms round his neck, she whispered something in the child’s ear which Bartlett did not catch, albeit he heard the reply:

“I promise, mother. Robin will be true.”

“Keep up your spirits — I will come soon,” said the bookseller, as they shook hands. “And here, take this” — giving her a crown. “You may find it useful where you are going. I believe the jailers expect something.”

CHAPTER IV.

NEWGATE.

THE turnkey threw back a heavy, nail-studded door, opening into a small quadrangle, enclosed within high and gloomy walls.

“Heaven help me! Must I go in there?” cried the unfortunate woman who called herself Sophie, recoiling with a gesture of horror and dread.

“Of course you must,” answered the man, with a sardonic laugh. “That is the women’s ward. You will have to stop there till you are tried, and then we shall, maybe, put you in a place as you can have all to yourself, and where nobody will disturb you.”

[26]

“The women’s ward!” said a female pickpocket, who had been Sophie’s chain companion from Hatton Garden to Newgate. “There is another name for it, ‘Hell above ground!’ I have been there before. If you haven’t, God help you!”

And then the heavy door closed behind them, and Sophie found herself in a pandemonium as appalling as Dante’s “Inferno.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

The quadrangle was filled with a horde of yelling and blaspheming women, most of them in rags, many half naked, some stupidly drunk, others fighting like demons and capering like maniacs.

There were children, too — babes but a few days old, born in jail; little ones clinging to their mothers' skirts, and learning to curse before they had been taught to lisp.

So soon as the new-comers were perceived, their fellow-captives gathered round them.

"Here's two fresh 'uns!" shouted a virago with tousled hair and blackened eyes. "We are middling crowded already; but I dare say we can find room for you. What was it, my beauty?"

Sophie was too dismayed to answer; moreover, she did not understand the question.

"Come now — none of your gammon! We won't have airs and graces here. You thinks yourself a lady, maybe, and too good for the likes of we. But we'll soon let you see — won't us, Cheeky Poll? What was it, I say?"

"I am very sorry, but I really don't know what you mean. If you will kindly explain," said Sophie, courteously, in the hope that a soft answer might turn away wrath.

"I am very sorry, but I really don't know what you mean," mimicking her. "Oh, my eye, here's a green 'un, and no mistake! I mean, what was you lagged for? What have you gone and been and done to get yourself locked up?"

Sophie hesitated a moment, and then thinking that frankness and truthfulness would be the best policy in the circumstances, she answered:

"I had no money, and I took a cloak — the night before last, when it was snowing so hard — to shield my starving child from the storm."

"And then you spouted it to get drink, I suppose?"

"I didn't keep it many minutes, and, when they took me into custody, I was going to return it."

"Why, what a fool you was, to be sure! When I prigs any-

thing I always sticks to it, and spouts it for drink. I wish I had some now — don't I just! But what made you want to give the cloak up?"

"My conscience smote me. I felt that I had done wrong?"

"Conscience! Wrong! Them's things I know nothing about; I'm not a scholar nor yet a fine lady. All the same, I have wit enough to stick to what I prigs. You said you had no dibs the other day. Have you any now — money I mean?"

"It is no business of yours whether I have or not," said Sophie, who began to see that nothing was to be gained by eating humble pie.

"Isn't it just? We'll soon show you. Come, let us see what my lady has got about her."

The words were hardly spoken when Sophie's arms were pinioned and half a dozen nimble hands were rummaging her dress.

"Here it is!" cried a slatternly girl with bare feet, a tattered gown, and a grimy face.

"Give it me!" screamed the black-eyed virago, snatching it from her. "This will pay your footing, madam; we'll drink your health in hot ale and rum."

"Hot ale and rum be —" shouted another. "We'll have blue ruin — blue ruin and no water."

"You shut up, Brazen Bett! It shall be hot ale and rum."

"Shut up yourself, Drunken Sal, and tip me the tin. I'm the treasurer of this 'ere crib."

"I'll see you — hanged first."

"Not you. You'll swing before me. That face of yours would hang a bishop."

"Bishop you. Brazen Bett! Take that for your imperence!" screamed Sal, giving her a tremendous box on the ear.

Bett answered in kind, and the next moment the two women were pounding each other's heads and faces like prize-fighters.

"A fight — a fight!" shouted the onlookers. "Make a ring; let us see fair play. Who'll back Bett?"

"I will," said one.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“And I’ll back Sal,” screamed another. “Go it, old girl! Tap her claret jug! Scratch her face! Pull her hair! Well done! Well done! Bett will be uglier than ever. She’ll have a jib like a black pudding.”

Sophie, horrified beyond measure by the revolting scene, put her fingers in her ears to shut out the hideous din, and stole away to

[28]

the end of the quadrangle, where several mothers seemed to be nursing their children in comparative peace.

One of the women made room for her on a stone bench.

“You look scared,” she said; “and no wonder. They are a rough lot. But if you want to be quiet, stop here with us, and I’ll do what I can for you.”

“Thank you, oh, so much! You have some influence with them, then?”

“A little. They are not quite as bad as you may think. They generally let me alone, and I dare say if I ask them they will let you alone.”

“Is it because you have children?”

“Partly. Those are mine” — pointing to two sickly little girls, who were playing with a rag doll. “I had three, but I lost one last week, thank God!”

“You thank God for taking your child!”

“So would you, if you were like me,” said the woman, gloomily; “and if he would take the other two I think I could die happy.”

“Die happy! What do you mean?”

“As soon as my baby is born I have to be hanged.”

“But it is impossible!” gasped Sophie, looking as amazed as if she had seen a ghost. “It would be an infamy. Nobody could be so cruel. What have you done, poor soul, that they should want to hang you?”

“We passed flash notes, my husband and I. I was once lady’s maid in a very good family, and I married the butler, and we took a public-house. But we did not succeed — lost all our money — and to retrieve ourselves we took to passing flash notes. For a while all went well, but in the end we were found out. My husband was hanged three months since, and in three more —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Here the wretched woman's voice sank into a broken whisper, and, though beads of perspiration started on her brow, she shivered as if she had been struck by an icy blast.

"You understand. In three months more it will be my turn. That is why the other prisoners look up to me a little, and if I ask them to let you alone, I think they will."

Sophie closed her eyes and shuddered. She was too horrified to speak, and could hardly believe that she heard aright, that the forlorn creature by her side was doomed to die a shameful death, and allowed to live for a brief space only that another life might not perish with hers. And she herself — was not the fatal rope also dangling

[29]

over her head? No, no! — a thousand times no! God would not be so unjust — men so cruel. For so trifling an offence as hers they could not condemn her to die. And then a feeling came over her as if she were already dying; her head fell forward, and, overcome by weakness and emotion and the foul air of the prison yard, she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK PEW.

WHEN Sophie came to herself, she was lying in the arms of the woman who was waiting to be hanged.

"You went off in a dead faint," said the latter. "Do you feel better?"

"A little, thank you. Where am I? Oh, I remember —" sighing. "You are very kind. You must tell me your name."

"Broxley. And yours?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Nelson — here. But that is not my husband’s name. He is away from home, and it would be so terrible for him, and such a slur on his family —”

“I understand. You are a lady. I could see that before you spoke. But why —”

“Why am I in this place, you would say? I will tell you.”

“You mustn’t be downcast,” said Mrs. Broxley, when Sophie had finished her story. “I don’t think they will convict you. It was such a very little thing, and you were bringing the cloak back. They do let people off sometimes. Pray that you may get a merciful judge. So much depends on the judge. I don’t think they are quite as hard on stealing as they used to be, so long as it isn’t burglary or highway robbery. But people who pass flash notes they never let off.”

“And is there really no hope for you?”

“None,” said Mrs. Broxley, with a heart-rending sigh. “My poor old mother — she lives at Chingford — and our clergyman saw the Home Secretary, and they pleaded very hard for me. My mother went down on her knees; but it was no use. He said he was very sorry, but that if they were to let me off they might as well abolish capital punishment altogether. I must try to be resigned.”

[30]

“I thought this morning there was nobody so unfortunate as I,” said Sophie. “But you are. How little we know! And my life was so happy. Till I came to London I had no idea there was so much misery in the world. Poor woman! My heart bleeds for you!”

“And yet there’s some as is worse off even than me. There are five — one of them little more than a child — to be hanged on Monday morning; and I have three, maybe five, months to live. They will surely let me have a week or two to get strong before — And if it would please God to take me and the little one too —”

“Oh, don’t say that, dear Mrs. Broxley! Something may happen. It may be better for you than you think, after all. You can at least hope. If I lost hope I should go mad — or die.”

And thus they talked on; and so potent a consoler is mutual sympathy, that, after a while, these two desolate women, both under the shadow of the gallows, became

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

almost cheerful. Sophie took the little girls on her lap and told them stories; Mrs. Broxley spoke of days gone by, and seemed to forget for a moment that her life was forfeit and her days were numbered.

It was so pleasant to have somebody who understood her, and to whom she could open her heart, said the poor soul, while the mere fact of Sophie finding one still more unfortunate — one that she could pity, and console, and help — made her own burden of sorrow and suspense easier to bear. Without the condemned woman's friendship, moreover, it would have fared ill with her in several ways. She would have been forced to join in the rough sports of the other prisoners, probably forced to drink with them, under pain of being threatened and bullied, if not severely beaten, and to go dinnerless and supperless to bed. At that time the prisoners' food was thrown to them as if they were dogs, and they scrambled and fought for it like wild animals. The strong got barely enough, and the weak, who could neither purchase the favor of their jailers nor buy bread for themselves, had to subsist on the doles of their more fortunate companions, or starve.

But those sentenced to death were always treated with a certain indulgence, as well by officers as prisoners, and Mrs. Broxley's sad fate touched the hearts and excited the pity even of the worst among the unsexed inmates of the ward. They secured her an ample allowance of food, enough for both herself and Sophie; offered her drink (always obtainable at the "tap" kept by one of the turnkeys), spoke to her respectfully, and paid her many little attentions; and so strangely constituted is human nature, so deeply

[31]

rooted are vanity and love of distinction, that, despite Mrs. Broxley's miserable condition and impending doom, she enjoyed these attentions. The homage of those terrible women gave her evident pleasure.

"Didn't I tell you that they would let you alone if I asked them?" she said, as Sophie and she were eating their dinner. "There is nobody else in the yard as they would do as much for. They always do as I tell them; and the roughest of 'em, Brazen Bett and Cheeky Poll, never give me a wrong word."

"Poor" creatures! They cannot be wholly bad. They are women, after all."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

It was true. They were women, after all.

When the time came for the children to go to bed, Sophie asked the mother if she should hear them say their prayers.

“Prayers!” said Mrs. Broxley, with a look of surprise. “Nobody prays here. What would be the use? Besides, I never taught them any. But if you like —”

And then Sophie, profiting by the permission, took the little ones to her, and taught them to lisp a short hymned prayer, such as she had once taught Robin, and when they knew it the children knelt beside her on the stone bench, and repeated it with uplifted hands.

While this was going on, several of the prisoners, gathering round them, watched the proceeding with deep silence and with amazed curiosity. When the children rose from their knees and Sophie took them in her arms and kissed them, Drunken Sal came forward and grasped her hand.

“You are a good woman,” she exclaimed, with a big oath, “and I used you ill; but I won’t do it again, and if anybody so much as lays a finger on you I’ll wring their necks for ’em.”

During the short remainder of her prison life, Sophie was treated with as much consideration as Mrs. Broxley. Nobody molested her, and though she heard many rude words, none were addressed to her.

In that place of torment night was more hideous than day. The beds were merely sloping boards, with logs for pillows; and for bedding and bed-clothes, each prisoner had two filthy and vermin-haunted rugs. The ward, which had accommodation for a hundred inmates, contained three hundred, and the cells were as crowded and noisome as the hold of a slave-ship in mid-ocean. The cries of drunken women, the wailings of children, and the curses of their

[32]

mothers, rendered rest well-nigh impossible; and though Sophie was weary and worn out, the clock of St. Sepulchre had gone twelve ere she could close her eyes in sleep, and she woke long before daylight, feverish and unrefreshed.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You are not used to it yet,” said Mrs. Broxley, looking at her pallid cheeks and sunken eyes. “It always takes a little time, and some never do get used to it —”

“And then?”

“They die. When the ward is as full as it is now, there is often a death every day; sometimes two.”

“I am afraid I shall prove to be one of those who die before they get used to it,” said Sophie, bitterly. “A few nights like last night would be my death.”

“Ah, Mrs. Nelson, many a one has thought and said the same; but none of us know how much we can bear till we are tried.”

The morning was Sunday, and Sophie, being a country-bred, God-fearing woman, and feeling in more need of religious consolation than she had ever felt in her life before, said that she should like to attend service at the prison chapel, and asked Mrs. Broxley to accompany her. But Mrs. Broxley positively refused.

“I shall not go,” she said; “and I would not advise you. However, please yourself; and it is, perhaps, just as well you should go, just for once.”

Rather to her surprise, Sophie finds that a good many of her fellow-prisoners are of the same mind as herself, and all go together, under the escort of several warders. She hears frequent mention of “the condemned sermon;” but, being too much absorbed in her own thoughts to inquire what this may mean, she enters the chapel quite unprepared for the terrible drama which is about to be enacted there.

The other women and herself are shown into the body of the building, on either side of which is a small gallery. In one are a number of strangers, who have come to feast their eyes on a spectacle hardly less piquant than a prize-fight or a public execution. In the other sit the convicts who, after being sentenced to death, have been respited by royal favor. The sheriffs of London are present in their robes of office, wearing their gold chains, and attended by two tall footmen in gorgeous liveries.

In the centre of the chapel is a large square pew, painted black, and on a table in the middle of it rests a coffin. Strangers, prisoners, and officers have taken their seats; the ordinary

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

is in the reading-desk; the shuffling of feet and the hum of voices have subsided, and amid a silence broken only by the sighs of prisoners and the clanking of chains, five manacled men and two women enter with laggard steps, and, filing into the condemned pew, range themselves round the open coffin. All are doomed to die on the morrow.

One of the women has broken into a dwelling-house, and stolen a pair of stockings; another has stolen a cotton counterpane. Among the others are a horse thief, a burglar, a highwayman, a coiner, a returned transport, and a lad of seventeen, who has forfeited his life by stealing a lamb — not a single murderer!

After a hymn has been sung, the morning service proceeds in the usual order until after the reading of the litany, when the ordinary, turning to the sheriffs, says, in a loud voice, “The service for the dead.”

All the occupants of the black pew have prayer-books, but only one of the women and the youth are able to read, and the latter is so agitated that he holds his book upside down. The woman is on the point of fainting; the burglar utters an audible oath; the highwayman laughs and smirks and tries to look as if he did not care.

Next follows a special prayer for “those now awaiting the awful execution of the law,” and in due course comes the sermon. It is a powerful sermon of its kind, and the place and the circumstances invest the words of the preacher with a dread solemnity which affects the most callous of his listeners, and throws the more sensitive into an agony of apprehension and fear. As he “concludes,” the visitors cover their faces; some of the women among the untried prisoners scream, others fall into hysterics; the lamb-stealer swoons, and has to be carried out by two of the attendants; the burglar, in a state of frantic excitement and fiercely cursing, strikes with his manacled hands one of the turnkeys full in the face, and is overcome only after a desperate struggle.

Sophie, more dead than alive, and bitterly rueing that she did not follow Mrs. Broxley’s advice, was led back to the women’s ward by Brazen Bett and Drunken Sal.

[34]

**The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)
MR. CHUBB.**

BARTLETT was a confirmed old bachelor. He lived in his shop, and slept in a chamber on the first floor. Besides this, he possessed only one other room — a place behind the shop, which served as office, study, and parlor. It was here that he took his meals (obtained, for the most part, from a neighboring eating-house), received his friends, and wrote his articles and letters. A charwoman made his bed and swept his rooms, and he was assisted in his business by a young man with straw-colored hair and a rueful countenance, who wore knee-breeches and buckled shoes on weekdays, and a brass-buttoned coat and top-boots on high days and holidays. The name of this young man was Solomon Slow. When his master was in a jocular mood he would call him “Slow Solomon,” “King Solomon,” “Slow and sure,” and indulge in other pleasantries at the youth’s expense, and much to his disgust.

When Mr. Bartlett, out of the kindness of his heart, volunteered to take charge of Robin, he had formed no definite idea as to how he should dispose of the child; and as they wended homeward from the police-court his mind was greatly exercised there anent.

“I have only one bedroom and one bed,” he thought, “and I don’t know much about children. Solomon has a mother; she lives in Fetter Lane, and I believe is a decent woman. I wonder whether she would put him up, and how much she would charge? I will send Solomon to ask her as soon as we get home.”

As he arrived at this conclusion they came to a second-hand furniture-shop, at the door of which stood a second-hand truckle-bed, whereon was a ticket thus inscribed:

“Ten shillings. Dirt cheap.”

The truckle-bed suggested an idea.

“Would you rather stay with me, my little man? You know my place; but I have very poor accommodation. Would you rather stay with me or with a lady who lives hard by? She would make you very comfortable, I think.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Oh, let me stay with you, sir,” answered the lad, looking up to him with trustful eyes. “You have been so kind to us, and — I like your face.”

“He likes my face!” thought the old fellow, with an amused smile. “Rather a strange saying from so young a child.”

All the same, the saying pleased him.

“Well, you shall stay with me. I will buy this truckle-bed, and have it set up in my room. And you can amuse yourself with my books. You like reading — eh?”

“I like it better than anything else” — eagerly — “except —”

“Except what? Speak out.”

“Playing at marbles.”

“Well, I dare say we can find somebody for you to play marbles with,” laughed the bookseller. “Now for the truckle-bed!”

With that he went into the shop, and asked the keeper of it, a bustling little woman, how she could have the conscience to want ten shillings for “an old concern like that,” and bade her five. She offered to split the difference, and ended by taking six-and-six.

“A truckle-bed is always useful, and I have got the worth of the money,” observed Bartlett, complacently, as he and Robin resumed their walk.

On reaching the shop he ordered breakfast, for the lad looked half famished, and, after he had eaten his fill, told him to choose a book. Somewhat to Bartlett’s surprise, Robert chose “*The Pilgrim’s Progress*,” and was soon deep in that most wonderful of allegories.

The bookseller’s next care had reference to providing legal assistance for Robin’s mother. Though he was a generous man — or, rather, because he was a generous man — he could not afford any great outlay. But he happened to have a customer learned in the law, and, as he expected this gentleman to call in the course of the day, about some books he had ordered, Bartlett decided to lay the matter before him, shrewdly thinking that he could do so to greater advantage, and probably at less cost, in his own shop than in the other’s office.

Shortly after noon the lawyer, who lived in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and whose name was Chubb, put in an appearance.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

The business of the books concluded, Bartlett took Mr. Chubb aside, and, after giving him full particulars, asked his opinion on the case “both as a lawyer and a friend, if you will allow me to call you so.”

[36]

“I want to have the woman properly defended,” he said, “but, not possessing a long purse, I cannot pay big fees.”

Lawyers are generally supposed to be hard and grasping, dead to sentiment, and alive only to their own interests — a conception of their idiosyncrasy which, in the main, may be true. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there are many among them who have lucid intervals of generosity. To this class belonged Mr. Chubb.

“’Pon my soul, Bartlett, you are a good fellow!” he exclaimed, when the bookseller had told his tale. “And this is an interesting case. Now, I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You cannot afford much expense, you say. Well, I’ll do what I can for the woman — instruct counsel, and the rest — all that is necessary, in fact — and charge nothing for my services. What do you say to that?”

“I say — thank you, Mr. Chubb, both on my own behalf and hers. It is more than I had any right to expect.”

“Not at all, Bartlett — not at all! I don’t like being outdone in anything — even in generosity. But there’s the question of counsel, you know. Counsel cannot work for nothing — it isn’t allowed. However, that is a difficulty which I think we shall be able to get over. I have a friend at the bar who wants business — young, clever, and eloquent. He has been junior in several cases, but, as yet, has had no opportunity of showing his quality. Now, the case of this anonymous woman is just the chance for which he is sighing. There is not much law in it. There can be no question, I think, that she is, technically, guilty of a felony. On the other hand, the prisoner being a woman, he may possibly be allowed to address the jury, and Blake — that is my friend’s name — is just the man to work on their feelings. If anybody can get her off, he can. I will retain him, and, considering the circumstances, I have not the **least** doubt that he will undertake the defence for a three guinea **fee** of which I will pay half — out of my own pocket. What do you say to that?” — and Mr. Chubb, smiling pleasantly, took a pinch

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

of snuff, and wagged his pigtail with an air which showed that he did himself full credit for the plan which he had suggested and the good action he proposed to perform.

“I say that you are a true friend in need. You have relieved my mind of a great anxiety, Mr. Chubb.”

“You approve of my idea, then, and authorize me to retain Blake?”

“Certainly.”

“Good! The next thing is to see the prisoner. As I have engagements

[37]

which will prevent me from doing so to-day, we must make it to-morrow, though it is Sunday. The sessions begin on Wednesday, and that will leave me only Monday and Tuesday to draw the brief and consult counsel. Not too much time — not enough, in fact. However, we must do our best. I shall call for you on my way to Newgate, about two o’clock. You will go with me, of course?”

“Of course.”

“We must try to persuade the prisoner to disclose her name. I fear it will make against her on the trial if she persist in her refusal to say who she is.”

“All the same, I do not think you will succeed in getting it out of her, Mr. Chubb. And, to tell the truth, I admire her refusal to disclose her name. It shows how deep is the love she bears her husband — that she thinks more of him than herself. Name or no name, Mr. Chubb, I regard that woman as one of the noblest of her sex.”

“Perhaps she is, Bartlett, but it is greatly to be feared that the judge and jury will not view the matter in exactly the same light. They may ascribe our interesting prisoner’s reticence to other and less commendable motives than wifely devotion. The counsel for the crown may even suggest that the husband is non-existent, and herself an habitual criminal who refuses to give her name in order to conceal her identity.”

“No, no, Mr. Chubb — that theory won’t hold water. If she wanted to mislead, she would give an *alias*, or adopt the name on the pawn-tickets. There is, moreover, something in her bearing and appearance that inspires me with confidence. I am too old,

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

and have been too often deceived, not to be mistrustful. Yet I believe in that woman, and I feel sure that she tells the truth.”

“The whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” added the lawyer, with a smile that might mean anything. And then they passed into the shop, where Robin sat on a cane-bottomed chair, poring over his book.

“Her son?” whispered Chubb, raising his eyebrows.

Bartlett nodded.

“What is the name of your father, my boy? Captain —?” he asked, suddenly, at the same time laying his hand on Robin’s head.

Robin, coloring deeply, looked up.

“The name of my father!” he said. “I cannot tell you sir. My mother bade me not.”

[38]

“Quite right, Robin! Always do as your mother bids you,” put in Bartlett, indignant at the lawyer’s mean attempt to surprise the lad’s secret.

“Very well answered, Robin!” said Chubb, laughing good-humoredly at his own discomfiture. “Here is a little reward for your ready intelligence” — giving him sixpence. “God bless me! Are you going gray already? If all your hair were like this, you would be powdered for life. Queer, isn’t it, Bartlett?” — pointing to a lock of the lad’s hair, which was white as snow, all the rest of his hair being dark brown.

“It has always been like that, sir,” said the child.

“And always will be, till you lose it altogether. A mark to know him by, that, Bartlett. If we have to invent a name for him, we might call him Whitelock — ah! ah!”

And then the lawyer made a courtly bow, placed his broad-brimmed beaver on his powdered head, and went his way.

CHAPTER VII.

HOPE.

AT the stroke of two on the following afternoon Mr. Chubb, who was nothing if not punctual and precise, presented himself at the bookseller's house. Bartlett and Robin, equally punctual, were ready to bear him company.

"Taking the boy, are you?" whispered the lawyer. "Do you think it is wise? Newgate is not exactly the place for children — though there are children there, I am sorry to say."

"I promised his mother," answered Bartlett, simply, "and if — It may be that they will never meet again."

"Ah — yes — I was not thinking of that. Poor little boy! Well, let us be going."

They had no difficulty in obtaining admittance to the prison. At the time in question, relatives of prisoners, and people who called themselves relatives, were allowed to see their friends inside even without orders; but Mr. Chubb had taken the precaution to obtain a sheriff's order for a private interview with "the untried prisoner, known as Mary Nelson."

The felon's door was beset with a crowd of visitors waiting for admission, most of them laden with baskets of provisions, "liquid

[39]

refreshment," and other things, the greater part of which had probably been ordered by the prisoners beforehand, and would be paid for out of their own pockets.

Passing through this door, Mr. Chubb and his companions find themselves in a large ante-room of gruesome aspect. The whitewashed walls are festooned with handcuffs and leg-irons; at an anvil in the middle of the room a felon, with ulcerated ankles, is being relieved from his fetters, and across it is ranged a battery of blunderbusses, mounted on movable carriages.

Hard by an iron gate leading out of this room are stationed a turnkey, who searches the men visitors, and a woman, who searches the women. But Chubb being furnished with a sheriff's order, and known to the jailers, he and his friends escape this ordeal.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

After going through a narrow corridor, they come to the place where male prisoners are allowed to hold converse with their visitors — a sort of iron cage, so contrived that, albeit talk is easy, personal contact, even to the extent of a handshake, is impossible. Passing thence to the women's ward, they are shown into a turnkey's lodge, and a few minutes later Sophie is brought in by a jailer, who stands on guard at the door, and never once loses sight of his prisoner. Though somewhat recovered from the shock of the condemned sermon and the scene in the chapel, she is pale to ghastliness; but a hectic spot on each of her cheeks betrays the excitement under which she is laboring, and there is deep trouble in her beautiful dark eyes.

Bartlett is both' pained and surprised by the change in her appearance which a few days have wrought.

After tenderly embracing Robin, she thanks the bookseller for his visit, sinks into a chair, and glances inquiringly at his companion.

"This is Mr. Chubb, the lawyer, who has been good enough to undertake your defence," says Bartlett.

"Will he speak for me?" — eagerly.

"No. The speaking will be done by counsel — a barrister, you know — a very clever and eloquent gentleman of the name of Blake, whom Mr. Chubb will retain and instruct."

"You are both very good and kind. How can I ever repay you, dear friend?" — taking Bartlett's hand; "for, though I have known you so short a time, you are in very truth a friend. All this will cost much money, and for the present I am destitute; but when my husband returns he will made it good to you, and join his thanks to mine."

[40]

"Don't you think it would be well, madam," observed Chubb, with great respect, for the woman's manner impressed him favorably, and her forlorn condition touched his heart — "don't you think it would be well if you were to be tried in your own name? Refusal to give a name is apt to be construed as ill as the giving a false one."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You mean kindly, I am sure, sir, but, for reasons that Mr. Bartlett has no doubt explained to you, I must decline to act on your suggestion. I cannot give my name.”

“Well, as I have told Mr. Chubb, I think you are doing quite right,” observed Bartlett. “But there is one consideration you appear to be losing sight of. Your husband may arrive any day; he may have arrived already. Had you not better enable us to communicate with him, and let him know where you are?”

“Not for the world — not for the world,” answered Sophie, warmly, “would I have him know that I am a prisoner in Newgate. Imagine him seeing me with these dreadful women! He would go mad, and I should die of shame. Better, far better, let him remain in suspense a few days — if he has come back. The trial takes place on Wednesday, and with the kind help of this gentleman, and that eloquent barrister to speak for me, I feel more confident than ever of an acquittal. After the trial I shall have nothing to conceal, and will gladly tell you my husband’s name and my own story. It is the least I can do.”

Mr. Chubb then asked her several questions — among others how she came by the pawn-tickets which were found in her possession at the police-court. The explanation was simple. When the exhaustion of her resources compelled her to resort to the pawn-shop, she felt ashamed of giving her own name, and gave instead that of Mary Nelson, a servant she once had in Hampshire.

“Could not you have written to your friends in Hampshire for help?” asked Chubb, suspiciously.

“I have no friends in Hampshire to whom I could apply for help, nor yet in England. I am not a native of this country.”

“You speak the language without accent, though,” said Chubb, in a tone of surprise.

“Naturally, because I have spoken it all my life.”

As she did not seem disposed to be more communicative, the subject then dropped, and shortly afterwards the interview terminated.

Before parting with her son (who had been out of earshot while

his elders were talking) Sophie drew him aside, and, taking him in her arms, kissed him passionately.

“Only till Wednesday!” she murmured — “only till Wednesday! In three days we shall be together again, and perhaps by that time your father may be with us. Pray to God that he may, and remember what I said.”

And then the turnkey led her away.

When the others were outside, Bartlett gave Robin the key of the house, and bade him go home and wait there until he came.

“Well, Mr. Chubb, what do you think now?” he said, when the lad was gone.

“I am of your opinion. To tell the truth, I had a lurking fear that you might have been talked over by an artful woman. But now that I have seen her and heard her story from her own lips — as much as she chooses to tell — I believe in her. She interests me. This woman must not be hanged, friend Bartlett.”

“You think you can get her off, then — you and Mr. Blake?”

“I do. All the same, there is no gainsaying that she is technically guilty of the felony. The evidence as to that is overwhelming, while her intention to return the cloak rests on her own statement, which is not evidence, and on the testimony of Perkins, who can only say what he thinks and the woman said. His opinion, of course, counts for nothing, and her statement to him was precisely such a one as an artful, unscrupulous woman, caught in flagrante *delicto*, would be likely to make. On the other hand, nobody can deny that she may have been telling the truth; she acted as almost any mother in similar circumstances would have acted; she is good-looking and ladylike, and that weighs much with a jury; Lazarus is a Jew, and the average jurymen detests a Jew, and Blake has ample scope for a powerful speech — if he is allowed to make one. Then we shall have, in Sir James Hulton, one of the youngest and most humane judges on the bench. If we had one of the old hanging judges, I would not give much for my client’s life. As it is, however, I think the chances are in our favor — I may almost say decidedly in our favor.”

“That means we are sure to win?”

“I hope we shall. All the same, I would not advise you to be too confident. There may be tradesmen on the jury who will rather sympathize with Lazarus than his

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

victim, and, because they expose goods for sale at their shop-doors, think that anybody who lays hands on them, except to buy, deserves to be hanged. And there is always the glorious uncertainty, you know.”

[42]

“Yes,” returned Bartlett, gloomily; “the only things certain about our English law are injustice and cruelty. Its footsteps are marked with blood; its victims outnumber those of the destroying angel; the gibbet is its emblem, and Jack Ketch its chief minister.”

“Hush, my dear sir, hush! You forget that I am a humble representative of the law which you defame. Yet I freely admit that our criminal code is susceptible of amendment; and it is being amended. The number of offences for which capital punishment can be inflicted has been reduced from three hundred to a hundred and fifty. Think of that!”

Bartlett bore the lawyer company as far as the turnstile leading into Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and it was agreed that he should call at Mr. Chubb’s office on the following Tuesday morning to ascertain the result of his consultation with Blake.

“Come about ten,” he said, “and bring the boy with you. I may have a question or two to ask him.”

So when the time came Bartlett bade Robin put on his hat and cloak (which he had bought for him the day before), and accompany him to Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

“I am glad you are come,” said the lawyer, when they were ushered into his room; “and you will be glad to hear that Blake’s opinion is favorable. With an average jury and a judge with bowels, he thinks we are nearly sure of an acquittal. He quite approves of my idea to call our young friend here as a witness. He thinks that, even if he can give no material evidence, his appearance in the box will have a good effect on the jury — always provided that he understands the nature of an oath.”

Mr. Chubb, having satisfied himself on this point, questioned Robin closely touching the evidence he might be able to give, carefully putting down his answers, which he considered so important that he said he should send a copy of them to Blake

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

forthwith. They fully confirmed Perkins's evidence of the prisoner's intention to return the cloak, and would, he thought, tell with the jury, if they did not convince the judge.

Then, turning to Robin, he asked him whether he had ever given evidence in a court of justice. Robin answered in the negative.

"Well," said Mr. Chubb, "there is nothing to be alarmed about. All you have to do is to answer simply and truthfully — for your mother's sake. One more question: Robin is, of course, a pet name, a diminutive — what of? I am not asking your surname,

[43]

remember. I want only to know your right Christian name. Is it Robert?"

"No; Rupert."

"In that case we shall have to call you as Rupert Nelson, I suppose? When you hear that name called, see that he steps into the box, Bartlett; and be at the court in good time — our case will probably come on early."

When Bartlett got back to his shop, he sent Solomon Slow with a letter, addressed to "Mrs. Mary Nelson," at Newgate, in which he told Sophie how well things were going, bade her be of good cheer, and said he hoped and believed that within twenty-four hours she would be free.

This hope was realized, but in a way which the worthy bookseller little anticipated.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRIAL.

THE Old Court of the Old Bailey.

A large, square hall, lighted by three large, square windows, through which can be seen the sombre walls of Newgate; on one side, and close to the ceiling, a gallery with projecting boxes; on the other the bench, with desks at intervals for the use of the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

judges; under the gallery, the dock, from which stairs descend to the covered passages leading to the interior of the prison. Standing out from one corner of the dock is the witness-box; at the other the jury-box, so placed as to enable the jurymen to see both prisoners and witnesses without turning their heads, and the witnesses to see the prisoners in like manner. The space below is occupied by the members of the bar, who are seated round a green baize table, covered with a formidable array of law books. The seat of honor on the bench is filled by a portly gentleman, attired in blue and furred robes; he wears round his neck a massive gold chain, and hanging over his head, against the crimson-lined wall, is the gilded sword of justice.

“Is that the judge, Mr. Bartlett?” asks Robin of the bookseller, who is looking anxiously for Chubb.

“The big man with the gold collar? No, that is the ex-Lord Mayor. The judge is the one further on, robed in scarlet. Ah, there is Mr. Chubb; let us go to him.”

[44]

The lawyer was close to the bar, whispering in the ear of a bewigged gentleman with a shrewd and powerful, albeit (for a barrister) somewhat youthful face, who held a brief in one hand and a pen in the other.

“That will be Blake,” thought Bartlett.

When Chubb caught sight of the bookseller, he pointed to a seat near his own. He looked so grave and anxious that Bartlett feared that something had gone wrong.

“Any news?” he asked. “Does Mr. Blake think as well of the case as he thought yesterday?”

“No. How could he, or anybody else, with old Baron Hardress on the bench?”

“Baron Hardress! I thought you said we should have Sir James Hulton.

“And so we ought to have. But it seems that at the last moment the devil put it into his head to stay in town, and Hulton is going on circuit in his stead.”

“And that will make against her, you think?”

“Decidedly. Instead of the chances being in our favor, it is now about even betting. Hardress always does his utmost to convict. They say he has passed more death sentences than any other judge on the bench. We have nothing to hope from him, and

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

everything to fear; but if Blake be allowed to speak, and can convince the jury of Mrs. Nelson's virtual innocence — and he still thinks he can — Hardress may go to the deuce; and he will, some time, the old ruffian!"

Bartlett felt greatly discouraged. He could see from Chubb's manner, and the unwonted energy of his language, that he thought worse of his client's prospects than he was willing to admit, and he regretted having encouraged Sophie to regard her acquittal as almost a foregone conclusion. She would be so buoyed up with hope that a verdict of guilty would come upon her with a crushing effect of which it made him shudder to think. And then he looked at the child by his side, who was gazing with his large blue eyes at the twelve men in the box above him, unconscious that on their fiat it depended whether his mother should be restored to him or taken away and put to a shameful death; then at the judge, who was raising his head — for the first time since Bartlett had entered the court — from the depositions he had been reading, to receive several "true bills" "which the grand jury had just found.

Baron Hardress, though not a very old man, was well on in

[45]

the sixties. He had a narrow forehead, and a big, aquiline face, covered with a smooth, tightly drawn, and colorless skin, small eyes under shaggy brows, and thin lips, which, when opened, showed a row of beautifully white teeth.

It was a countenance that reminded the bookseller of a portrait of Torquemada he had once seen in a "History of the Spanish Inquisition" — a countenance by no means devoid of dignity and power, yet ruthless and malevolent, as if the Draconic code which its possessor administered had turned his heart into stone, and dried up at their source all the gentler virtues.

"No pity there," thought Bartlett. "It will be no fault of his if that poor woman is not convicted, and if she be, then may she bid hope adieu."

This view of the judge's character received speedy confirmation. The prisoners first arraigned pleaded guilty, and on all were passed the severest sentences which it was in his power to award. A wretched old man in tattered garments, and shaking with palsy, accused of clipping the current coin of the realm, who looked as if

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

he could not survive another week of Newgate, much less a voyage to the other end of the world, was so ill-advised as to admit his guilt and “throw himself on the mercy of the court” Baron Hardress, who had a courtly manner and a silvery voice, thereupon expressed his regret that mercy was not one of the attributes of the court over which he presided; it was the prerogative of our gracious sovereign alone. Clipping the coin of the realm was a most serious offence, and he, the judge, as a faithful minister of the law, felt that he had no alternative but to sentence the prisoner to transportation for life.

This was virtually a sentence of death; and a few years previously “clipping” had been a capital felony, to which no indulgence was shown, those guilty of it being invariably hanged.

Towards twelve o’clock the name of Mary Nelson was called, and Robin’s mother, who had been waiting her turn in the covered passage, was led into the dock. At first she shrank back in dismay, cowering and shivering under the concentrated gaze of so many eyes. But recovering her self-possession by a strong effort, she glanced quietly round the crowded court, and seeing Bartlett and Robin, gave the one a grateful look, the other a loving smile.

The boy was terribly excited, and Bartlett had some difficulty in preventing an explosion of indignation and grief which would have drawn on him the anger of the judge.

[46]

Blake, after a keen glance at the prisoner, carefully scrutinized the countenances of the twelve men in the box.

“She will do,” he whispered to Chubb. “Those pale, refined features, those large violet eyes, the neatness of her dress — which is none the worse for being a little shabby — and the modesty of her bearing, are all in her favor. She has won the sympathy of the jury already. Mark the interest with which they regard her, and the way in which they are talking about her.”

“This is the prisoner who refuses to give her name and address, my lord,” said the clerk of the arraigns. “She has been indicted as Mary Nelson — a name which was found on some pawn-tickets in her possession.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“The name is a matter of secondary importance,” observed the judge, indifferently, “and the prisoner’s name is probably Nelson, after all. People caught in the commission of a felony are not generally careful to tell the truth. Let the case proceed.”

The clerk of the arraigns then read the indictment, which set forth that, according to the finding of the grand jury, the prisoner Mary Nelson, “abode and occupation unknown,” had, on the night of December the 13th, feloniously taken from the shop of Jacob Lazarus a cloak, or piece of cloth, of the value of ten shillings, against the peace of our lord the king, his crown and dignity.

“What say you, prisoner at the bar — guilty or not guilty?”

“Not guilty,” answered Sophie, in a low, yet clear and distinct voice.

After the junior counsel for the Crown had briefly “opened” the case in a rapid, monotonous voice, he called the first witness, John Smith, who saw the theft committed. Smith’s evidence was merely a repetition of that which he gave at the police-court. Blake cross-examined him sharply, but failed to shake his testimony or obtain any admission favorable to the prisoner. He could not take on himself to say whether she was bringing the cloak back or not; and whatever she may have said to Perkins, all that he heard her say was that she wanted to be let off.

The desire of Perkins to shield the prisoner was obvious, and the reluctance with which he gave some of his answers drew a severe rebuke from the judge. He swore positively that when he first caught sight of her she was coming towards him, and that the first thing she said was that she regretted what she had done, and was bringing the cloak back.

[47]

“I suppose you regret that you did not take the cloak and let her go?” asked the judge, with a sneer.

“I do, my lord; and shall as long as I live,” said the honest fellow.

The next witness was the constable, who testified that, after arresting the prisoner, he warned her that anything she might say would be used in evidence against her, on which she answered that she took the cloak for her little boy, who was wet

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

through and perished with cold, without thinking what she did, and was taking it back when she met Mr. Perkins.

“That is my case,” said the senior counsel for the Crown, Sergeant Walworth, as the constable stepped down.

Then rose Mr. Blake, and, with marked deference of manner, asked the judge if he might be allowed to address the jury on the prisoner’s behalf.

“Address the jury!” said Baron Hardress, with a look of surprise. “But that is against all rule, Brother Blake. This is a case of felony. On what ground do you make the application?”

“On the ground that the prisoner is a woman, my lord, and the wife of an officer in his majesty’s service. I am aware that my request is unusual; but in the circumstances I venture to hope that your lordship will make an exception in this poor lady’s favor.”

“The wife of an officer in his majesty’s service! But how am I supposed to know this? It is not before me.”

“If your lordship will be good enough to read the letter found in the prisoner’s possession, you will see that I am stating no more than the literal truth” — handing him the letter.

The judge read the letter.

“This seems to be genuine,” he said, “but there is nothing to show that it was really addressed to the prisoner, and her refusal to give her name does not predispose me in her favor. However, I will give her the benefit of the doubt. It is highly irregular, though, and I must ask you to make your speech studiously moderate. If not, I may find it my duty to direct the jury to disregard your observations as completely as if they had never been made.”

On this, Mr. Blake thanked the judge for his indulgence, and began his speech, and had he been pleading for his own life he could not have spoken more powerfully and earnestly. He made no attempt either to dispute or distort the facts of the case as they had been stated by the witnesses for the prosecution. His client

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

took the cloak. She admitted it; he admitted it; but he denied most emphatically — denied “with his whole soul “— that she took it feloniously, and without felonious intent there could be no felony. If he called at the chambers of his learned friend to borrow a book, and, not finding him in, took it without leave, intending to return it on the following day, would that be a felony? Moreover, when the prisoner took the cloak, she was not in full possession of her senses; she knew not what she did. Let the jury try to put themselves in this poor woman’s place, and say before God and man whether, in similar circumstances, they would not have acted as she had acted.

Mr. Blake next gave a vivid description of the prisoner’s forlorn condition — a gentlewoman born and bred, whose husband had fought and bled for his country and his king; of her weary wanderings through the streets — homeless, hungry, desperate; of the dark night and the fast-falling snow; of her impulsive taking of the cloak “to shield her shivering child from the storm, just as a man who saw a fellow-creature dying of thirst would give him a cup of water without thinking to whom it might belong;” and of the noble honesty and resolution with which she attempted to repair the wrong she had inadvertently committed. He asked the jury whether an act that was neither morally a theft nor technically a felony should be adjudged a crime deserving of death, and, after a passionate appeal in favor of his client, he besought them to render such a verdict “as would restore the mother to the child to whom she was so devoted, and the child to the mother whom he so dearly loved and so sorely needed.”

Had Mr. Blake said no more than this, he would have acted wisely; but he let himself be carried away by the fire of his own eloquence (which is oftentimes a snare), and, not content with asserting his client’s virtual innocence, denounced, with great warmth, the system of which she was the victim. He told how many unfortunates had suffered death during the last quarter of the previous century, quoting the saying of Sir John Moore that it was neither right nor just that the loss of goods should cause the loss of a man’s life, “all the goods in the world not being able to countervail man’s life.” Going still further, he questioned whether it was either expedient or just that life should be taken for any offence whatsoever; spoke bitterly of the “hanging judges “of the period, and stigmatized several recent executions as nothing less than judicial murders.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“It was a splendid speech,” remarked Chubb, when the eloquent advocate sat down, “and I agree with every word of it; but old Hardress looks as black as thunder, and if he has not half frightened the jury out of their senses, I am much mistaken.”

“I shall call only one witness,” said Blake, again rising — the Prisoner’s son, Rupert Nelson.”

“Rupert Nelson!” repeated one of the tipstaves.

“Don’t be afraid; speak boldly out, and tell neither more nor less than the truth,” whispered Bartlett, as he led Robin to the box.

“Rather a youthful witness. Brother Blake,” observed the judge. “Does he understand the nature of an oath?”

“Better than many a grown-up person. Perhaps your lordship will put him to the test?”

“What would happen to you, my boy, if you should bear false witness!”

“God would punish me.”

“That will do. Let him be sworn.”

“Take the book in your right hand,” said the registrar. “The evidence that you are about to give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God! Kiss the book.”

Robin kissed the book, glanced at his mother — who smiled encouragement and love — and then looked Mr. Blake full in the face.

“Do you remember the 13th of December — last Friday?” asked the barrister.

“Yes, sir.”

“Were you with your mother — the prisoner at the bar — on that day?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What were you doing?”

“Walking about the streets.”

“What streets?”

“A great many. I don’t know their names.”

“Were you in Holborn at all?”

“Yes, twice — once in the afternoon, and again at night, when it was snowing.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Did anything particular happen while it was snowing?”

“Yes; we sheltered near some houses, where there was a light, and my mother gave me a cloak.”

“She gave you a cloak! Where did she get the cloak?”

[50]

“I did not see. I was very cold, and looking another way, but I think—”

“Never mind what you think. She gave you a cloak. What happened next?”

“She took my hand and said, ‘Let us go,’ and we ran down the street, and then she stopped and said, ‘That was ill done, Robin. I did not give myself time to think. Your father’s wife must not play the thief. Let us be honest, though we perish. We will go back and give the cloak up.’ Then she took it from me, and, as we turned round, we met Mr. Perkins, and he said the cloak was his, and made us go with him.”

“Thank you, Robin; you have answered very well. Perhaps my friend here would like to ask you a few questions” — pointing to Sergeant Walworth.

“Well, I think I should — just one or two,” said the sergeant rising and looking hard at Robin. “You seem to have a good memory, my boy?”

“Yes, sir,” said Robin, who did not seem quite to understand the drift of the question.

“I mean that you remember things very well. You repeated just now what your mother said the other night, word for word. Will you be able to repeat next week what I am saying to you now?”

“You are not my mother, sir.”

“I see. You remember all your mother says, but nothing anybody else says. Your memory is more than good — it is convenient. I wonder if you forget with equal facility. You spoke of your father, or, rather, you say your mother did. Where is he?”

“I don’t know, sir” — sadly.

“What is he?”

“An officer and a *gentleman*.”

Whether by accident or design, Robin laid a strong emphasis on “gentleman,” thereby causing the bar to smile and the public to titter.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“That means, I suppose, you do not consider me a gentleman?” remarked the sergeant, good-humoredly.

“I did not say that, sir; but —”

“But what? Don’t hesitate. Out with it.”

“I know my father is a gentleman, and I am not quite sure —”

“You are not quite sure about me. Well, I may return the compliment,

[51]

and say I am not quite sure about your father. Who is he? What is his name, I mean?”

“I cannot tell you, sir.”

“Why?”

“Because my mother said I was not to tell anybody.”

“Well, I shall not press you to disobey her. All the same, if it were necessary for the ends of justice, I should insist on your telling his name, and I think your mother was ill-advised in forbidding you to disclose it. You can step down.”

The sergeant then began his speech in reply, the last word being with him. He spoke very much to the purpose. Though less eloquent, he was more artful than his opponent, laughed at his oratory, and sneered at his law. If the prisoner took the cloak, he said — and as to that there could be no question — she committed a felony within the meaning of the Act. To acquit her because she pretended regret for what she had done, and protested that she meant to restore the stolen property to its rightful owner, would be the height of absurdity, and a most dangerous precedent. Every thief who was found with, stolen goods in his possession might make a similar excuse, and if poverty were held to justify robbery, social order would be at an end, and private property cease to exist, for it unfortunately happened that the poor were much more numerous than the well-to-do. He had no feeling against the prisoner; on the contrary, he pitied her; but unless the jury despised facts, and disregarded their oaths, they could not do otherwise than find her guilty of the felony for which she was arraigned.

THE VERDICT.

THE counsel for the Crown had scarcely sat down when the judge began his summing-up. Under a show of impartiality, it bore much more hardly on the prisoner than Sergeant Walworth's speech had done. It was for the jury to consider the facts, he said. If they believed that, for some inscrutable reason, the witnesses, Smith and Perkins, had conspired to swear away the prisoner's life; that the boy Robin was mistaken, and that the constable had borne false witness — in short, if they believed that the prisoner never took the cloak, they would, of course, give he the benefit of

[52]

the doubt. But as for the law, they must take that from him; and it was his duty to tell them that, unless the witnesses had lied, one and all, the prisoner was undoubtedly guilty of stealing with felonious intent. With her position, her poverty, her love for her child, or her child's love for her, they had nothing whatever to do. The statement that her husband was an officer who had fought and bled in his country's defence they must regard as a pure assumption — he had almost said an impudent fiction. The letter proved nothing; as likely as not the prisoner had stolen it. It was, however, a fact to which he begged leave to call the jury's particular attention, that she declined to give her name and address. The wives of officers in his majesty's service, he hardly needed to observe, were not in the habit of prowling about London after dark and refusing to give their names. They might depend upon it that people who refused to give their names, or gave false names, had something to conceal which would not bear the light.

Baron Hardress had, moreover, much to say concerning the "pernicious principles" advocated by Mr. Blake — "principles which smacked of Rousseau and Voltaire, which had led to the downfall of the ancient monarchy of France, caused the horrors of the French Revolution, and laid Europe prostrate at the feet of Bonaparte." England was the freest of countries; her laws were the perfection of human wisdom; and further tampering with the system of capital punishment, as it then existed, would, he felt persuaded, be attended with the most disastrous consequences. In conclusion, he

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

besought the jury to dismiss from their minds everything that was not relevant to the issue, in which category they must include the observations of the counsel for the defence, and find a verdict in accordance with the oaths they had taken and the evidence they had heard.

All this time Robin's attention had been divided between the judge and his mother. When he was not looking at the one, he was gazing with all his soul at the other. In the first instance he failed to attach any precise significance to the proceedings of the court; but it gradually dawned on his mind that he was watching a terrible struggle, in which his mother, championed by Mr. Blake, and Baron Hardress were the principals; and, fresh from his reading of "The Pilgrim's Progress," he likened the eloquent advocate to Mr. Greatheart, and the judge to Giant Despair or Apollyon.

While the judge was summing up, Robin hardly ever took his eyes off him; and though he perceived that his lordship spoke

[53]

with greater authority, and had much more power than Mr. Blake, the poor boy never doubted that right would triumph and his mother be set free.

Notwithstanding the judge's ruling, and the comparative simplicity of the case, the jury were slow in coming to a decision. After long whisperings and much putting together of heads, they seemed to be exactly where they were, and Baron Hardress suggested that they should retire to their own room, where they could consult more at their ease. But the jury knew what retiring to their own room meant, and before complying with the suggestion they made yet another attempt to arrive at an understanding. The attempt failed, however, and they were led away to a wretched little room, destitute of seats, where, as they well knew, they would have to bide, without food, fire, or light, until they could agree on a verdict — and the weather was bitterly cold, and the day fast drawing to a close. Had the season been summer, their deliberations might have lasted longer and ended differently; for, despite the uncompromising character of the judge's deliverance, there was great diversity of opinion among them, and at the last moment the prisoner's fate depended on the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

capacity or willingness of a few jurymen to undergo a certain amount of physical hardship and privation.

“Let the prisoner be removed, swear another jury, and we will proceed with the next case,” ordered the judge.

So Sophie was taken into one of the dens below the court to endure for another hour, in darkness and solitude, the torture of suspense. As she was led away, Blake, sanguine to the last, good-naturedly passed to her a piece of paper, on which he had scribbled:

“Don’t be downcast; the hesitation of the jury is a good sign.”

Having his mother no longer to look at, Robin now fixed his eyes exclusively on the judge, wondering why he had such a wicked face and big white teeth — whether he always wore his wig and his scarlet robe; whether he had ever been a little boy, or had little boys of his own; whether he was more like Giant Despair or Apollyon; what would become of him when he died — and many other things. Meanwhile a barrister, who seemed to have a cold in his head, was opening the new case in a droning voice, which, together with the hypnotic effect of the boy’s steady stare at the judicial countenance, almost sent him asleep. But the case, being undefended, was soon concluded, and as Baron Hardress sentenced

[54]

the delinquent, an embezzling clerk, to ten years’ transportation, a side door opened, and it was whispered that the old jury were ready with their verdict.

“Let the prisoner, Mary Nelson, be brought up!” said the judge.

In the yellow light of the candles that flared on either side of him he looked, thought Robin, more diabolically wicked than ever, and when his mother stood once more at the bar, a great fear came over him. The boy was awed by the intensity of the silence which followed her appearance. He felt that something portentous, some unspeakable calamity which might sunder them forever, was about to take place.

The jury stood in a group under the gallery, their foreman, pale with suppressed excitement, at their head.

“Are you agreed on your verdict?” asked the clerk of the arraigns.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“We are.”

“What say you? Is the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty!” answers the foreman, in a voice trembling with emotion, for he has weakly yielded to the pressure of his colleagues and fear of cold and hunger, and his conscience smites him.

A shudder runs through the court, and Sophie, staring wildly with terrified eyes, clutches convulsively at the front of the dock and awaits her doom.

“Have you anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon you?” demands the judge.

A low, almost inaudible moan is the only answer.

“Mary Nelson, or whatever may be your name,” he goes on, “after a long and painstaking trial, in which you have been ably, though I fear not very judiciously defended, a jury of your countrymen has found you guilty of a capital felony — of stealing from Jacob Lazarus a cloak of the value of ten shillings. It is a verdict in which I fully concur, and the sentence of the court is that you be taken from hence to the place from whence you came, and from thence to the place of execution, and that you be there hanged by the neck until you shall be dead, and that your body be afterwards buried within the precincts of the prison in which you shall have been confined after your conviction. And may the Lord have mercy on your soul!”

While these dread words were being spoken, a fearful change was seen to pass over the prisoner’s countenance. She clutched wildly at her throat, her eyes became fixed, her pallor corpse-like

[55]

the jaws dropped, her head fell forward, and, as the judge’s voice ceased, she sank down in a heap.

The turnkey, who was standing beside her, stooped to raise her up, and Blake, who had been watching his client intently, sprang forward to help him. After looking at her for a minute, the barrister, with a face almost as pale as the prisoner’s, turned towards the bench.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Your lordship has anticipated the hangman,” he said, in a voice that trembled with pity and rage. “Your victim is dead.”

“Mr. Blake! This language to me!”

But his voice was drowned in the cries and exclamations that came from every part of the room, and he hastily ordered the court to be closed.

“What has happened? What is it, Mr. Bartlett?” wailed Robin. “My mother is ill! Let me go to her! Oh, let me go to my mother!”

“You have no mother, my poor boy. She is gone — to a better world than this. But I will be a father to you, until you find your own. Come; let us get out of this place. It is the ante-chamber of death.”

And, taking the weeping and half-fainting child in his arms, he led him tenderly home.

CHAPTER X.

A BOOTLESS QUEST.

ROBIN, half-demented with grief, sobbed himself asleep, and Bartlett hoped that the elasticity of youth would enable him to support, and in a while to forget, the trouble which had befallen him. Children so easily forget. But the lad’s vitality had been impaired by privation and exposure. His nature was sensitive, his love for his mother a passion, and the excitement of the trial and its terrible ending were more than his brain could bear. When the bookseller looked at him in the morning, tossing in his little bed, he saw at once that there was something seriously wrong. The child’s hands were clasped over his head, which he said ached terribly; his eyes were bloodshot, and their pupils contracted to a small point. But he hardly seemed to understand what was said to him, and his answers were wild and incoherent.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Like the sensible man he was, Bartlett sent straightway for Dr. Yockleton, who, as a neighbor and a Fogey, would, he felt sure, take a special interest in the case, and be moderate in his charges. When the doctor (by courtesy, for he was no more than a member of the college) had examined his little patient he looked grave, and, taking Bartlett aside, told him that the lad was very ill.

“It looks like a case of phrenitis — brain fever,” he said. “He will want skilful treatment and careful watching; and even then it won’t be easy to pull him through and preserve his reason. Acute inflammation of the brain is one of the most difficult diseases we have to deal with. Now, I am going to make you a proposal, less in my own interest a good deal than yours, for it will lose me a patient. Let us roll him up in his blankets, put him in a hackney coach, and take him right away to Bart’s — St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. What can you do with him in this little room, where you have to sleep yourself? And not a woman in the house, and no accommodation for a nurse!”

The suggestion was so sensible and practical that Bartlett fell in with it at once, and half an hour later, Robin, already delirious, was lying in one of the sick wards of the great hospital.

“He will be as well looked after and as skilfully treated as if he were the king’s son,” observed Yockleton, as he and the bookseller were going away; “and that and a youthful constitution may pull him through. But it will be touch and go.”

“Poor little chap! I should like him to get better,” said Bartlett, sadly. “He is a fine boy, and I have quite taken to him; and if he does not, we shall never know who he is, or his right name.”

“You have found no clue, then? The mother said nothing?”

“No. She said she would tell us everything after the trial; but the poor soul has gone and taken her secret with her, and I suppose the boy won’t be in a condition to answer questions for some little time, even if —”

“He gets better? Not for a long time. That brain of his has a good deal to go through before it will be fit for much. A strange case, Bartlett; and, to my thinking, the strangest thing about it is that a cynical old bachelor like you should act as knight-errant for a woman and a child you know nothing in the world about.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“A cynical old bachelor! Thank you, doctor! Well, to tell the truth, I am rather surprised myself. Perhaps you are right in thinking I have acted like a fool — for knight-errant and fool are almost synonymous terms, I imagine — but I can plead that I

[57]

really did not mean it. I was led on. When I heard the woman had been arrested, curiosity prompted me to go to the police-court. The marvellous fact of a wife publicly declaring that she would rather die than cast a slur on her husband’s name by revealing her own, still further roused my curiosity, and so I went on till I became responsible for her defence, and a sort of post-baptismal godfather to her son. But I don’t think I shall do so any more. The result of the experiment has been the reverse of satisfactory. I did not get the woman off; the boy is sick, and I have not the least idea who they are.”

“It is like you, Thomas Bartlett, to belittle your own goodness. Why, man, you have tears in your eyes this minute! Curiosity, indeed! Why, it was nothing but kindness of heart! While, as for knights-errant — whether ancient or modern — so far from thinking them fools, I regard them as superior beings. Did you ever meet with a finer character in all literature than Don Quixote? I was paying you a compliment, man — not finding fault. Everybody knows that your cynicism is all on the lip. But about this boy. Do you still think he comes of gentle people?”

“More than ever. He has been well brought up, and is wonderfully forward for his years — writes fairly, reads well, and knows the greater part of “Chevy Chase,” Gray’s “Elegy,” Milton’s “L’ Allegro,” and several pieces of Shakespeare off by heart. His mother must have been a cultivated woman. It would be a strange dispensation if he should die, and we were never to know who they were. If I had thought he was going to be so ill, I should have got him to tell me his father’s name last night. The poor man may be in London this moment vainly looking for his wife and child.”

“Yes, and he may be the first man I meet on my way home. But what would be the use of that? I should no more know him than Adam. I shall look in at the hospital occasionally to see how the boy is going on. I suppose you will also?”

“I shall either call every day or send Slow, and when he gets better — However, we will not talk about that for the present.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

The doctor was followed — at a short interval — by the lawyer, who seemed much put about on hearing of Robin's illness.

"It is of a piece with all our luck," he said, bitterly. "First, we have that old hangman, Hardress, instead of Hulton; then Blake, not content with defending his client, must needs set both court and jury against him by abusing the laws and making a Jacobin speech, and now the boy is ill and like to die!

[58]

"No, no; not so bad as that, I hope?"

"Well, you will see. Brain fever is a formidable disease — you must admit that; and you cannot deny that the omens are against us. I came with the express purpose of asking Robin his father's name. Now that his poor mother is dead, there is no reason why he should not tell us— every reason why he should, indeed!"

"And I am sure he would if he could. But the poor child is past answering questions just now, Mr. Chubb. He is delirious."

"So you said. Zounds! it is a thousand pities! Has it occurred to you that his father may be seeking him and his mother at this moment?"

"Exactly what I said to Yockleton this morning. But what can we do — how ascertain whether he is in London or not?"

"Well, it is not very easy to find a man in London whose name you don't know, and whose description you are unable to give. However, we can make an attempt. We will insert an advertisement in some of the papers — the *Times* and the *Morning Chronicle*."

"An excellent idea! I wonder we did not think of it sooner."

"It would have been of no use if we had; and if Mrs. Nelson — I suppose we had better speak of her as Mrs. Nelson — had either been acquitted or survived her trial, it would not have been necessary. I shall also obtain the pawn-tickets and redeem the articles she pledged — they may possibly afford us a clue — and make a personal inquiry at the coffee-house in Leadenhall Street."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Before Mr. Chubb went away, he and Bartlett drew up the proposed advertisement, which the bookseller undertook to send to the offices of the *Times* and the *Chronicle*. It was to the following effect:

“If the officer returning from Foreign Service, who appointed his wife and son (Rupert) to meet him in London, will communicate with Messieurs Chubb, Marrowfat, & Sheepshanks, Attorneys-at-law, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, he will hear what has become of them.”

As the advertisement, after four insertions extending over a fortnight, produced no result, save a few odd inquiries from curious busybodies, they were discontinued. In the meantime Chubb had obtained the pawn-tickets and redeemed the pledges to which they referred. They were mostly articles of wearing apparel belonging to the boy and his mother. Hers were marked with the initials “S. R.,” his with “R. R.” There were, besides, a pair of gold eardrops, two brooches, a gold keeper, and a miniature on ivory, set in a gold frame. Inside the keeper were engraven a true-lovers’

[59]

knot, and the words “Sophie and Will.” The miniature represented the half-figure of a florid, handsome, blue-eyed Englishman. He might be some twenty-five years old, and wore a full-dress uniform coat, which Chubb afterwards ascertained to be that of a lieutenant of marines. All this did not tell him much — merely that “R.” was the initial letter of the dead woman’s surname. He knew already that her husband was an officer of marines, and that his Christian name was “William.” Nor did the inquiry at the coffee-house prove more fruitful in results. It was a place of call for a good many people, and a good many people had their letters sent thither. Neither the landlord nor the waiters could remember who had called for letters a week or two previously. Had a woman and a boy called? asked Chubb. Yes, several women had called — women called every day; but they did not remember any boy coming.

The lawyer next asked whether a gentleman resembling the miniature had called within the last few days, or if they could identify the likeness as that of anybody they knew. After carefully scanning the picture, the people of the coffee-house felt quite sure that they had never seen anybody who resembled it in the least. Baffled in this quarter, Chubb asked and obtained permission to look over the letters in the rack. He

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

thought he might possibly be able to identify the letter in which Sophie intended to inform her husband of her arrival in town, and give him her address. Here, again, he was baffled. Among a bushel of letters there were at least half a dozen which might have been meant for her husband. One was directed to “William Raby, Esq.,” a second to “Mr. W. Rowntree,” a third to “William Rackstraw, Esq.,” a fourth to “William Redmond, Esq.” If he could have opened them all he might have found a clue to the mystery; but, not being allowed to open any, he had to go away as empty as he came.

Chubb pushed the investigation no further. It had already cost him several pounds sterling and some time and trouble, and lawyers do not like to work for nothing. Had he been acting for a solvent client he would doubtless have persevered, and his exertions might have been crowned with success. But he thought that he had now done quite enough for humanity and the satisfaction of a legitimate curiosity. Yet, knowing how pregnant is life with possibilities, how full of surprises the chapter of accidents, and how often that which we have painfully sought comes to us at last without effort, he dictated to one of his clerks a full and particular account

[60]

of the case, from the meeting of Bartlett with the woman and her boy, to the woman’s death in the dock at the Old Bailey, and the boy’s illness. The account comprised a minute description of Robin’s and Sophie’s personal appearance. The latter, obtained from the authorities of Newgate, and other documents, together with the letter taken from Sophie at the police-court, and the trinkets she had pawned, were made up into a packet, which, after being duly docketed, was consigned to the safe-keeping of an iron box in the office of Chubb, Marrowfat, & Sheepshanks.

“The woman and the boy must belong to somebody,” soliloquized the head of the firm; “and sooner or later there are sure to be inquiries. Who knows? Their identification may be a matter of great importance, and the possession of these papers bring business to the office.”

For kindness is by no means incompatible with keenness, and Mr. Chubb’s kindness was no more disinterested than that of other men. He possessed generous impulses, and liked, when occasion served, to do a fellow-creature a good turn; but he

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

had no sympathy with the doctrine that virtue should always be its own reward. Good deeds were in the nature of bread cast upon the water, which the sower might justifiably hope would be returned to him after many days.

CHAPTER XI.

BARTLETT'S RESOLVE.

THE last fact set down in Mr. Chubb's memorandum was the burial of Sophie in Bunhill Fields Cemetery. The Fogies subscribed a sufficient sum to defray the cost of a modest funeral, and erect over her grave a headstone which bore this inscription:

HERE LIES

THE BODY OF SOPHIE R.

(Also called Mary Nelson).

The innocent victim of a cruel law and an implacable judge, she was here interred on January 20, 18 —, at the charge of a few unknown admirers of her constancy and virtue.

Many weeks elapsed before Robin was able to visit his mother's grave. He lay long between life and death, and even when the

[61]

fever left him, seemed almost too weak to rally. Had he stayed in the bookseller's house he would surely have died; but the skill of Saint Bartholomew's physicians and careful nursing eventually restored him to comparative health.

All this time Bartlett was as good as his word. Not a day passed that either he or Solomon Slow did not call to see the lad, and when Robin began to recover, they

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

often passed an hour by his bedside, talking or reading to him. But all exciting topics were forbidden, and, as nothing excited him so much as reference to the past, Bartlett deferred putting questions to the child about himself or his mother until he should be quite convalescent.

At last the house physician, who knew something of Robin's history, declared him well enough to be removed.

"So well that we cannot keep him here much longer," he said to Bartlett; "but he is far from strong, and will require care for some time to come. I don't mean as to his bodily health — that, I dare say, will soon be all right — but his nervous system has received a severe shock, and may not recover its normal tone for a twelvemonth or more. Has he told you his name yet?"

"I have not asked him. You said we had better not — that it might do harm to recall to his mind the tragedy of his mother's death; and once or twice, when I have thoughtlessly spoken of the past, he has got wildly excited."

"That was some time ago. I see no harm in asking him now. Indeed, I should like the experiment to be tried before he leaves the hospital."

"Do you mean that you would like me to ask him now?"

"Yes. I think he is more likely to answer you than anybody else."

Robin was sitting on his bed, partly dressed, and turning over the pages of an illustrated book. As yet, he read with pain and difficulty; the letters ran into each other, he said, and made his head swim.

"The doctor tells me you are so much better that I may take you home, Robin," said Bartlett, raising his voice.

"Home? Home?" returned the boy, with a puzzled look. "You mean —"

"I mean my house in Holborn — the bookshop, you know."

"Yes, I remember. But that is not my home. My home is — with my mother. Will you take me to my mother, dear Mr. Bartlett? My mother, my mother!" and the look he gave the bookseller was so tender, pitiful, and pathetic, that it quite went to his

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

heart, and he knew not what to answer. "But I am forgetting" — wildly — "she is gone. Giant Despair — no, it was Apollyon — killed her, and those men took her away. I shall never see her more, Mr. Bartlett, never more! No, it was not Apollyon who killed her. It was the wicked judge — the man with the red cloak and the big white teeth; and when I am a man I shall kill him."

"No, no, Robin, you must not talk about killing. That would be wrong, and if your mother could hear you, she would not like you to threaten vengeance. You shall go with me, and play about the shop, and read as many books as you like, and I will try to find somebody to play marbles with you. You would like that now — wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I should like that."

"You see" — aside to the physician — "he cannot stand it yet."

"No, he is not as much better as I thought. His brain won't stand much yet; that is quite clear. You will have to watch him carefully, Mr. Bartlett."

"You surely don't think, doctor, that the poor boy is off his head at all?" asked the bookseller, anxiously.

"Well, I should not go so far as to say he is of unsound mind. Rather that the nephritis — the brain fever, you know — and the nervous shock have left him mentally weak — for the time being. If he were older the weakness might become chronic; but he is very young, and the recuperative energy of youth and *vis medicatrix naturae* will, I hope, eventually restore him to perfect health. But, as I said, you will have to be cautious. Another shock — the sight of Baron Hardress, for instance — might develop homicidal mania, and make him an incurable lunatic. I think, on the whole, we had better keep him here a few days longer. It is an interesting case. Come for him this day week."

After staying awhile longer, Bartlett bade Robin good-bye, and went sorrowful away. He had an idea that the physician thought worse of the case than he was willing to admit, and he took so much interest in the lad that the possibility of his mind being permanently unstrung grieved him greatly. In any circumstances, it would be sad to see so young and promising a life blighted in the bud; but for this child, whose father had probably perished at sea, and whose mother had just died so tragic a death, to lose his reason would be too terrible — enough to make a man doubt whether the world is not ruled by some malign influence, and the evil of it greater than the good.

[63]

But this impression did not last long. Bartlett, albeit he occasionally indulged in caustic remarks, was not given to taking gloomy views of life. Before the day ended he had persuaded himself that the doctor did not know what he was talking about, and that the boy would soon be sound again, both in mind and body. This conclusion was confirmed on his next visit to the hospital. Robin seemed decidedly better, and when Bartlett took him home on the following Monday he was better still. Yet, while disbelieving the doctor's diagnosis, Bartlett religiously followed his instructions, carefully refraining, and requesting others to refrain, from questioning the lad about his father or his name, or making any allusion to his mother's fate and his former life.

"We need not call him anything but Robin; and if we do, there's a name handy — Nelson. He could not have a better," said Bartlett to Solomon Slow.

So Robin went back to the bookshop. As before, he shared his protector's bedroom, and during the day had "the run of the shop." Very quiet and grave he was, often reading (his eyes being now stronger), sometimes looking into the street, or talking to Solomon, with whom he soon struck up a warm friendship. But never a word about the past, or the most remote reference to the trial, or the events which immediately preceded it, escaped him. Bartlett doubted whether they were even in his mind. But he was pleased to observe that the boy appeared perfectly sane and sensible, and warmly attached to him. He not only obeyed him implicitly, but tried to anticipate his wishes, and, when he grew stronger, asked for something to do.

"Let me help Solomon," he said one day.

"By all means, if you think you can," said the bookseller, who saw in this request a sign both of a thoughtful disposition and improving health.

Solomon was compiling a "random catalogue," and Robin, after a little instruction, rendered him material help — fetched and carried books, read out their titles, while Solomon wrote them down, and sometimes, taking the pen himself, wrote to the shopman's dictation. Then, by way of change, he would go with Solomon to the Row and elsewhere in search of works, new or old, ordered by customers or desired by Bartlett; and when he got to know the town a little, he was often sent, at his own

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

request, to deliver books and messages. Usefully occupied, and passing much of his time in the open air, Robin not only regained his wonted health, but became

[64]

cheerful, brisk, and alert — albeit, for his years, singularly taciturn. His presence, as Bartlett more than once remarked to his brother Fogies, seemed to brighten the shop. Nevertheless, he still refrained from questioning him about the past — the boy, on his part, being equally reticent; and though several months were gone by, the bookseller knew no more of his protégé's antecedents than he had been able to gather before the trial.

There was something strange, unnatural even, in one so young maintaining about himself and his previous life so unbroken a silence — children are generally so talkative and open, oftener saying too much than too little. Bartlett could only account for Robin's reserve on the supposition that it was in some mysterious way a consequence of his illness — an ailment which would cure; and he waited patiently in the confident expectation that, sooner or later, he would spontaneously reveal his name, and tell where he and his mother had lived, and what had befallen them before they came to London. But as time went on, and the lad made no sign — might, for anything that appeared to the contrary, have lived in Holborn all his life — Bartlett resolved to try an experiment which, as he hoped, would have the effect of opening his lips. One fine Sunday morning, when the church bells were ringing, he took him to Bunhill Fields Cemetery, and showed him his mother's grave.

“Do you know who is buried there, Robin?” he asked.

“Mary Nelson. The stone says so.”

“The stone says ‘Mary Nelson;’ but the woman who lies under it is — your mother.”

“My mother! it is impossible!” cried Robin, turning pale and quivering like an aspen leaf. “My mother's name was not Mary Nelson.”

“What was it, then? I am very anxious to know. It is of great importance, especially for you, that we should know.”

“Sophie” — looking at the stone — “yes, it was Sophie.”

“Sophie what?”

Robin’s face assumed an expression of blank surprise, then of painful effort. He knitted his brows as if he were trying to remember something, and then, bowing his head, burst into tears.

“You cannot remember” — soothingly. “Never mind. Another time, perhaps. Can you tell me the name of the place you lived at in Hampshire?”

Robin shook his head, and Bartlett, taking his hand, led him away.

[65]

The bookseller was puzzled, and, in spite of himself, doubts of the lad’s sincerity began to trouble his peace. Could he be feigning? Was he, in obedience to some secret command laid on him by his mother, ignoring his past and concealing his name? And if so, for what purpose? Had they, after all, been deceived in the woman? Heaven forbid! But, do as he would, the doubt continued to haunt his mind — haunted it all day long, and grew to such a pitch that in the end, though half-ashamed of himself, he consulted Dr. Yockleton, of whom he entertained a high opinion, both as an able practitioner and a man of the world.

At that time physiology was in its infancy, and the scientific study of mental phenomena had hardly begun; but Yockleton, besides being a keen observer and a wide reader, knew how to make a correct deduction, and had become, without knowing it, a very fair practical physiologist. Bartlett could have found no more competent adviser.

“No, no,” he said; “the boy is no hypocrite. It takes a clever man to be a consistent hypocrite. No child of tender years could keep it up. He would be sure to betray himself, and Robin, you say, is singularly truthful. It must be the nephritis. I told you it would be ill to cure. I have known some strange cases. He is quite right in his head — no doubt of that — but his memory is gone. He has been dipped in the waters of Lethe, my friend.”

“There I cannot agree with you, Yockleton. There are many things he does remember — how to read and write, for instance. He remembers his mother, and he has not forgotten the trial.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Perhaps I was too absolute in saying that his memory is gone. But it is certainly very defective. And I did not mean that it was gone for good. It will come back — probably is coming back. And as for reading, is it not possible that seeing printed words would bring the power of reading back, and that watching you and Solomon write would, as it were, teach him the art over again?”

“I dare say you are right, for I noticed that when he first began to use the pen, he wrote slowly and with great difficulty — could scarce form his letters, in fact. I thought it was weakness.”

“So it was — weakness of memory. But his fingers would get him over that difficulty, as his eyes would help him over the difficulty of reading printed words. Acquirements that have become automatic, that are performed independently of the consciousness, I do not think can be forgotten. Is there no way of putting this to the test? Did he not use to know some poetry by heart?”

[66]

“A good deal.”

“Does he remember that?”

“I don’t know; I have not tried him. We can do so, though, if you like.”

“By all means. It will be an interesting experiment.”

On this Barlett called Robin into his private room, where he and the doctor had been having their talk.

“I want you to repeat Gray’s ‘Elegy’ for Dr. Yockleton, Robin,” said Bartlett.

“Gray’s ‘Elegy’? What is that?” asked Robin, with a bewildered look.

“What! — don’t you know? You once repeated it right through in this very room. You can surely recall the lines —

“ ‘The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.’ ”

A smile broke over the boy’s face.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Oh, yes — I remember now!” he exclaimed; and with that he repeated the first stanza correctly and without hesitation. But until Bartlett read them he could not repeat any of the following stanzas. It was the same with “Chevy Chase” and the other pieces he had previously known.

“It is just as I thought,” said Yockleton, when Robin was gone. “I read in a French medical book of a precisely similar case. But you need not worry yourself. His memory will gradually come back, just as his bodily strength has done. As the brain suffered the most, it is naturally the last to recover its pristine vigor.”

“That I can understand. But isn’t it passing strange that the boy should forget his own name?”

“Not at all — considering the circumstances. Why, I know a man — clever he is, too — who forgets his name regularly. The other day he went to the post-office to inquire for letters, and when the clerk asked his name, he was unable to tell him — had actually to refresh his memory by referring to his card-case. Now, if a man in fair health can forget his name for a few minutes, is it any matter for surprise that a boy, who has suffered from acute nephritis, should forget his for a few weeks or months — years even?”

“No, I don’t think it is, considering the circumstances, as you say. You could not give me any idea, could you, how soon he is likely to remember his name?”

[67]

“Not the least. That, my friend, depends on the chapter of accidents. It may be to-morrow. It may not be for years — many years. If you could give him a clue, as you did just now with the poetry, he might remember it at once.”

“Which means, I suppose, that if I could tell him his name, he would know it?” said the bookseller, with a smile.

“Undoubtedly. Also, if he chanced to hear it accidentally spoken, see it in a book, in a newspaper, or on a sign-post. You must just go on as you are doing — wait patiently, and put your trust in the chapter of accidents.”

This ended the conversation, and, when the doctor was gone, Bartlett sat down in his easy-chair and smoked a reflective pipe.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“The lad is a good lad,” he mused. “I am getting fond of him, and he shapes for being very useful in the shop. I should be sorry to lose him, and when he finds his father, or his father finds him, I shall lose him; and I am not so sure about the father. I dare say, if the truth were known, he deceived that poor woman with a mock marriage, and is purposely keeping out of the way. There is certainly something very queer about it all. She said she wasn’t a native of this country. Why didn’t he leave her with his own people instead of at an out-of-the-way corner of Hampshire! Yes, it does look queer — very. At any rate, I have done my duty, and I don’t see that I am called on to do more. If the father comes forward and recognizes his son, well and good — I must give him up. But I shall trouble Robin with no more questions; and if his name does not come back to him, what then? He cannot have a better name than that of England’s hero, and I will cherish him and make much of him, and he will be a comfort and a companion to me; and when I am too old for harness, he shall have the business. There is nobody else for it but my miserly nephew, Moses Weevil; and I would rather leave it to be scrambled for by blind beggars than to him.”

CHAPTER XII.

A CLUE.

“HERE’S your list! ‘Decline and Pall,’ ‘Paradise Lost,’ and ‘Animated Nature,’ one copy each; ‘Tom Jones,’ two copies; ‘The Frugal Housewife,’ four copies; ‘Pamela,’ three copies. ‘Jones’ and ‘Pamela’ have to go in the St. Albans parcel; so look sharp, my little Lord Nelson.”

[68]

“All right, old Wisdom! I’ll try to act sharp, and leave you to look it,” answered Robin, as he put on his hat and shouldered his bag.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Old Wisdom, indeed! Take that for your impudence, you young jackanapes!”
— throwing a book at his head.

“Well meant, but badly aimed, Slowman. Try again!” returned Robin, laughing, as he dodged the missile by a timely obeisance; and then, running out of the shop, he bent his steps towards Paternoster Row.

Solomon Slow resumed his work of adding up the cash-book.

“Dash the boy, he’s getting altogether too sharp!” he muttered. “Always taking my name in vain. Gad! there’s hardly a day that he does not find me a fresh one. I shall never forgive my father for being called Slow, nor my mother for having me called Solomon. It was her doing — after that precious brother of hers. They will cling to me through life, those names will, and I shall be everybody’s butt to the end of the chapter. Old Wisdom! Slowman! What next, I wonder? I’ll have another shy at him when he comes back. I’d pepper him, only — it wouldn’t be very easy. He has grown tremendous the last year or two, and, besides sparring well, is as active as a cat, and the master might not like it. He thinks all the world of him, and treats him as his own son. I really don’t know why. He never took to me in that way, and I flatter myself that I am in every respect equal to Rupert Nelson — in many respects superior. At any rate, I have a father, and know my own name.”

It was quite true. During the years that had elapsed since they made each other’s acquaintance, the bookseller’s attachment to Robin had grown with the boy’s growth. He filled a void in the old man’s heart and brightened his home; he could not have loved him more had he been his own son. In one sense he was his own, for had he not saved him from the horrors of a workhouse or the streets? For a while he sent him to Chigwell Grammar School, but finding that he learned little but boxing, football, and other boyish accomplishments, Bartlett took him into the shop, let him read as much as he liked and what he liked; taught him arithmetic and book-keeping, and even a little Latin. So it came to pass that Robin knew more than most boys of his age, and his London breeding and continual association with his elders had made him sharp of tongue and ready-witted, although of the world outside his own narrow one he knew next to nothing.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Bartlett had another reason for taking kindly to his ward. Though a Radical, he was not free from superstition, and he believed that Robin had brought him good-luck. Since the boy (now nearly a young man) became an inmate of his house, the business had so much increased as to render necessary a considerable enlargement of the shop. He had also added to his house, given Robin a room all to himself, engaged a working housekeeper and a porter, and purveyed rare editions for several wealthy customers. Robin, on his part, regarded his benefactor with an affection which seemed to grow with his growth and increase with his years, and there prevailed between them a loving confidence which it was pleasant to see. The youth was tall for his age, slim and active, and blessed with a bright and intelligent countenance. His health had fully recovered from the effects of the brain fever. One trace of it only, and that purely psychological, remained. He was still unable to remember his father's name and his own. But he could now discuss the subject without excitement, and he and Mr. Bartlett often talked it over. Robin himself had an idea that the injunction laid on him by his mother had something to do with his inability to recall her name. On the other hand, he had every desire to recall it, the need for reticence being long past. He had, moreover, sense enough to see that until he knew more about his father, there was no possibility of either of them finding the other, and the thought that Mr. Bartlett might possibly attribute his obliviousness to intention sometimes pained him beyond measure. Yet, try as he might, he could not remember. Nevertheless, Dr. Yockleton maintained his original opinion.

“So soon as the right chord is struck his memory will respond,” he said. “Mark me if it doesn't.”

In due time Robin reappeared with his budget of books.

“Well, have you got 'em all, you young jackanapes?” asked the shopman, who, though by no means ill-natured, was not always sweet-tempered.

“I have, Solomon, King of the Jews — all except “The Frugal Housewife' —”

“King of the Jews! I'll Jew you, you nameless waif — There!”

This time Robin did not dodge quickly enough; the book struck him on the ear, and the taunt touched him to the quick. Seizing the first missile that came to hand, which chanced to be an inkstand, he threw it with aim so true that it hit Solomon on the chin, splashing his face and deluging his cravat with ink.

[70]

At the same moment Bartlett came in, unperceived by either of the combatants.

“Come, come, Robin!” he exclaimed. “What are you about, throwing ink all over the place? God bless me, Slow, what a sight you are! You look as if you were weeping tears of ink — ah, ah! But, seriously, you know, these games won’t do in business hours. What has been the matter? Not quarrelling, I hope!”

“He called me ‘King of the Jews,’ ” said the shopman, angrily, as he wiped his face with a dirty duster, “and —”

“Only after he had called me jackanapes and a nameless waif, and shied a book at my head,” put in Robin; “and I —”

“Retaliated with the inkstand. Well, I should very likely have done the same if I had been in your place. I don’t much believe in turning the cheek to the smiter. But no more larking in business hours, if you please. Suppose a customer had come in before Solomon had wiped his face! It is not clean yet — you had better wash it with soap and hot water. Suppose a customer had come in, what would he have thought? Has anybody been in since I went out, Solomon?”

“Only Collis. He stopped more than an hour, looked at a hundred books, left them all over the shop, and bought a copy of ‘Tommy Titmouse.’ ”

“Price twopence! Just like him. Collis is as great a skinflint as my nephew Weevil. I am going to Portsmouth to-night by the Flyaway coach. Can I trust you two to look after things till I come back?”

“Certainly, Mr. Bartlett.”

“And keep the peace?”

“If Solomon won’t call names and throw things at me, I won’t throw things at him,” said Robin.

“And if Robin won’t call names and throw things at me, I won’t throw things at him,” echoed Solomon.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Good! The treaty of peace is fully ratified, and I shall be able to leave with an easy mind,” said Bartlett, smiling. “Will you go with me to the Angel, and help to carry my things, Robin?”

Robin said he should be very glad, and the bookseller, after a short absence, appeared in the shop, fully equipped for his journey, which, as it involved sitting twelve hours outside a coach (Bartlett begrudging the expense of an inside place), was not to be undertaken lightly. He carried his cloak on one arm, and under the other an umbrella — a huge affair of whalebone and blue cotton, big

[71]

enough for a gig. The cloak, furnished with two or three capes, was a garment of weight and substance. Robin followed with the valise, which was little heavier than the umbrella, and not half so heavy as the cloak.

“Which way shall we go — by Chancery Lane or across Lincoln’s Inn Fields!” asked Bartlett, as they stepped into the street.

“As you like, sir; but if I were by myself I should go through the Fields.”

“Why?”

“I like to see the grass and the trees. It makes me think I’m in the country.”

“Ah, you like the country better than the town. I don’t. I detest the country and like a crowd. However, as you prefer the Fields, we will e’en go that way.”

“No, no, sir; let it be as you please.”

“It pleases me to let you indulge your fancy, and I like passing through the Fields occasionally myself. It is a change. We shall pass the house of poor Mr. Chubb.”

“Why do you say poor Mr. Chubb?”

“Because he is doubly unfortunate: he has lost a wife whom he dearly loved, and got a fever of which he may not improbably die.”

“I am very sorry for that. He is a pleasant gentleman, and always so kind to me when he comes to the shop.”

“Yes, he takes a great interest in you, Robin, and if he should recover from his sickness, as I hope he may, and you should ever want to know all that is known about — about your mother and that sad time when we first met — and I don’t happen —

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

what shall I say? — don't happen to be at hand, you must apply to him. Bear that in mind: apply to Mr. Chubb, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. A strange-looking body that. Quite an admirable study from the antique, I do declare."

The strange-looking body was a tall, angular, elderly lady, who was crossing, the great square as Robin and Bartlett turned into it from Turnstile Lane. She wore spectacles, carried even a bigger umbrella than the bookseller's; though the day was fine and the streets were dry, she wore a pair of Brobdignagian pattens; her fiddle-like face was shaded by long brown curls, which had certainly not grown where they flourished, and her costume was that of the previous century.

No sooner did this queer-looking creature catch sight of Bartlett than she clattered towards him with a cry of joy.

[72]

"At last — at last I have found you, my dear, my beloved, my only brother!" she exclaimed, dropping her umbrella, and throwing her arms round Bartlett's neck with a force that almost sent him into the gutter.

"God bless you, woman, I am not your brother!" cried the astonished bookseller, struggling to free himself from her embrace.

"You are — you are!" Don't you remember me — your sister Selina? True, 'tis a long time since we met —"

"A very long time, I should say. You are quite mistaken. Never had but one sister in my life, and she has been dead a generation."

"What! Are you not my brother. Major Claude Ilford, who went to America in 1795?"

"Certainly not. My name is Bartlett. I am not a major. I have a shop in Holborn, hard by, and I was never in America in my life."

"Ah, me! Another case of mistaken identity! Shall I never see him again — my dear, my beloved brother? Pray excuse me, sir; and as for Claude, I beg his pardon for mistaking him for a common tradesman."

And with that this eccentric lady picked up her umbrella and took herself off.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“The woman is mad — mad as a March hare,” said the bookseller, adjusting his hat, which had suffered in the encounter. “I never knew anything like it. She apologized to her brother for mistaking me for him. Come along, Robin; we have plenty of time. But if we meet any more women who fancy I am akin to them, we may be too late, after all.”

“That is Mistress Rackstraw,” observed a passer-by. “She is quite out of her mind — imagines every man she sees to be her lost brother.”

“Thank you, sir. I thought she was a lunatic, from her looks and her very extraordinary behavior. Good-day to you, sir. A very curious incident, and calls to mind your lost father, Robin. I need not ask you whether you remember his name yet. If you did, you would be sure to tell me. Can you recall nothing — nothing that might serve as a clue?”

“Yes, sir, I can recall two things. They have come into my mind within the last few minutes. I remember my mother once saying that I was born at sea, on board the ship Ilford, as she was sailing from America to Portsmouth.”

[73]

“A clue — a cine!” exclaimed the bookseller, in great delight. “It is just as Yockleton said it would be. I am going to Portsmouth. Ilford is the name of Mrs. Rackstraw’s lost brother, who has never been heard of since he went to America in 1795. These have reminded you. One of the missing links has been supplied; the rest will come in good time. A most fortunate accident, this meeting with Mrs. Rackstraw. And I’ll tell you what, Robin. I’ll make inquiries at Portsmouth. You were born on board the Ilford, during her passage from America to Portsmouth, some eighteen years ago. I’ll apply to the port authorities for a list of her passengers. Among them is sure to be your father’s name. If possible I shall bring the list back with me. If not, I will arrange to have it sent here. You are quite sure that if you heard your father’s name you would know it?”

“Quite.”

“Good! I must get that list, cost what it may. But let us hurry on, or I shall be too late; and my place is booked, you know.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

When they reached the Angel, near St. Clement Danes Church, in the Strand, the coach was drawn up at the door, the guard was putting the mail-bags into the boot, and the coachman was standing by, drawing on his gloves.

“Not so much too soon,” said Bartlett, as he shook hands with Robin. “I shall be back by the end of the week, as I hope, with important information; and you had better not say anything of the attack made on me by that fiddle-faced female, nor of that other matter — not even to Solomon. Good-bye.”

Robert lingered about the inn-door until the coach started, and then, waving a last adieu to Bartlett, he walked slowly homeward, absorbed in painful thought. For, although, as touching his father’s name, his mind was still a blank, his memory was so far restored that he remembered some of the principal events of his life as vividly as if they had occurred only the day before; they passed before his mental vision like the unrolling of a pictured panorama:

The happy time down in Hampshire with his mother — the journey to London — the delight with which they had looked forward to the meeting with his father — delight on Robin’s part mingled with curiosity, for he had almost forgotten what that father was like — followed by growing disappointment, deepening into dire alarm. Then the grind of poverty — the gradual disappearance of his mother’s ornaments and nearly all their clothing — their expulsion

[74]

from their lodgings — the dreadful night they spent under the Adelphi arches — their weary wanderings through London streets — their meeting with Mr. Bartlett — the snow-storm — the taking of the cloak — the flight, the arrest, the trial, and all that had come to pass since.

And he vainly tried to conjecture what the future might have in store for him, and strove, equally in vain, to recall his father’s name.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)
MOSES WEEVIL.

“IT would have paid the old man to take an inside place,” said Solomon Slow that same evening, as he looked out of the shop door. “It is going to rain cats and dogs all this blessed night, I do believe.”

The realization of Mr. Slow’s forecast proved the correctness of his opinion. It did rain all that blessed night (which, however, was anything but blessed by the Flyaway’s passengers), and, despite his big umbrella and his many-caped cloak, Bartlett got thoroughly wetted, and took a severe cold. In that age of picturesque yet uncomfortable travelling, it was no unusual thing for elderly gentlemen who took outside places on stage coaches to catch cold, and Bartlett had often caught cold before under precisely similar circumstances, without any more serious result than some temporary inconvenience. But in the present instance, the bookseller’s penny wisdom (he could well have afforded to go inside) was destined to have important consequences, both for himself and the youth whose welfare he had so much at heart.

Mr. Bartlett came back a day before he was expected — greatly surprising Robin and Solomon by driving up to his door in a hackney carriage.

“I have been obliged to hurry back,” he gasped, as he entered the shop, and sank into a chair. “I am very ill. Help me to my room — Solomon and Mark; and Robin, will you run for the doctor?”

He was ill — so ill as to be almost voiceless — and it was all Solomon and Mark, the porter, could do to get him up-stairs. Robin went on his errand without a second bidding, and in less than twenty minutes he was back with Dr. Yockleton, whom he accompanied

[75]

to Bartlett’s room. The sick man was evidently in great pain, but when he saw Robin he beckoned to him.

“I think I have found another clue,” he said. “I met an officer —”

“Stop!” interposed Yockleton, imperiously. “No talking, if you please. You have got rheumatic fever, complicated with inflammation of the lungs. Robin must go at

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

once to Bart's and fetch a sick nurse. Here! I will give him a line to the warden. But for the difficulty of moving you, and the risk, I would, send you thither straightway."

Robin ran off to the hospital with the note, wondering what Mr. Bartlett would have said had Yockleton not interrupted him, but too much concerned about the former's illness to be either overcurious or impatient. When Mr. Bartlett was a little better he would learn everything.

But, instead of getting better, Mr. Bartlett grew worse. On the Saturday morning Dr. Yockleton, whose face Robin carefully scanned, looked enigmatic, and spoke with oracular vagueness; on the Sunday he looked serious, and said that Mr. Bartlett was very ill, but he hoped for the best; on the Monday he asked Solomon whether his master had any kinsfolk in or near London, to which question Solomon made answer that, so far as he knew, his master had only one relative in the world — a nephew, of the name of Weevil, who lived at Chelsea.

"Send for him at once!" said the doctor.

So Slow, as in duty bound, and perceiving from the doctor's manner that he despaired of the old man's recovery, wrote to Mr. Moses Weevil, apprising him of his uncle's illness, and despatched the letter by the twopenny post.

"He is the cursedest sneak in all London, I do believe," said Solomon to Robin. "I'd rather see Boney in the place than Moses Weevil. Drop the We, and you have him to a T. It would be a nice thing if the place were to come into his hands! I know somebody who would have to go — and pretty quick, too. But our old man knows better than that; he has surely made a last will and testament, in which I hope his faithful shopman, Solomon Slow, is not forgotten. He is sure to have remembered you, Robin. You will get the lion's share, and these books are worth a nice penny."

Robin made no answer. He grieved too much for his friend to think of himself; and was too young to care about money or be

[76]

over-anxious concerning his future. A little later he looked into the sick-room; but Mr. Bartlett's senses were so dulled by opiates that he neither recognized him nor

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

seemed capable of coherent speech. Nevertheless, the doctor thought his patient might last several days.

The next morning came Moses Weevil. A gray, spare little man — in appearance not much younger than his uncle — with a low forehead, a large nose, little, furtive eyes, a long, bony chin, and lantern jaws. He wore a bob-wig, an old-fashioned suit of seedy black, and had a subdued manner and a low, soft voice, in striking contrast with his ungainly person and ill-favored face.

“How de do, Mr. Slow — how de do?” he said, deferentially, taking the shopman’s hand. “I am truly grieved to learn that my uncle is so sick. I do hope it is not unto death. Is he any better this morning? No! I am sorry to hear that. And this is the young man my uncle takes so much interest in. Mr. — ah! thank you — Mr. Rupert Nelson. How de do, Mr. Nelson — how de do? I hope I see you well, sir. Would you oblige me by inquiring whether I can see my poor uncle?”

Solomon suggested that it would, perhaps, be as well if Mr. Weevil were to wait till the doctor came; whereupon Mr. Bartlett’s nephew bowed acquiescence, and, withdrawing to a corner of the shop, he sat himself down. He made no further remark, but his little eyes were in continual movement. Had he been counting the books he could not have scrutinized them more minutely. Nothing that Solomon and Robin did escaped him, and he scanned the customers who came and went like a thief-taker on the war-path.

“Thank goodness he is gone!” exclaimed Slow, fervently, when Yockleton appeared, and, after a whispered conversation, took Weevil to the sick-room. “The sense of being continually watched by that ghoulish wretch is enough to send a fellow off his head. He could not look more unwholesome if he fed on his own corpses.”

“His own corpses! What do you mean? What is Mr. Weevil?” asked Robin.

“A miser and an undertaker; and they say he does not always bury the bodies he undertakes to lay in the ground.”

“Doesn’t bury them! What then?”

“Sells them to the doctors. At least, so people say. And there is a very queer story — it happened a good many years ago; Weevil is an oldish fellow — about a coffin that he had provided and buried being dug up and opened — to told a coroner’s on, I think,

[77]

a case of suspected murder, or something of that sort — and found to contain nothing but stones.”

“But might not somebody else have taken out the body and put in the stones?”

“That was just the point. They could prove nothing against him. All the same, everybody thinks Weevil did it, and you have only to look at his cadaverous old face to see that he is capable of anything. He reminds me of one of those vampires you read about who disinter corpses on moonless nights and eat ’em.”

“Well, he has a very ugly face. All the same, he seems a harmless old gentleman.”

“Harmless old gentleman! I shouldn’t like Moses Weevil to have a chance of doing me an ill turn if he thought he could gain twopence-halfpenny thereby.”

A few minutes afterwards Weevil and the doctor re-entered the shop. Yockleton said that Mr. Bartlett was no better, and unless a speedy change took place, he greatly feared that his old friend —

Here the doctor paused, shook his head mournfully, and took a pinch of snuff — an opportunity by which Weevil profited to observe, in his dulcet voice, that, being his uncle’s sole surviving relative, he could not think of leaving him to the care of strangers, and that he should bide in the house until a change occurred — which, notwithstanding Dr. Yockleton’s unfavorable prognosis, he hoped would be a change for the better.

“You may bide, but I don’t know where you will sleep,” said Solomon. “There are only two beds — one is the master’s, the other Nelson’s.”

“Oh, I can sleep with Mr. Nelson quite well — if he will kindly allow me,” answered Weevil, with a grimace which he probably meant for a smile. “I am not particular.”

“But I am,” exclaimed Robin, with a look that showed how little he relished the undertaker’s proposal. “I mean that mine is a truckle-bed which could not possibly hold two.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Oh, anything will do for me,” rejoined Weevil, meekly — “a sofa or an armchair, a shake-down here in the shop, or in my poor uncle’s office. I can lie anywhere.”

“So you can— or to anybody,” muttered Solomon.

Were you saying something, Mr. Slow? I did not quite catch it,” asked Weevil, softly. (A lie; he had caught it.)

“Merely that I think we might perhaps find you a mattress and

[78]

a counterpane, and make you up a bed on the office floor — if you could put up with such poor accommodation.”

“Poor accommodation! Oh, Mr. Slow, what do you take me for? Add a sheet and a pillow, and I shall be as contented as if I were in a palace. My wants are very few, and I have never pampered myself with luxuries.”

“Nor anybody else,” whispered Solomon to Robin. “They say he starved his wife to death.”

So it came to pass that the private office — or study, as it was sometimes called — was converted into a temporary bedchamber for Weevil — an arrangement which made him a near neighbor of Robin, whose room opened into the study.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER LOSS.

FIVE days more passed, and Bartlett still lingered. Robin and Solomon began to hope that he might recover, after all; but to Yockleton and the nurses, and doubtless also to Weevil, it was evident that the end could not be far off. When not writhing with pain, the patient was mostly in a condition verging on stupor. The doctor, however, thought he understood what was said; and now and again he recognized those about him, and spoke to them, though not always coherently. Sometimes, when Robin entered

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

the room, he would greet him with a pathetic smile, which went to the lad's heart. Once he said, "When I am a little better —" and then stopped short, with a troubled look, as if he wanted to add something which he was unable to recall. It was quite impossible for Robin to question him about his father's name, or anything else.

Bartlett's recognition of Weevil was the occasion of a rather unpleasant incident — for Weevil.

"Do you feel any better to-day, uncle?" asked the undertaker, in an intense and mellifluous whisper.

Bartlett eyed him with a look of surprise, which swiftly turned into one of dislike and distrust.

"What! Moses Weevil!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Go! Get out of my sight. I have left everything to — my boy." Weevil did get out of his uncle's sight, and, save for an occasional

[79]

peep, kept out of his room; but he declined his invitation to leave the house, and there was no one to compel him. He was nearly always in the shop, for the most part sitting in a corner, silently observant, to Solomon's great annoyance.

"If this continues much longer I shall be doing something violent," said Slow to Robin. "Whatever I do, I am always conscious of a cadaverous gaze, and if it was not for the poor master being sick up-stairs, I should —"

"What?"

"Knock Weevil off his chair, or throw something at his head."

When the shopman was out. Weevil would sometimes quit his chair and find his tongue, ask Robin questions about the price of various books, their original cost, the value of the stock, and other things touching the business. On these occasions he made himself so agreeable and deferential, always calling the lad "Mr. Nelson," that the latter began to think the undertaker was not such a bad fellow after all, and that Solomon was too hard on him. If Weevil had not been so ill-looking and badly dressed! — but the poor man could not help his looks. He was as God made him, as Robin had once heard Mr. Bartlett say of another ugly man.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

A few days after this it almost seemed as if the change for which Weevil had expressed so ardent a desire was setting in. The worst of the fever appeared to be over, and one night, when Robin, according to his wont, went into the sick-room to see how Mr. Bartlett did, he found him clear in mind and free from pain. Unfortunately, however, he was too weak to converse.

“Yes, I am a little better,” he whispered, in answer to Robin’s inquiry, “but still very feeble. To-morrow we must have a talk about your father and other things.”

“To-morrow!”

Robin pressed the old man’s hand, and bade him good-night, and then, going to his own room, “turned in,” and slept the sleep of the just, until he was awakened by the clock of a neighboring church striking three. In ordinary circumstances he would probably have resumed his slumbers without remembering that they had been interrupted, but, as he dreamily opened his eyes, a gleam of light streamed from under the door. This roused him to full consciousness, and greatly excited his curiosity. What could it mean? Weevil always went to bed early, and it was hardly conceivable that so miserly a man would, even by inadvertence, leave the candle homing. Could it be anybody else?

[80]

By way of solving the doubt, he slipped quietly out of bed and applied his eye to the keyhole.

This is what he saw: the safe door ajar, Weevil half-dressed, sitting at Mr. Bartlett’s desk, looking over a pile of papers by the light of a guttering candle. Without a moment’s hesitation Robin threw open the door.

“You seem to be busy, Mr. Weevil,” he said, quietly.

Weevil jumped up as if he had seen a ghost, his jaw dropped, and he nervously grasped the back of his chair.

“You — you, Mr. Nelson!” he gasped. “I thought — I mean I did not know. I was looking for some papers —”

“So it seems.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Some papers my uncle wants. He told me to get them. I am getting them for him.”

“Did he give you the keys?”

“He told me where they were; and now I am going back to him.”

As Weevil spoke he rolled up his papers and shut and locked the desk.

“I shall return presently,” he added; “and, as I can find my way in the dark, and lights are expensive, I may as well blow the candle out.”

Whereupon he suited the action to the word, then went out himself, leaving behind him a glowing wick and an evil smell.

Robin returned to his bed, greatly puzzled by what he had seen and heard. He could scarcely think that Mr. Bartlett was in a condition to transact business or look over papers — above all, in the middle of the night — and had it not been for Weevil’s possession of the keys (which the sick man kept by his bedside), he would have been inclined to disbelieve him.

For a short time Robin lay awake, turning the matter, and several others which it suggested, over in his mind; but, being a healthy young fellow, with a good digestion, he soon fell asleep again.

When he awoke a second time it was past seven o’clock; so getting up, and dressing quickly, he went into the shop.

Mark, the porter, was taking down the shutters, and before he had finished the operation, Mrs. Gaddums, the sick-nurse, came in.

“You had better not take them shutters down, Mr. Mark,” she said — “leastways, not all of ’em.”

[81]

“Why?” exclaimed Robin, in sudden apprehension. “You surely don’t mean —”

“Yes, Mr. Bartlett is dead.”

“And I did not see him again. When — when did he die, Mrs. Gaddums?”

“He passed away soon after the clock struck four.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“But it is impossible. He was so much better last night. He said he had something to tell me, and I felt sure he would get well.”

“Patients very often does pick up a bit before they passes away, Mr. Nelson. I thought it was a bad sign when he seemed so much better last night; but I didn’t like to say so.”

“Did you see him die, Mrs. Gaddums?”

“Of course I did, poor dear!” — sighing deeply. “I gave him his mixture regular, and sat by his bedside the night through, never so much as shutting my eyes for half a minute. I’m not one of your nurses as sleeps at their postesses, let others do as they will. He passed away peaceful, just as the clocks went four.”

Robin regarded the woman suspiciously. She looked as if she had been asleep, and smelt of gin, and he had heard Solomon Slow say that nearly all nurses were given to drink.

“Mr. Weevil can bear me out in what I say,” she went on, with some asperity. “He was in the room when Mr. Bartlett passed away.”

For the first time since he had got up Robin remembered the strange incident of the preceding night.

“Where is Mr. Weevil!” he asked.

“He went out soon after six. He will be back about nine to arrange for the funeral. I never saw a man take the passing away of a near and dear relation worse, and him as is so used to coffins and corpses, and such like. I have seen as much of undertakers as most, and they are generally as hard as their own brass nails. But Mr. Weevil could not show more sorrow, not if Mr. Bartlett had been his father and left him a fine fortune.”

Robin turned away, with an aching heart. As yet, however, he failed fully to realize the loss which he had sustained. He felt rather dazed than grieved; and though it seemed absurd to doubt the woman’s statement, he found it hard to believe that his friend was really gone. “It is impossible,” he repeated to himself; and then, as if moved by an irresistible impulse, he crept in fear and trembling to the chamber of death.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

As he stepped across the threshold a sudden faintness came over him, so that he had to lean against the wall for support. It was the first time he had been alone with the dead. Then, drawing nearer to the bed, he looked on all that remained of the man who had befriended his mother and been to himself more than a second father. Bartlett lay almost as he had died: his head propped on his pillow, one arm across his breast, the other hanging by his side. The poor boy shrank back in horror, but, remembering that it was the face of his once friend and benefactor, he bent reverently down, and, murmuring a prayer, imprinted a loving kiss on the inanimate brow. Then, walking on tiptoe and shutting the door softly after him, he returned to the shop.

A few minutes later came Solomon Slow.

“The shutters up and you crying!” he said. “That tells a tale. The old man has gone over to the great majority.”

Robin nodded. He was too full to speak, and the shopman’s manner seemed flippant and his words unfeeling.

“I am very sorry. He was a kind gentleman, and always a good friend to me; and I am not sure about keeping my place. Who is going to look after things?”

“Mrs. Gaddums says that Weevil is going to arrange about — the funeral.”

“Weevil! Hang the fellow! What business is it of his? Well, I suppose, as the nearest relative, he has a sort of right to take the first step. But when the will is produced my gentleman will have to march. By — I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Robin. I’ll run down to Lincoln’s Inn Fields and ask Chubb and Marrowfat what we had best do.”

Robin signified assent, and the shopman started on his self-imposed errand. In half an hour he was back — very little wiser than before. Mr. Chubb was better, but still quite unfit for business. So soon as he gained a little strength he was going to take the waters at Bath. Mr. Marrowfat believed that Mr. Bartlett had made a will, but there was no such document in their possession. It would probably be found among his papers, and until it was found, Weevil, as the deceased bookseller’s next of kin and presumptive heir, had a right to assume the temporary ordering of his affairs.

“So he is master for the moment, and I suppose we shall have to treat him as such — though I would a good deal rather kick him,” concluded Solomon. “Gad, here he is! Who is that with him, I wonder?”

[83]

“That” was a large man, with keen gray eyes, a big wig, and a ponderous gait. His manner was solemn and his costume funereal. He wore a voluminous black coat, black smalls, ditto silk stockings, and a huge black stock. The only white things about him were his bony face and his big wig.

After saying how highly he had respected his Uncle Simon, and how much he deplored his death, and making a desperate though ineffectual attempt to shed a tear, Weevil introduced his companion as “Mr. Tokenhouse, my lawyer.” He wanted to do everything in proper order — just as his poor uncle would have wished. If there was a will, he would most gladly conform to its provisions; if there was not a will —

“If there be no will, your respected uncle died intestate,” observed Mr. Tokenhouse, with great deliberation, “and you, as his next of kin and sole legal representative, would take all — be in the position of sole legatee — in fact.”

“But maybe there is a will,” suggested Weevil, blowing his nose and pretending to wipe his eyes. “Perhaps there is a will, and, if so, nobody will more gladly conform to its provisions than I.”

“By looking through the papers of the defunct we shall probably be able to ascertain,” suggested the lawyer.

“Let us do so, then. About an hour before my poor uncle Simon breathed his last, he desired me to take his keys and bring certain papers from his desk; which, of course, I did” — looking significantly at Robin. “I will fetch them, and ask you, sir, in the presence of these gentlemen, to look through them.”

The papers were fetched and carefully examined, but nothing in the nature of a will was forthcoming. An examination of the desk, and of every receptacle in the deceased gentleman’s office and bedroom likely to contain any such document, proved equally resultless.

“I think you will have to administer and take possession of the property, Mr. Weevil,” said Mr. Tokenhouse, when the search was completed.

“You advise me to do so?”

“Certainly, it is your duty. The fact of no will being forthcoming is presumptive proof that none exists.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Very well. Will you be good enough to take the necessary steps? I will see to the funeral; it is in my line. We will inter next Tuesday. In the meantime, I shall be glad if Mr. Slow and Mr. Nelson will attend to the business as usual. It may be —

[84]

However, we can talk about that afterwards. I need hardly say, gentlemen, that if a will be found hereafter, its provisions shall be implicitly obeyed.”

**CHAPTER XV.
SOLOMON’S ADVICE.**

“WEEVIL is cleverer than I thought,” said Solomon Slow, when he and Robin were alone. “I knew he was a knave, but I had no idea he was a comedian.”

“A comedian!”

“Yes. Don’t you see that he has been playing a part, and playing it deuced well, too? He knew from the first there was no will. He purloined it last night when he went into that office; and, if you had not seen him, you may be sure he would have said nothing about it. And he expects us to believe that the master gave him the keys! Why, Bartlett could not bear the sight of him. You may depend on it that Weevil took them after he died, and bribed Mrs. Gaddums to confirm his story.”

“What shall we do, then?”

“What can we do? I feel sure that he first stole the will, and then destroyed it.”

“I don’t think so, Solomon. I don’t think anybody could be so wicked.”

“Could not be so wicked! Little you know of the world, Robin. Wait till you are as old as I am — wait till you are twenty-five — and you’ll see. If Weevil was not after the will, what was he doing in the office? Tell me that. And do you think the master would trust Weevil with his keys — a man he could not bear the sight of? You may depend on it, he found the will in the desk along with the other papers, and that by this time it’s dispersed to the four winds in the shape of ashes. It is a bad job for both of

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

us — for you especially. He meant to make you his heir — I am sure he did — and me manager of the business, with an increase of salary and a share of the profits. But, as we can prove nothing, we should only get into trouble by saying anything. Better keep a still tongue, and be civil to the villain. It is necessary to hold a candle to the devil sometimes, and if he continues the business — I mean the villain, not the devil — he may keep us both on — not that

[85]

I take at all kindly to the idea of serving Mr. Weevil. I shall be on the lookout for another place, but I should like to be kept on till I find one. Top-boots and embroidered waistcoats are expensive, to say nothing of an occasional night at the play and Ranelagh; and I have not much laid by.”

The shopman lost no time in acting on the lines he had laid down. When Weevil, who had gone out with Tokenhouse, returned later in the day, Solomon treated him with marked deference, asked for his instructions about business, showed him the cash-book, told him how much money there was in the till, and asked what he should do with it. The undertaker, on his part, was as affable as an angel with a new pair of wings, said he knew nothing whatever about the book trade, declared that he had full confidence in Mr. Slow’s honesty and capacity, and begged of him to go on exactly as he would have done had his poor uncle been alive. He left everything in his hands.

Nevertheless, Solomon profited little by his policy of the jumping cat. The day after the funeral Weevil told him, with a malicious smile, but in his sweetest voice, that he should not require his help after the end of the week. He had arranged with a firm in the Row to accept a transfer of the lease, purchase the goodwill, and take the stock at a valuation. It would be very painful for him to part with Slow, but he had no alternative. He knew nothing of the book trade, and it was impossible for him to carry on a business which he did not understand, especially as he had already a business which required all his attention.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“The end of the week! Is that all the notice I am to have? You will at least give me a month’s salary, if only out of respect for your uncle’s memory,” exclaimed Slow, in a rage.

He was wild to think that he had practised so much servility to so little purpose.

“I do not see any necessary connection between respect for my uncle’s memory and making you a present of a month’s salary. All the same, I would if I could; but I really cannot afford the outlay. I have to pay legacy duty, and all sorts of things. There will be very little left when all is paid.”

“That is false, and you know it is, Mr. Weevil. As I am to have no notice, I may as well go now. I make you a present of the half-week. It will buy you a new hat; you want one. Good-bye, Robin. We shall meet again, I hope. I am sorry you have been jockeyed out of your inheritance.”

[86]

“Stop, stop, Mr. Slow! Don’t be so hasty!” cried Weevil, laying his hand on the shopman’s arm. (It had occurred to him that if he were left to deal with the Row people alone, he might be taken in to a much greater amount than the month’s salary.) “On second thoughts, yes, you shall have the month’s salary, if I pay it out of my own pocket.”

“How long do you want me to stay?”

“Only till Saturday night, just to see, on my behalf, that nothing is omitted — that a proper inventory is taken.”

“Very well; but I must have the money now.”

“Now, Mr. Slow! But — it is impossible. I could not —”

“Then it is impossible for me to stay —” putting on his hat. “It is a degradation to stay with you another day. My poverty, not my will, consents; and unless I get the price down on the nail, I’ll be hanged if I do degrade myself.”

With a very wry face, Weevil produced a shabby-looking pocketbook, and paid Slow his month’s salary in dirty one-pound notes, for which the shopman gave him a receipt in due form.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I suppose I shall have to go at the end of the week, too, Mr. Weevil?” asked Robin, who had been an interested witness of the scene.

“You, Mr. Nelson! Certainly not, my dear sir. I believe my poor uncle had it in his mind to do something for you, and I shall consider it a sacred duty to provide handsomely for his adopted son. Make yourself content, and help Mr. Slow to overhaul the stock. I give up possession of the shop and its contents to Messrs. Brevier & Co., the people from the Row, you know, on Monday. We keep the bedrooms a week or two longer, and before that time we shall see. I have something in view. Make yourself content, my dear sir — make yourself content.”

Robin was surprised beyond measure by this unlooked-for generosity. He had been wondering what would become of him, and forming wild plans for going in search of his father, though he could not remember his name.

“Thank you, Mr. Weevil, you are very good; thank you very much,” he returned, warmly.

“Don’t say that, please. I don’t pretend to be good — I only pretend to do my duty; and I shall do my duty by you, and, I hope, by everybody else.”

Now that the funeral was over, the undertaker appeared to be in better spirits, probably because he had discovered that, besides the

[87]

stock in trade, his uncle owned a piece of land in the City, bought for an old song many years before. True, it was of no great extent, but even at that time, a few square yards of land in the heart of London were worth a great many pounds sterling, and Weevil, being heir-at-law, as well as next-of-kin, would take both the real and personal estate.

For the remainder of the week Robin and the shopman were too busy stock-taking to have much time for talk; but on the Sunday morning they put on their scarves and hat-bands, and went together to the Church of St. Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe, where Bartlett had been in the habit of attending occasionally, and whose rector had officiated at his funeral.

After service, Solomon, always liberal when he had money in his pocket, stood dinners at an eating-house in Newgate Street. Then they went for a stroll on

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Islington Common, drank a dish of tea at the Old Queen's Head — an ancient and picturesque lath-and-plaster hostelry, once inhabited by Sir Walter Raleigh — and walked home in the cool of the evening through Finsbury Fields.

Their talk was mostly about themselves, Mr. Bartlett's death, and their own prospects, and the burden of the conversation was borne by Slow. He was still very wroth against Weevil.

"There's one thing I'm deuced glad of," he said, shortly before they parted company. "He has been done in the valuation. But it was no business of mine. I am not going to cast my pearls before swine — above all, when I am not asked. There's that Mazarin Bible now — the one Bartlett always kept in his room, you know. Well, just because it was entered in the cost-book at fifty shillings — the price our poor old man gave for it at a country sale, where nobody knew its value — Weevil actually let it go at ten pounds, and thought he was doing a good stroke of business! I wonder what he intends to do for you, Robin? Yes, I wonder?" (curiously). "I don't think he ever did a generous or kindly action in his life — except to gain some end for himself. However, if he offers you anything good, take it. That is my advice. You see, you have no trade in your fingers, and would find it hard to get employment, except in a very mean capacity. How would you live if Weevil turned you adrift? Times are very bad. Gad! you might have to go to the workhouse. Anything would be better than that."

"Yes," thought Robin, who felt unspeakably desolate and sad, "anything would be better than that."

[88]

Rather than submit to so great a humiliation, he would beg his way to Portsmouth, and, if he failed to find his father, go to sea or enlist as a soldier.

CHAPTER XVI.

BOUND APPRENTICE.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

ROBIN was not kept long in suspense. On the next day, as he was lending a hand to the new people, Weevil took him aside, and, with an air of importance, said that he had something to communicate touching his promise of the previous week. After dwelling on the lad's unfortunate position — without means, kinsfolk, or the knowledge of any craft whereby he might earn his living — the undertaker observed that it was of the first necessity for him to learn a trade.

To this obvious proposition Robin readily assented, and made a pertinent inquiry as to what trade he should learn, and how he was to live till he did learn it.

“Cotton spinning is the trade you will learn, if you are wise, Mr. Nelson; and as for living, I. can arrange for you to be boarded and lodged — handsomely — kindly treated, and found in pocketmoney.”

“Cotton spinning! But it is only women who spin!” exclaimed Robin, whose ideas of the rising industry of the north were somewhat shadowy.

“Oh, it is not that sort of spinning. I know what you are thinking about. You are thinking about old women who do something with a distaff and a wooden wheel. They spin now with machinery, in great big factories, turned by steam. It's a splendid business, and very genteel and interesting. I wish I was your age, and had the same chance. Why, you will make your fortune in no time!”

“Is it far off — the place I should have to go to, I mean?”

“Well, it isn't quite in the next parish. It's a charming place in the country, about two hundred miles away, called Birch Dene; and at this time of the year the journey thither must be delightful. I wish I was going.”

“In the north, you said?”

“Yes, in Lancashire.”

This was not exactly the direction in which Robin wanted to go,

[89]

and he did not quite believe all that Weevil had told him. But, being at a credulous, confiding age, he believed a good deal of it; and if he refused this offer he would be thrown entirely on his own resources — if a youth without either money or friends can be said to have resources. He knew, moreover, from the newspapers, that parish

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

constables were always on the lookout for penniless wanderers, receiving for each apprehension a reward of ten shillings. On the other hand, by going to this place in Lancashire, albeit he might not make his fortune in no time, he would, at any rate, earn something, and when he had laid by a few pounds he could go in quest of his father — so soon as he remembered the name after which he was continually striving. A sojourn in a place like Birch Dene would be an agreeable change, to say nothing of the journey; and a two-hundred-mile ride on the top of a fast coach would be something to look forward to.

“You seem to hesitate,” said Weevil, impatiently. “I need hardly say that, if you are so foolish as to refuse this chance, you won’t get another. If you were my own child I could not do better for you. I expected gratitude, not hesitation. Come, now, what do you say? Is it ‘Yes’ or ‘No’?”

“Yes,” answered Robin, who had already made up his mind. But he said nothing about gratitude, for though the undertaker’s voice was as soft as usual, his manner had become unpleasantly peremptory.

“You have decided wisely. And now the sooner we see Mr. Tokenhouse the better. I have a duty to perform; you must not leave my charge until your future is assured. Let us go at once.”

Mr. Tokenhouse’s office consisted of two dark and musty little rooms in a street near Smithfield Market. The floors were thick with dust, the papers on the desks were covered with it, the ceiling was black with cobwebs, and the window dim with dirt. The outer room (which Weevil entered without knocking) was occupied by a seedy-looking man and a mildewy-looking boy, both seated on long-legged chairs, and writing as if they were paid by results, as probably they were.

“Is he in?” asked the undertaker, in a confidential undertone.

“Yes,” answered the seedy-looking boy.

“Anybody with him?”

“No.”

Whereupon Weevil rapped at the inner door, and being answered

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

by an invitation to “Come in,” went in accordingly, followed by Robin.

“Here is a young man who has made up his mind to go into the cotton trade,” said the undertaker, by way of introduction.

“Wise young man! I congratulate him. He will become rich. He is taking at the flood the tide that leads on to fortune. They are coining money up there — literally coining it! I know of only one better trade than cotton spinning, and that is farming. A farm is as good as a gold mine in these days. I suppose you have brought him to sign his indentures?”

“Well, I don’t know whether that is necessary. It is time for Bones to be here, isn’t it?”

“Quite. But Mr. Bones is not the most punctual man in the world. He will be here presently, though. Ah! I think I hear his step in the outer office. You can hear Mr. Bones a long way off — ah, ah!”

The next moment there was a tremendous knock at the door, and, in response to Mr. Tokenhouse’s “Come in,” entered Mr. Bones, a big man with a beefy face, a resplendent uniform, and a presence that seemed to fill the room. In one hand he held a cocked hat, in the other he carried a long, silver-mounted staff.

“At your service, gentlemen!” exclaimed this magnificent personage, with a condescending wave of his cocked hat.

“Good-morning, Mr. Bones; glad to see you,” said Tokenhouse. “Pray take a seat.”

“Is this the youth?” asked Bones, glancing critically at Robin.

“Yes, this is the youth.”

“Hum! He is rather older and bigger than they like ’em to be. But I dare say he’ll do. They can lick bigger fellows than him into shape up there — ah, ah! What is your name, my lad?”

“Rupert Nelson. And who are you?” said Robin, chafed by the man’s overbearing manner and annoyed at being called “my lad.”

“Who — who am I?” gasped Mr. Bones, his great red face purpling with indignation, and his cheeks swelling out like the gills of an enraged cock turkey. “I never heard such impudence in all my life! Tell him — tell him, Mr. Tokenhouse, who I am.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Mr. Bones is a highly important parochial officer; he is the senior beadle of this parish,” said the lawyer, severely.

“You want a lesson in manners, young man. Respect them as is set in authority over you, or you will come to no good. Where

[91]

was you brought up, I wonder? But I need not ask that. Where was you born?”

“I was born — at sea.”

“Oh, you was born at sea, was you? And whereabouts there, I should like to know?”

“Eighteen degrees twenty-seven minutes north latitude by thirty-three degrees thirteen minutes west longitude.”

Robin was by no means sure that he had first seen the light at this particular part of the North Atlantic, but he had a decided feeling that it would be better to answer at random than let himself be put down by a parish beadle.

“I don’t think as I ever heard of that parish before,” said Bones, with a rather foolish laugh. “But he has a settlement in St. Giles’s parish — hasn’t he, Mr. Weevil?”

“There is no doubt of that, I think. He has lived in it several years, to my knowledge.”

“That is quite enough, Mr. Weevil — quite enough. Well, it is my duty to ask you, Rupert Nelson, whether you are willing to be bound apprentice to Messieurs Benjamin & Robert Ruberry, cotton spinners, of Birch Dene, in the county of Lancashire, to be by them taught the trade and mystery of cotton spinning?”

“I am willing,” said Robin.

“As you are a minor, and chargeable on the parish, the parish has no call to ask if you are willing; but as the overseers make it a rule never to apprentice a hinfant against its own wish or the wish of its parents, and as I understand you have neither kith nor kin —”

“What have the overseers to do with me, or I with them?” asked Robin, warmly. “Besides, I am not an infant.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Allow me. I think I can explain the matter to this — this young gentleman’s satisfaction, Mr. Bones,” interposed the lawyer, with judicial ponderosity. “You are in a peculiar position, Mr. Nelson. Being a minor, you are incapable of contracting a legally binding engagement; and, being an orphan, you have no parents to contract one for you. In these circumstances, and as you have, unfortunately, no visible means of subsistence, the parochial authorities of St. Giles, where you have acquired a settlement, are empowered by the law of the land to act on your behalf. They are in *loco parentis*, as we say.”

“I understand — in the place of parents.”

“Precisely. You know a little Latin, I see. Precisely. And as

[92]

these Lancashire gentlemen, Messieurs Benjamin & Robert Ruberry, engage to teach you the art and mystery of spinning cotton, it is necessary for the parochial authorities to undertake, on your part, that you serve the Messieurs Ruberry well and faithfully, according to the usual covenants. The authorities, as Mr. Bones just now truly observed, have no need to ask your consent; but as they have no desire to assert their prerogative merely to do you a service, they have deputed the senior beadle to ask you formally whether you are willing to be apprenticed to these Lancashire gentlemen, and conform to the conditions which the parish may make on your behalf.”

“As I have already said, I am willing.”

“Will you be so good as to put that down on a piece of paper, Mr. Tokenhouse?” asked the beadle. “The overseers are rather particular just now. Some people have actually been giving out as we send children off like slaves, without so much as telling ’em where they are going. Why, bless your life, they fairly clamor to go! We cannot keep ’em back.”

Mr. Tokenhouse wrote a few lines on a sheet of foolscap, and, after appending his signature, handed the document to Mr. Bones. It was to the effect that Rupert Nelson gave his consent to being apprenticed to Benjamin & Robert Ruberry, according to the conditions set forth in the indentures, which had been read over to him. This was false, and if the indentures had been read over to him, it is quite certain that Robin, being

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

neither a simpleton nor a lunatic, would have refused point blank to accept the engagement which the guardians and overseers of Holborn had contracted on his behalf. The indentures which bound him to serve Ruberry & Brother until he was twenty-one years of age, for a remuneration of a shilling a week, and his board and lodging, made him as much their chattel as if they had been West India planters and himself a negro slave.

“When shall I have to start?” he inquired, as Bones consigned the piece of paper to his pocket-book.

“To-morrow morning, at six o’clock, you must be at the Elephant and Castle, King’s Road, St. Pancras, with your goods and chattels,” said the beadle.

“The Elephant and Castle, in King’s Road! The Manchester coach does not start from the Elephant and Castle.”

Mr. Bones gave a look of blank astonishment, and then, leaning back in his chair, burst into a laugh that raised a cloud of dust

[93]

from the floor and brought down a shower of cobwebs from the ceiling.

“Coach — coach!” he exclaimed. “Did anybody ever hear the like? What is the world a-coming to, I wonder? He’ll be wanting a chaise and pair all to himself next. You’ll have to ride in a wagon, my young master — and be thankful for that.”

“It is very expensive inside the coach,” put in Weevil, soothingly, and with a significant glance at the beadle — “very expensive; I could not afford it myself. And I would not on any account let you travel outside; you might get your death of cold. But you will find yourself very comfortable in the fast wagon. It is drawn by six horses and covered over, and I will bespeak a good place for you, where you can sleep as well as in your own bed. It is not as if time was an object. You are in no hurry, and when I am not pressed for time, I always travel by wagon, or in a covered cart — if I don’t walk. Those coaches go seven or eight miles an hour, and that’s too fast for enjoyment, to say nothing of the danger.”

Robin was bitterly disappointed, but, seeing that remonstrance would be useless, and remembering that beggars cannot be choosers, he held his tongue.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

The business being concluded, the beadle and the undertaker took formal leave of Mr. Tokenhouse, and when they were outside the latter invited the beadle to step into a neighboring public and have a glass at his expense. Bones accepted the invitation with great alacrity, whereupon Weevil told Robin he might go home, whither he would presently follow him.

CHAPTER XVII.

ROGUES IN COUNCIL.

“WHAT will you take, Mr. Bones?” asked Weevil, as they seated themselves in the bar-parlor of the King’s Head.

“Rum, with a squeeze of lemon in it, if you please, Mr. Weevil.”

“You couldn’t have anything better. I’ll do ditto. Two rums, if you please, miss.”

“How much am I in your debt for this business, Mr. Bones?” continued the undertaker, when the rums had been brought and paid for.

[94]

“Well, I have had a good deal of trouble one way and another. Would a one-pound note be too much?”

“I was thinking of ten shillings. You’ll get a fee from those Lancashire people, I suppose?”

“A trifle. But this is a special job, and requires nice management. This young spark isn’t a common workhouse child, and I am not sure, if the overseers was to see him, as they’d let him go. They might think him big enough to shift for hisself— or, leastways, try to find him a place in London, and make inquiries as you mightn’t like. No, Mr. Weevil; a pound is the very least I deserve. It should be two by good right — and many a man would ask you five.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“A pound let it be, then. Here it is” — handing him a note. “All the same, I think ten shillings — You are quite sure, now, there’s no chance of his getting back?”

“Not the least. I’ve known thousands go, but I’ve never known one come back. They takes care of that. Between you and me, most on ’em dies.”

“Oh, they die, do they?”

“Like flies. The masters works ’em to death. They find that pays best, I’m told, and they can have as many more as they want for the asking. Many a wagon-load of parish apprentices I’ve sent off to Lancashire and Derbyshire; and — you’d hardly believe it — but they’re all delighted to go — thinks they’ll be better off than they was in the workhouse, the fools! Little they knows what is before ’em. I say, won’t it be a heye-opener for that young spark when he gets to Birch Dene! Ride in a coach, would he? The only coach as ever he’ll ride in will be the parish hearse.”

“But mightn’t he run away on the road thither? That’s what I’m afraid of. He’s a lad of spirit, and if he got an inkling — You understand.”

“He’ll get no inkling. The other children knows nothing. They think they’ll have plenty to eat and nothing to do. Lancashire is a sort of Promised Land for ’em, and nobody is fool enough to tell ’em different. And we must not let this Nelson know any different. Go with him to the Elephant and Castle to-morrow morning. Make much of him, and give him good advice and a trifle of pocket-money —”

“Money — money! You talk as if I was made of money, Mr. Bones. Haven’t I just given you a pound? and there will be Tokenhouse’s bill and the legacy duty, and I don’t know what besides. I really couldn’t afford it, Mr. Bones.”

[95]

“That is just as you like, Mr. Weevil. You asks my advice, and I gives it. Follow it or not, as you please; only if you want the young chap to go and not come back —”

“How much do you think I should give him, Mr. Bones?” groaned the undertaker. “What do you say to ten shillings, and a crown to the wagoner?”

“Fifteen shillings more! Heaven help me! But why a crown to the wagoner?”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“So as to get a good place for Nelson in the wagon; and I will give the man a hint to treat him different from the others. He is proud — anybody can see that — and if he got it into his head as he was going to be treated like a common parish apprentice, he might bolt off the course — don’t you see?”

“Well, I suppose I must do it” — (sighing). “And if I could only feel sure that I shall never see or hear of him again —”

“If he gets to Birch Dene — or any other cotton factory, for that matter — you never will hear of him again.”

“He might write.”

“Oh, he can write, can he? That’s bad.”

“Yes, he is well educated. He understood that Latin — *in loco* something.”

“So he did. That is worse. I could never see any good in education, except for gentlefolk, tradesmen, and parochial officers. As for the poor, education can only make them dissatisfied with their lot, and goes clean against Scripture and the Church catechism. But we have no such nonsense at the workhouse. Nelson is the first apprentice I ever came across as could tell B from a bull’s foot. I don’t think, however, as he is likely to give you any trouble with writing letters. They’ll keep his nose too close to the grindstone for that, and if he tries to run away he’ll get locked up.”

Meantime, Robin, unapprehensive of evil, yet not altogether easy in his mind, was wending down familiar Holborn. Though at an age when care sits lightly, and troubles are soon forgotten, he could neither think of the past without regret nor of the future without misgiving. The beadle’s manner made him doubt whether his prospects in Lancashire were nearly so bright as Weevil made out; and, albeit he did not think as ill of him as Solomon Slow, he had a feeling that the man was not sincere, and a suspicion that, in sending him so far away, he might possibly have a purpose of

[96]

his own to serve. What that purpose was did not, however, seem very clear; and after long cogitation, and much halting between two opinions, Robin came to the more charitable conclusion that Weevil, pitying his forlorn condition, and having regard to

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Mr. Bartlett's intention to make him his heir, really wanted to do him a good turn at a trifling expense.

But what weighed most on Robin's mind, and made him really angry, was Weevil's meanness in sending him to Manchester in a wagon. As for the plea of poverty, and fear of his taking cold, that was all nonsense. Robin had heard that the undertaker was rich, and he knew from the books that Mr. Bartlett's stock and the moneys due to the estate amounted to two or three thousand pounds. Weevil could easily afford to pay his fare by coach, and Robin had looked forward to the ride with desire; and he thought that travelling in a wagon, like a common workhouse apprentice, was a sort of degradation. For he never forgot that his father was an officer and a gentleman. Yet he had undertaken to go, and go he would. Gentlemen always kept their word.

Later in the day he called at the Slows to take leave of Solomon, but found, to his regret, that the shopman was gone to see an uncle at Croydon, and would not be back for several days. So it came to pass that neither of his two friends (Mr. Chubb being the other) knew whither he was going.

Rather to Robin's surprise, Mr. Brevier made him a handsome present for the help he had rendered in arranging the books and preparing the inventory. Weevil was also very kind, talked to him like a father, let him have an old valise of Mr. Bartlett's "to put his things in," and on the following morning, as they were going to the Elephant and Castle, almost took the lad's breath away by giving him two crown pieces.

"A little pocket money for you," he said. "You may want a shilling or two on the way, and I don't think the Messrs. Ruberry will be able to afford you much wage for a month or so. But don't waste it; ten shillings is a deal of money, and should last you a long time. My uncle was very good to you. You are well set up with clothes. I wish I had such a wardrobe."

Robin was quite touched. The undertaker could do a liberal thing, after all. How much he had mistaken the man!

"Thank you, Mr. Weevil," he said, "I thank you with all my heart. I am quite rich now" — gleefully. "I never had so much money in my pocket before."

“I dare say. Ten shillings is a large sum.”

“I have more than ten shillings. I have twenty” — jingling them in his pocket.

“But how — where? I don’t understand —”

“Mr. Brevier gave me ten shillings yesterday for helping him with the books. Very kind of him, wasn’t it?”

“Very kind — quite princely — very kind indeed,” stammered the undertaker, turning pale.

“Don’t you feel well, Mr. Weevil?” asked Robin. “You look as if you were in pain.”

“A slight spasm: — nothing worth mentioning,” answered Weevil, recovering his self-possession with an effort. He was agonized to think that he had thrown ten shillings away. Had he known that the Breviers would be so generous, he need not have parted with a penny. By ascribing their liberality to his influence, he might easily have got the credit without incurring the outlay, and if he could have invented a plausible excuse, would have asked Robin to return him the two crowns which he had just given him. There was, however, still a possibility of saving five shillings; he would tell Bones not to tip the wagoner. If there was anything more to be paid, the young jackanapes must pay it himself.

“We must put the best foot foremost,” he observed, “or we shall not be in time. It would never do to keep the wagon waiting, and I want to have a word with Mr. Bones before you set off.”

A few minutes later they were at the Elephant and Castle, where they found the beadle in full uniform, and smelling very strongly of rum.

“How do you do, Mr. Weevil?” he said. “I have just been taking a nip to keep out the morning air. The wagon is at the workhouse. It will be here in a few minutes. Won’t you have a taste of something?”

“A word with you, Mr. Bones” — drawing him aside. “About that crown —”

“For the wagoner? Oh, it is all right. He has got it. He will let our young friend have a sleeping-place all to himself and see as he doesn’t make a bolt of it —”

“I didn’t want you to give it him — I didn’t want you to give it him,” interrupted the undertaker, with a suppressed groan of anguish. “It was unnecessary —

quite unnecessary. I shall be clean ruined. Couldn't you get it back, Mr. Bones? I should be so much obliged if you would" — piteously.

[98]

"Get it back! I might as well try to get butter out of a dog's throat. What has made you change your mind so? Yesterday you were all for preventing Nelson at any cost from suspecting what is before him or guessing that you want to get rid of him."

"Not at any cost, Mr. Bones — I did not say at any cost. I was willing to go as far as ten or fifteen shillings more — and that will make a total, one way and another, of seven pounds, not reckoning the valise I have given him; and that alone is worth three-and-sixpence of anybody's money. And I could have saved ten shillings. Just now, when I gave him two crowns, as you suggested yesterday, he told me that the Breviers — the people I have sold my uncle's business to — had also given him two crowns. I did not like asking him for it back, but he could easily afford to fee the wagoner himself. Are you quite sure he wouldn't return it, Mr. Bones?"

"Well, you can ask him if you like, but I wouldn't advise you to; and I'll be hanged if I will," said the beadle, with a laugh. He rather enjoyed Weevil's discomfiture, for misers are never popular, even with their parasites. "Besides, what difference does it make? It is costing you no more than you calculated yesterday. The two crowns he got from the Breviers did not come out of your pocket."

"It's the same thing. Money saved is money gained, and I might just as well have saved my ten shillings."

"You've got up too soon, and are out of spirits — that's what it is. Come into the house and have a glass — at my expense."

With this invitation Weevil, who made it a rule never to refuse a treat, promptly complied, and the two went together into the inn, leaving Robin outside.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE ROAD.

WHEN Weevil and the beadle returned from taking their nips, the wagon, a ponderous affair, drawn by four horses, and covered with an awning, was at the inn door. It was in charge of two men, one of whom drove while the other slept. The fore part, save a small space in front, was filled with parcels and light goods; the hind part with children, none of whom looked more than seven or eight years old. The only provision for their comfort was a quantity of clean straw, in which they sat and disported themselves, as

[99]

it might seem, in very good spirits. They were prevented from falling out or running away by an iron grating which swung on hinges and fastened with a padlock. A couple of beadles, who closely resembled Bones, even to the bigness of their noses, were looking on. They belonged to the workhouse of St. Pancras, hard by.

“Here’s the young spark as I was a-telling you about,” said Bones to the driver on duty, by way of introducing Robin. “You’ll take care of him, won’t you?”

“Aw reyt,” answered the man, Tim Slingsby by name, a burly Yorkshireman. “I’ll see as he wants nowt. There’s a warm nook for him i’ t’ front, where he can lig all by hissen. But he’ll pay his footing, willn’t he? If he doesn’t, he’ll ne’er get safe to t’ far end.”

“Of course I will. What will you have?” rejoined Robin, who, with twenty shillings in his pocket, felt as if he had come into a small fortune.

“A pint o’ ale, with a sup o’ rum in it, if yo’ please, maaster.”

“And me too!” exclaimed the other fellow, as he scrambled out of the wagon, where he had been sleeping. “Me too!”

“Certainly;” and Robin led the way into the house.

“May I come also, Mr. Nelson?” asked Bones, with a leer. “I should like to drink your health before we part — wish you good-luck, you know.”

“If you please,” said Robin, politely, though not very cordially; and feeling that it would be both invidious and ungrateful to leave Weevil out in the cold, he asked the undertaker to bear them company. The two St. Pancras beadles, on a wink from

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Bones, followed without being invited, and one of Robin's crown pieces vanished almost as quickly as the ale and rum disappeared down Slingsby's throat.

Bones, who always took kindly to his liquor, became exceedingly merry; and, dropping his dignity and doffing his cocked hat, he danced a jig with one of his brother beadles, to the huge delight of the two wagoners.

The undertaker, who had a weak head and an empty stomach, grew maudlin, and, after his second glass, protested, weeping, that he loved Robin like the eye of his apple, and assured him that he would always find a warm enemy in Moses Weevil. Then, to the general surprise, he ordered more drink, and, when it was consumed, wanted to decide by tossing up with Bones which of them

[100]

should pay the shot. Whereupon a wrangle and a row, in the midst of which Robin (who had been wise enough to drink nothing), not liking the turn things were taking, left the room, and went to the outer door to look at the wagon and get a breath of fresh air.

The wagon was gone. The horses, tired of waiting, had taken French leave, and were already half a mile away, going northward, at a slow and elephantine trot.

Returning at once to the revellers, Robin gave the alarm; whereupon the two drivers, gulping down their drink, hurried out of the inn, followed by the beadles and the undertaker. Robin made the running; after him came the wagoners, neck and neck; then Weevil, a bad fourth; and close behind him the three beadles. They had not gone many yards when Weevil fell on his nose, tripping up Bones and his brethren, and the last Robin saw of them was a confused mass of men wriggling on the ground — the undertaker undermost — and making frantic efforts to get up.

“By gum, if yon little chap isn't kilt, it caps me,” said Slingsby. “I never see owt like it i' my life. But we've no time to stop and help 'em up. We mun catch them tits, drat 'em, or they'll be running o'er somebody, or into summat. Come on, lads!”

Robin was first at the wagon, and, dashing rather recklessly at the off-leader's head, he managed, at some risk to himself, to bring the team to a stand several minutes before the drivers came up.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That’s a good job,” gasped Tim, who, not being used to running — and carrying weight in the shape of a pair of tremendous boots — was a good deal blown. “I was feared as there’d be further trouble. You’re a sharp young fellow, and I’m obleeged to yo’. Here’s my mate; he’s waur blown than I am mysen. Get in, Matt, and let’s be off. Willn’t yo’ get in too?” — to Robin. “There’s room for both on yo’, and you’ll find riding comfortabler than walking. It’s a snug little berth, where yo’ can either lig or ston’.”

Partly out of curiosity, and partly to please Slingsby, Robin climbed up the side of the wagon after Matt. The “snug little berth” was a narrow strip, as long as the wain was wide, between the fore part of it and a wall of packages which reached to the very top of the awning. There was just room for two men to lie down, and plenty of clean straw to lie on. Matt threw himself down without a word, and the next moment was snoring. Robin preferred to stand up and look out. But the road being rough, and the wagon

[101]

springless and heavy laden, it jolted terribly, so that he had much ado to keep his feet, and an occasional muffled scream from the rear told him that the children were having rather a bad time of it. The horses, having had their fling, settled down into the regulation walk of about two miles an hour, Tim keeping pace with them, now and again cracking his whip and shouting “Gee up!” by way of letting them know that he had his eye on them. Your northern driver, unlike him of the south, never says “Wo back!” It is always “Gee up!”

After this sort of thing had gone on some three hours, and the wain had trundled, perhaps, eight miles, it occurred to Slingsby that if his horses were at all like himself they must be very dry, and he pulled up at a roadside public-house to water — and beer.

Robin profited by the opportunity to get out.

“I am going to walk awhile, until we get to a smoother road,” said Robin to Tim.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You’ll have to walk a long way, then. Yo’d better get up ageean, I think, when you’ve helped me to watter th’ bosses. Matt’s asleep yet, I reckon.”

Matt was asleep — as it seemed, beyond the power of anything short of an earthquake or a thunderbolt to waken him.

“I’ll help you to water the horses, with pleasure,” answered Robin, “but I shall not get up again just yet; I prefer to walk.”

“And I’d liefer you didn’t walk. Yo’d happen to be pykeing off.”

“Pykeing off! What does that mean?”

“Cutting your stick — running away; and if you did, I should get into a hobble. You’re down i’ my way-bill, and I’ve to ‘liver you up at t’ far end.”

“Why should I run away? I want to go to Birch Dene.”

“The hangment you do! By gum, if yo’ nobbut (only) knowed. Howsomever — “stopping short, as if he were at a loss what to say.

“Robin, ignorant of the man’s lingo, did not grasp the portentous significance of the expression, “if yo’ nobbut knowed.”

“I shall walk,” he said, resolutely.

“Aw reyt, but promise as yo’ willn’t pyke off.”

“Certainly. I have not the least desire to pyke off, as you call it.”

“He looks like a lad as’ll keep his word, but if he nobbut knowed what was afore him, he’d be off, word or no word,” muttered the driver.

Robin went round to inspect the children. They looked seedy

[102]

and woebegone. The motion of the wagon had made some of them quite ill, and their hair and clothes were covered with bits of the straw in which they had rolled — at first in the gladness of their hearts, afterwards because they could not help it. Yet they were in the highest spirits, fully believing (as they had been told in the workhouse) that they were going to a world of ha’pence, without kicks — an El Dorado where they could work as little as they liked and eat as much as they chose. Three or four of the elder children were disputing which should first ride in their master’s carriage.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

Robin asked the wagoner to let the children out for a run on the common, hard by the inn.

“Bithmon, they’ll happen to be running too far.”

“No, they won’t. They are too anxious to get to Birch Dene.”

“Poor little devils! — poor little devils! Ay, let ’em have a run. Here’s t’ key. But you’ll be answerable, now?”

“Yes, I’ll be answerable;” and with that Robin opened the iron door, and let the captives go free. He went with them, and, after a glorious scamper over the common, brought them back to the wagon, where they had a “putting on” of bread and cheese, washed down with water from the horse trough. Tim had been slaking his thirst with something a good deal stronger.

“I’ll tell you what, Nelson,” he said, in a rather thick voice, when they were once more under way, “I doan’t think as I’ll cart childer ony moor. It’s second time, and it shall be t’ last.”

“What for, Slingsby?”

“Well, when I seed ’em lakeing (playing) and shouting on t’ common just now, and thought what they’ll be like i’ two or three months, it made me feel unfine.”

“Unfine! Do you mean uncomfortable?”

“Ay, uncomfortable.”

“Why should it make you feel uncomfortable?”

“Well, I’ve childer of my own — two little wenches and a little lad. You’ll find out one o’ these days. You doan’t come fra’ t’ workhouse, I reckon?”

“Certainly not. I was never in a workhouse in my life.”

“But you’re a parish ’prentice?”

“I am an orphan, and the parish of St. Giles apprenticed me — if that is what you mean.”

“And they towd you as you’d have fine times o’er yon, I reckon?”

“Mr. Weevil said I should learn cotton spinning, and be handsomely treated and well paid.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“He did, did he? Well, he deserves his neck wringing — that’s what he deserves. However, there’s no telling; you happen will be handsomely treated — and you’re not like them t’others; you can tak’ care of yersen. If they doan’t treat you handsome, give ’em leg-bail; and if onybody hits yo’, hit um agean. Punch their shins. Yo’ look as if yo’ could do a bit o’ feyting.”

This was not very encouraging, but, as Robin only half understood the man, and it was evident that he had taken more beer than was good for him, Slingsby’s hints and warnings gave him little concern, and, not being repeated, they soon passed out of his mind.

Six days were spent on the road. Every two hours there was a halt to water — every four or five a long stoppage to bait. At night they generally drew into some inn yard, the carters sleeping in a hay loft, and Robin and the other apprentices in the wagon. The children, being nearly always confined in their cage, deteriorated both in health and spirits; but Robin, who walked all day long, benefited greatly by the exercise and the open air, and was stronger at the end of the journey than he had been at the beginning.

Their last halting-place was Stockport, whither they arrived on the evening of the fifth day, and where there befell an incident to which Robin attached much more importance than to Slingsby’s only half-comprehended warnings. The horses had been unyoked, and he was talking to the children, all of whom he now knew by name, when two women with shawls over their heads came up.

“Parish ’prentices going to a cotton factory,” said one.

“Liker (more like) lambs being led to a slaughter-house,” said the other.

“Why do you say that?” asked Robin.

“Are you one of ’em?”

“I am an apprentice.”

“Well, then — but there’s no use saying aught. Yo’ll learn soon enough. And you are tall and strong. You can fend for yourself. But these poor little things — Stand up for ’em whenever you’ve a chance. They’re all somebody’s childer, and God is good to them as is good to little childer.”

“I don’t understand. I wish you would tell me what you mean,” said Robin, earnestly.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“You will know soon enough,” repeated the woman, “and when you do, think of my words. Good-neet to you.”

He was thinking of them already; they had sunk deep into his

[104]

mind, and he was on the point of again asking her to be more explicit, when Tim called him to supper. The wagoner had decided to stay all night where they were, and go on to Manchester next morning.

CHAPTER XIX.

A NEW FRIEND.

“THESE are um, Mester Ruberry,” said Tim, pointing to the children, who lay huddled up among the straw. “Get aat — here’s your maaster!”

“These are um, are they? How many?”

“Nine lads and four wenches.”

“A baker’s dozen. One, two, three, four — Right you are, Slingsby. Got a delivery note?”

Tim went to his cart-box, took from it a tin case, and from the tin case drew a wafer-fastened letter, which he silently handed to Mr. Ruberry, who straightway opened it.

“Thirteen!” exclaimed Mr. Ruberry, looking up from the letter of advice. “But there should be fourteen, according to this. I hope you haven’t let one of ’em slip off, Slingsby.”

“Oh, ay — there is another. I’d cleyn forgotten he wor one on um. He’s a young mon. No. 14 is. I’ll fot him. Nelson!”

Robin, who was in the stable, helping Matt to feed the horses, answered promptly to the call.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Master and apprentice exchanged a stare of surprise, for neither was what the other had expected. Benjamin Ruberry was a middle-sized, broad-set man, with light-blue eyes under bushy brows, a crooked nose, slightly redder than the rest of his ruddy countenance, fat cheeks, mutton-chop whiskers, and hair turning gray. As touching age, he was probably between fifty and sixty, and, as Robin thought, he looked much more like a country gentleman or prosperous farmer than a manufacturer.

Mr. Ruberry wore a pair of top-boots, spurs, cord breeches, a green coat with brass buttons, a canary-colored waistcoat, and a low-crowned, broad-brimmed hat, set a little on one side.

This was not, as may be supposed, a hunting or masquerade dress. It was the costume in which Mr. Ruberry invariably went to market, and generally (barring the spurs) to church.

“So this is No. 14, is it?” he said, with a dissatisfied look. “You’ll be bringing old fellows, next.”

[105]

“I’ve nowt to do wi’ it. I only brings them as I receives,” answered Tim, sharply.

“I know that, and I am not blaming you, Slingsby. But we gave strict orders to send none above ten, at the outside. My brother would rather have ’em at six and seven, as we used to have; and if the age had not been raised by this new law to nine, we’d have none else. How old are you?” — to Robin.

“Eighteen.”

“Four years older than your number — and that’s four too many. They must ha’ wanted to get rid of you base ill. Have you ever been locked up?”

“Never” — impetuously, and reddening with indignation.

“Well, well — you needn’t get in a passion about it! I thought you happen might ha’ been. Why didn’t they ’prentice you in London, I wonder? However, we shall have to learn you to addle your own porridge, I suppose, and the sooner you do the better my brother will be pleased; and he isn’t a man to be trifled with.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

The London-bred lad had only a very vague idea of what “addling” his own porridge might mean; but he guessed, from Mr. Ruberry’s manner, that it was something not very pleasant, and he had a foreboding that he and his new master would not be the best of friends.. He was so very unlike Mr. Bartlett.

“I think you and me had better settle up, Slingsby,” said Mr. Ruberry, turning to the wagoner. “Come into the bar-parlor. Gib Riding will be here directly for these children.”

Tim responded to the invitation with a “Thank you kindly, Mr. Ruberry,” and a broad grin. He knew that in addition to receiving money, “settling up” meant supping something warm with a spoon in it. He had arrived in Manchester an hour before, and put up at an ancient hostelry in Hanging Ditch, where Mr. Ruberry (having been apprised betimes of his departure from London) had found him and claimed his property, for, except that he could not sell them, the apprentices were as much his own as if he had bought them at a price.

Mr. Ruberry and Tim made rather a long stay in the bar-parlor, and, had it not been for the arrival of Gib Riding, would probably have made a night of it.

“You are Gib Riding, and that’s Mr. Ruberry’s cart,” said Robin, as the vehicle in question came into the inn yard.

“How the hangment do you know that?” exclaimed the astonished carter, a freckled; red-haired fellow, with a smock-frock, a

[106]

hair-skin cap, fustian smalls, and iron-shod clogs. “And how the hangment do you know me?”

“I can read,” looking at the sign-board, “and I heard you were coming.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it? Well, as you knowen so much, you can happen tell me wheer owd Ben is.”

“Do you mean Mr. Ruberry?”

“I do.”

“He is in the bar-parlor with Slingsby. Shall I tell him you want him?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Nay, nay, lad — I’ll go mysel’. I know th’ road. Will yo’ just keep a heye on this tit a minute or two?”

The bar-parlor was suggestive of a drink, and Gib thought it very likely that somebody would “stand treat.” In this expectation he was not disappointed. His master stood a pint of ale and Slingsby a noggin of rum, and Gib presently came back very red in the face, and wiping his mouth with his smock sleeve.

“They’ll be here in a minute,” he said; “ger in wi’ yo’.”

Robin, guessing that this meant “get in,” helped the children to mount the cart, which was provided with board seats. Then he threw in their poor little bundles and his own valise.

“Naa, ger in yersel’,” added Gib, as he took the rope reins, and, putting a foot on the spoke of one of the wheels, climbed to the front of the cart.

Robin did as he was told. The cart would be pleasanter than the wagon, and he was tired with his long walk from London.

As they were setting off, Mr. Ruberry and Tim appeared on the scene, both looking rather flushed.

“I shall be seeing you on th’ road, Gib. Be sure, now, you don’t sup any more,” said Mr. Ruberry.

“I cannot, mayster. I’ve gotten no brass — not th’ price of a stonning gill.” (A “standing gill “cost a penny, a “sitting gill “three halfpence.)

“So much the better. And see as you take care of that cowt, or he’ll be running away with you.”

“Never yo’ fear, mayster. Th’ cowt’ll moan tak’ boggart wi’ me.” (Take fright and bolt.) “Are yo’ aw reyt, childer? Gee up, Piper!”

Robin and the others were not much impressed with the bigness of Manchester. As compared with London, it was little more than a large village; but the country outside was among the fairest they

[107]

had yet seen. It was richly wooded, interspersed with pleasant gardens, sparkling meads, and waving cornfields, with here and there an ancient timbered mansion and quaint

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

farmhouse. The road bordered the Irk, a crystal stream flowing between verdant banks. Then by Harpurhey and Blackley, and past Heaton Park, with its noble forest trees and wide stretches of turf, as yet innocent of soot and unpolluted by smoke.

After they had gone about a mile, Robin inquired how far it might be to their destination.

“Nearly ten mile fro’ th’ start. Th’ cowt”’s a goodish walker. We’s do it under three hours, I reckon,” was the answer.

When they had done two thirds of the distance, and were nearing the Three Fiddlers, a pleasant-looking, whitewashed inn, with dormer windows, a thatched roof, and a porch overgrown with greenery, Gib asked Robin whether he happened to have such a thing as a shilling about him; whereupon the lad, who was nothing if not truthful, admitted, albeit rather reluctantly, that he did happen to have in his possession a coin of the denomination in question.

“I wish yo’d len’ it me. I’ll giv’ it yo’ back next pay-day — I will, as sure as God’s i’ heaven. I’m that dry I hardly know how to bide.”

Robin forked out the shilling with a rueful face, and a painful consciousness that his once unlimited wealth was becoming small by degrees and beautifully less.

“I’ll not be a minute. Howd th’ reins till I come back,” said Gib, pulling up at the inn door, and dismounting from his perch.

Instead of a minute, he stayed a good half-hour, and when he reappeared his eyes were watery and his legs unsteady. Twice he tried to mount the cart, and twice ignominiously failed. As he tried a third time, putting his foot on a spoke as usual, the horse moved, and Gib fell on his back, carrying with him the reins, which he had seized in a desperate effort to save himself, and cursing both loud and deep; whereupon Piper, either shocked by his master’s profanity, or startled by his fall, set off, full tilt, down the hill, and the next moment was hidden from view by a bend in the road.

With some difficulty Gib scrambled to his feet, and, after steadying himself and staring round, started, as he thought, in hot pursuit; but, owing to a slight confusion of ideas and a obliquity of

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

vision, which, in the circumstances, were natural, if not pardonable, he unfortunately went the throng way.

Meantime Mr. Ruberry was jogging soberly (though perhaps not quite sober) homeward on his sorrel nag — a roadster of the old-fashioned sort, equally at home in harness or saddle. Hard by Heaton Park he was overtaken by another horseman, mounted on a powerful and nearly thoroughbred bay gelding with black points. The new-comer was a tall man, with a brown face and light, closely cut hair. Whiskers he had none, but he wore a moustache — an adornment only affected in those days by gentlemen who actually bore the king's commission, or had served in the army. His costume was not unlike Mr. Ruberry's, but his coat and other garments were of finer quality and better fit. He was particularly well booted and gloved, and the pose of his hat (of the latest fashion) showed that, though no longer young, the wearer was still somewhat of a dandy.

“Good-day, major,” said Ruberry, respectfully touching his hat. “I hope I see you well, sir?”

“Quite well, I thank you, Mr. Ruberry. It would be almost superfluous to ask how you are” — smiling.

Seeing that Ruberry's face was red and his voice thick, this might have been considered a rather doubtful compliment; but he took it quite seriously.

“Well, my health keeps very good, if that is what you mean, major. I don't know as I ever felt much better, bad as times are.”

“Times bad! Why, God bless me, I thought you cotton men were making money hand over fist!”

“You are quite mistaken” — eagerly. “You were never more mistaken in your life. Things are not as they have been. Yarn has dropped and raw cotton gone up, and we cannot see more than sixpence a pound clear profit on thirty-twos twist; and when you take into account risk of bad debts, troubles with the hands, anxiety of mind, and one thing and another, sixpence a pound is really nothing at all. As my brother says, you might almost call it a loss.”

It was the fashion seventy years ago for tradesmen to protest, in season and out of season, that times were bad, and Benjamin Ruberry being as much a farmer as a manufacturer, grumbling came natural to him.

“But if yarn is down, corn is up, and you will have it that

[109]

way,” said the major. “You are equal to either fortune, Ruberry.”

“Nay, nay, I haven’t made my fortune yet, major — at any rate, not much of one; though I will not deny as we have a good deal to be thankful for. It’s such like as you as is fortunate — rent rolling in regular, and land increasing in value, while you lie abed sleeping.”

“But you get it every way, Ruberry. You are landlord, cotton lord, and farmer all rolled into one. I’m content to be a landlord.”

“Landlord! Call me a landlord! Why, we’ve only about three hundred acres, and you’ve four or five thousand, if not more, and no bad debts to fear nor hands to contend with.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. Life is just a little tame down here, it is true; but it’s better than being in a French prison —”

“Hallo! I’ll be hanged if that isn’t Gib Riding. What is he up to, I wonder?”

“Who is Gib Riding?”

“My carter. Where are you going, Gib?”

“Piper has run away, and I’m after him,” said the carter, stopping in full career.

“But he has not run away this way, you fool. If he had, we should have met him. Which way did he go?”

“To’ard hoam.”

“But this is not the way to’ard home. It’s the way to’ard Manchester.”

“Bithmon, and so it is!” exclaimed Gib, looking round in grotesque bewilderment. “I’ve been running back’erd road.”

“Why, you’re as drunk as a fiddler’s sow! Who has been treating you?”

“Nobody. I borrowed a shilling fro’ that young mon, Nelson. But I’ll pay him back out o’ my next wage — I will, as true as — I’m not drunk. I hope as noan on’ em’ll get killed.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Get killed! Who do you mean? What is it all about, Ruberry?” asked Major Dene.

“Why, the goamless beggar has let his horse run away, and the cart’s full of childer — ’prentices from London.”

“God bless me! Let us ride on and overtake them, before worse befall.”

With that, Major Dene touched his horse with the spur, and went off at a gallop, followed by Ruberry, at a fourteen-mile-an-hour trot.

[110]

When Piper set off, Robin found himself in a rather awkward fix. As the reins had fallen under the horse’s feet and got cut to pieces, stopping him was out of the question; and he went at such a pace that to slip out behind and run to his head (as Robin once thought of doing) would have been highly dangerous and probably unavailing. The children, who had been thrown from their seats, were half frightened to death, and screaming wildly. And there was cause for fear. Piper’s course was most erratic. Now on one side of the road, now on the other, bounced the cart; once on the footpath, with a wheel in the air, several times nearly in the ditch; and it soon became evident that unless something were done, and that quickly, an upset or a collision, probably attended with fatal results, was merely a question of a few minutes.

But what could be done?

“I have it!” shouts Robin; and the next moment he is on the horse’s back, his feet on the shafts, and holding on by the crupper. Then he scrambles over the saddle, and, reaching over and seizing the bridle with both hands, pulls with all his might. Piper shakes his head, and at first takes no heed, but yielding at length to the steady pressure, he gradually slackens his gallop into a trot; the trot next becomes a walk, and the danger is past.

“Well done, boy — very well done, indeed! You have shown both pluck and presence of mind. But do you know that you risked your life?”

“I never thought of that, sir,” said Robin, simply, looking up at Major Dene, who had overtaken him just in time to be of no use.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You did, though. If you had fallen — and I don’t know how you managed to get to the horse’s head without falling — you would either have been trampled on or run over. But it is sometimes a man’s duty to risk, and even deliberately sacrifice, his life in the cause of duty or honor; and you certainly saved the lives and limbs of some of these children.”

“It’s all right” — to Ruberry, who had just come up. “No bones broken, and, so far as I can see, the horse is none the worse — for which you must thank this youngster. He did a very plucky thing — got on the horse’s back and pulled him up — as I told him just now, at the risk of his life.”

“As you say, major, a plucky thing, and I am obliged to him. All the same, as it was partly his fault —”

“His fault! What do you mean!”

“He gave Gib a shilling, and Gib got drunk with it —”

[111]

“He asked me to lend him a shilling, and I did not like to refuse,” said Robin, reddening. “How could I know he would get drunk and fall off the cart?”

“A fault on the side of generosity, if it be a fault,” rejoined the major. “If anybody is to blame, it is rather those who trust children to drunken carters — and set them such a nice example,” he added, in an undertone.

“Well, you are happen right,” answered Ruberry, with a forced laugh. “But what can you do? They are all alike. We haven’t a chap about us as doesn’t sup whenever he has a chance. There’s worse than Gib. If you’ll go quietly on, Nelson, I’ll just go back a bit and see what has become of him.”

Major Dene remained with the cart

“So your name is Nelson?” he observed, interrogatively, to Robin, as Ruberry rode off.

“Yes, sir.”

“You come from London, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But these are workhouse children, aren’t they?”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“They are; but I am not a workhouse child.”

“How do you happen to be here, then?”

“Mr. Weevil got me taken as an apprentice to learn cotton spinning. After Mr. Bartlett’s death I had to get my own living — there seemed no other way — and Weevil said I could not learn anything better, and that I should make my fortune.”

“But your parents?”

“I have no parents.”

“Poor boy! Mr. Bartlett was probably a relative?”

“No, sir — only my dear friend and benefactor. But he was everything to me, sir,” said Robin, as a tear rolled down his cheek.

“And the other gentleman you mentioned —”

“Weevil.”

“Mr. Weevil — was he also a benefactor?”

“He is Mr. Bartlett’s nephew and heir, and got me a place as apprentice.”

“Turned you adrift — eh? Inherited his uncle’s money, but not his benevolence. Have you been at school?”

“Yes, sir; I was three years at Chigwell Grammar School. I had lessons also from Mr. Bartlett.”

“Excuse my asking so many questions; but boys, especially when they are plucky, always interest me. Look here! I have no

[112]

desire to interfere between you and the Ruberrys; but if anything — if you should not be happy with them, or any of the people don’t — if they use you ill, come to me — Major Dene, of Birch Dene Hall. Anybody will tell you where it is; the lodge gates are only about two miles from Mr. Ruberry’s factory. You won’t forget, now. And, see, take this” — offering him a guinea — “as a reward for the courage you showed in stopping that runaway horse.”

The guinea would have been very acceptable — the lad’s store had waned woefully since he left London — but it seemed to him that, if he took it, he would suffer both in Major Dene’s estimation and his own self-respect.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You are very good, sir,” he answered, after a moment’s hesitation, “but you said just now that it was sometimes a man’s duty to risk his life in the cause of honor or humanity, and it does not seem right to take money for performing a simple act of duty.”

“A simple act of duty! However, you are perhaps right. I should have offered you the guinea as a tip, not as a reward. No boy in his senses ever refuses a tip. I shall know better next time. Don’t forget what I said; we shall meet again. Good-bye.”

CHAPTER XX.

THE APPRENTICE HOUSE.

MAJOR DENE had not been gone many minutes when Mr. Ruberry returned from his quest.

“Gib’s yon,” he said.

“Where?” asked Robin, staring up the road.

“Nay, it’s no use looking; you’ll not see him. He’s in th’ dyke bottom.”

“In the dyke bottom? Shall we go back and put him into the cart?”

“Nay, nay. Let him lie where he is till he’s slept himself sober. Can you drive Piper? We are not much above a mile from home now.”

Robin answered in the affirmative, and the journey was resumed.

“There, that’s it!” exclaimed Mr. Ruberry, reining in his horse, after they had gone a little farther. “Birch Dene factory and village, and it all belongs to me and my brother.”

[113]

“Birch Dene! And that is Birch Dene?” said Robin, in a voice expressive rather of disappointment than admiration or surprise. He had lived too long in London to be greatly impressed by the sight of a cotton factory and a few cottages. “I thought it was a large place.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It is a large place. There is not two bigger concerns between here and Manchester. We run fifty thousand spindles, and farm three hundred acres of land, to say nowt of a thousand weavers as we keep going, here and elsewhere,” answered Ruberry, with some heat; for, though it suited his purpose to sing small to Major Dene, he was proud of his property and his wealth, and it went against the grain to hear them belittled by a workhouse apprentice.

“Fifty thousand! That seems a great number; but I don’t know anything about spindles,” returned Robin, who saw that he had unwittingly given offence.

“You soon will, though. Ay, that is Birch Dene, and it’s worth a hundred thousand pounds of anybody’s money, little as you think it looks, my lad.”

A somewhat confused mass of white buildings of various heights and dimensions, lying in a hollow, and partly enclosed by a wall, with a gateway and a lodge, looking rather as if they had been thrown together haphazard than scientifically planned; nevertheless, far more picturesque than the “modern mill,” by which they have been succeeded.

Close to the factory, and parallel with the road, was a long row of straggling cottages — some one-storied, whitewashed, and thatched; others of red brick, roofed with gray slate; and all the windows were glazed with diamond-shaped panes. Hardly any two of the cottages were alike, either in appearance or size. Like the factory itself, they had evidently been put up at various times, and without the least regard to unity of design.

On the brow of a hill at the opposite side of the road, and some distance from it, could be seen a nondescript sort of house, which looked like an old-fashioned homestead, veneered with the stuccoed front of a genteel mansion of the period. It was approached by an avenue of beech-trees and flanked on one side by a large garden, on the other by a farmstead filled with stacks of hay and corn. This was the ancestral home of the Ruberrys, and the oldest gaffer in the township could not tell of a time when Oaken Cleugh was not owned and occupied by one of the name.

The country round about, though it lacked the soft grace of

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

southern landscapes, was destitute neither of beauty nor character. The valleys (now denuded to their last tree) were well wooded; merry rundles murmured their way through tangled cloughs; the meadows and cornfields were interspersed with patches of brown heath and yellow gorse, and overshadowed by sweeps of wild moorland, still sacred to blackcock and grouse. As yet, long chimneys were few and far between. Day was not disfigured with pillars of smoke, neither were the fruits of the earth and the leaves of the trees coated with soot, nor the flowing waters fouled with refuse.

Now the once fair landscape is scarred with coal pits, and made hideous by the print shops, gas works, factories, and other buildings, of ugliness unspeakable, which cover the land as the waters of the deluge once covered the face of the earth.

But there is never an evil without a good, and albeit, since that not very distant time, which we call the dawn of the century, the landscape about Birch Dene, and many other places, has been bereft of its pristine loveliness, men have improved and humanity has gained. If the age be more practical and less picturesque, it is also less discontented and more comfortable.

Robin, as the reader is aware, saw nothing extraordinary in the place. It was neither particularly big nor supremely beautiful, but when Mr. Ruberry observed that it was worth a hundred thousand pounds, he thought it was a very fine thing to be a cotton spinner, and, with his usual outspokenness, said so.

Mr. Ruberry seemed pleased.

“Well, it isn’t so bad,” he remarked, complacently. “Better than being a parish apprentice — eh? But there is no telling. Many a one has made a fortune with no better a start than you. You are at the bottom of the ladder now. You’ll happen get to the top before you’ve done, and if you do, take care you stop there. It is easier to fall than to rise. Here we are. Stop him! Wo-oh, Piper! Hello, Betty, are you there?”

They were before a house with a stone porch, near the factory gates, which looked like three or four large cottages converted into a single dwelling.

In answer to Mr. Ruberry’s call, there came to the door a tall, gaunt old woman, wearing a print bed-gown, a red petticoat, a cap that ought to have been white, but was not, and a pair of ironsoled clogs.

“Oh, you’ve brought ’em, have you?” she cried, in a shrill voice.

[115]

“Ay, here they are — a baker’s dozen on ’em, and one over. Where’s Dick?”

“I’m here, mayster. What wanten yo’?” answered a gruff voice from the house; and a man, taller, older, and more gaunt than the woman, yet hale and hearty withal, came to the threshold.

“Take Piper round to the stable, Dick. I left Gib i’ th’ dyke bottom a bit this side of the Fiddlers.”

Dick silently did as he was bidden.

In the meantime the little waifs, with Robin’s help, had dismounted from the cart, and stood, each carrying a bundle, before the apprentice house.

“Come on and have summat to ate,” said Betty, roughly, yet not unkindly. “You look as if you wanted it.”

On this all filed into the house, followed by Robin. Passing through the porch, they found themselves in a large, low room, furnished with narrow deal tables and wooden benches. At one end of the room was a wide, open fireplace, and over the fire hung a huge pan, from which rose a cloud of steam.

After making the girls seat themselves at one table and the boys at another, Betty placed fourteen bowls on a stand near the fireplace, and, taking a ladle, half filled them with boiling porridge from the pan. Then she poured into each of the bowls a little blue milk, and, with a large whittle, cut from a huge and not very inviting loaf, compounded of rye and coarse flour, fourteen chunks of bread.

“Here, you two, fot ’em and sarve t’ others!” she said, pointing with her whittle to the boys’ table.

Though Betty’s words were almost Greek to the Cockney children, there was no mistaking the gesture by which they were accompanied — she was evidently a woman who meant to be obeyed — and the two whom she had indicated hastened to do as they were told.

The children were hungry, and hunger is an excellent sauce; and, as everybody knows, oatmeal porridge is highly nutritious food. Unfortunately, however, everybody does not like porridge — especially with blue and rather sour milk. It was rather

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

different from the plum-pudding with which the poor little wretches had expected to be regaled. No wonder that some of them smelt at the mess before tasting it, and, when they did taste it, pulled wry faces and laid down their spoons, with looks of disgust and despair. They had been better fed at the workhouse.

[116]

“What! — you don’t like my porridge?” exclaimed the old woman, with a sneer. “It’s allus so wi’ you Londoners; you know not what’s good for you. But wait a bit. You’ll be fain to get ’em afore you’ve been here a week; and I can tell you one thing, you’ll get nowt else — less it be potatoes and point.”

“Potatoes” the children understood, but the “point” passed their comprehension. They were soon enlightened; it meant a modicum of salt — or none at all, according to circumstances, the mineral being so dear that poor people had often to content themselves with pointing at the empty salt-cellar. Hence the expression — “Potatoes and point.”

The children were still lingering over the repast — many of them, after the first plunge (of their spoons), found the porridge not unpalatable, and decidedly filling — when a bell rung — a signal that was followed at a short interval by the inrush of a horde of apprentices from the factory, ravenous for their supper. Among them were children and young people of both sexes and all ages, from nine to nineteen. Most of the boys had nothing on but trousers, shining with grease, and coarse, blue shirts, open at the neck. Their hair was tangled, unkempt, and powdered with cotton fluff; several had black eyes, others ugly wounds on their heads and fingers bound with blood-stained rags. The girls, like the boys, were bare-footed and bare-headed. Their hair was pinned up; very few wore either bodice or gown, only a single under petticoat, and over that a “bishop” or “brat” (a long apron reaching from the neck to the heels). Compared with this lean, sallow, half-naked crew, redolent of factory grease, the newly arrived Londoners looked like so many ladies and gentlemen.

As they came into the house, some of the old apprentices glanced curiously at the strangers, but most of them were too intent on feeding to think of aught else. Some took bowls to old Betty and had them filled with porridge; others went to a hatch door

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

opening into the kitchen, and clamored for potatoes, which the girls received in their filthy aprons, and the boys into the forepart of their equally filthy shirts. Then, scampering to their places, they tumbled the potatoes on the bare table and devoured them with infinite relish.

Still unsatisfied, the hungry crew next turned their attention to the newcomers, and, seeing that the latter had not consumed the whole of their rations, gobbled up in a twinkling all that remained and shouted for more.

[117]

The thirteen unfortunates from St. Pancras were speechless with dismay, as well they might be. Robin began to think that he had been suddenly transported to the nether regions; and of a surety it was a strange, uncanny scene. Night had set in. Old Betty, in her red bed-gown, standing near the blazing fire, gesticulating fiercely with her porridge-ladle in a vain attempt to restore order, looked for all the world like a witch performing some unholy rite; half-naked, impish lads were gambolling on the benches and racing round the room, some tearing each other's hair and punching each other's heads; a group of girls, who had fallen out, swearing like bargees.

The noise was deafening, and only when it lulled could Betty's voice be heard above the din, scolding and expostulating. Robin was wondering how the row would end, when the door opened, and a tall figure quietly entered the room. It was Dick, with a horsewhip.

"Silence! Be quiet, you little devils! Silence, or, bithmon, I'll flay you alive!" he shouted, in a stentorian voice; and, seizing by the waistband of his trousers one of a group of lads who were fighting on the floor, he gave him half a dozen cuts of the whip, which produced howls of anguish from the victim, and frightened all the others into instant silence.

"Get away to bed! Get away to bed, every one on you!" he cried, shaking the whip over their heads, and letting it occasionally descend on their backs.

The terrified wretches obeyed without a murmur, tumbling over each other in their efforts to get out of his way. In two minutes they were gone — all save the newcomers, who had been silent, yet deeply interested, witnesses of the incident.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You’d better go too,” he said. “Come on, lads; I’ll show you th’ road. Betty, thee take th’ lasses. Give me a candle.”

Robin rather resented being ordered off in this peremptory fashion; but, as he felt tired, and refusal to obey would have involved spending the evening with Dick and Betty, he followed the others.

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER MISFORTUNE.

THE ROOM into which the old man led the children was a garret on the second floor, running the whole length of the building — a

[118]

long, low, cheerless-looking room, with bare rafters and barred windows, plunged in a funereal gloom, which the tallow candle carried by Dick served rather to intensify than relieve. The sleeping-places were narrow cribs, built in a double tier all round the chamber, like bunks in a ship’s cabin. The apprentices, with grim humor, dubbed them coffins — probably because many of their occupants had been taken thence to their long home. The smaller lads slept two in a bed, but Robin, being considered an oldster, got one all to himself. It was just under a beam, whereon he placed his valise and his clothes, for the room contained neither chair, bench, nor table. While the boys were undressing, Dick walked about, shaking his whip and threatening what he would do if they did not keep quiet and look sharp. After telling the new-comers — to whom he showed more indulgence than to the others — where they were to sleep, and seeing that they went to bed, he bade them a gruff “good-neet” and went his way.

As Robin crept between the sheets he heard Dick double-bolt the door, and then he knew that he was a prisoner for the night. The oily stench of the bedclothes, which had apparently not been changed or cleansed since they were last used, nearly turned his stomach. He was already sick at heart and wild with rage at the deception

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

which he now knew, beyond a doubt, had been practised on him, and was mentally anathematizing Moses Weevil, and revolving in his mind projects of escape and revenge, when his musings were interrupted by a whisper from the other side of the board which separated him from the next bunk.

“Are you asleep?” asked the whisperer.

“Not yet — not by a long way. I cannot sleep.”

“I dare say; none of ’em sleep much for a night or two.

There’s one down below — in the next coffin but one — a little lad with a fresh complexion and curly hair, that’s sobbing as if his heart would break. Don’t you hear him?”

“Poor fellow! Poor little chap! I was thinking so much of my own misfortune that I forgot there were others as badly off as myself.”

“Harney is his name? What’s yours, if I might make so bold?”

“Nelson. And yours?”

“Blincoe; but they generally call me ‘Parson.’ ”

“Why do they call you ‘Parson’?”

“I can hardly tell. Perhaps because when I came at first I

[119]

said my prayers sometimes. But they give everybody a nickname. They’ll give you one.”

“I wonder what it will be? You are from London, I suppose!”

“Yes, I was apprenticed by the overseers of St. Pancras, like a good many others. Lancashire folks won’t apprentice their children.”

“How is that?”

“They know better. Apprentices are so hard wrought and ill-used. I was at another place before I came here — I’m what they call a turnover — it was hell, Nelson. We hadn’t half enough to eat, and were a’most kicked and cuffed to death. I hadn’t a sound spot on my body. Many did die. I saw one child killed” — lowering his voice. “A spinner knocked him down with a clearer (wooden roller), and he fell with his head on the corner of a carriage rail. He never spoke again, poor little thing!”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“But that was murder!” exclaimed Robin, horror-stricken. “Wasn’t the spinner hanged?”

“Hanged! Not he. It was given out as the child died in a fit, and none of us durst say owt different. But it isn’t as bad as that here. We mostly get enough grub; and if they put you with a good spinner, you haven’t so much to fear. They don’t knock big ‘uns about as they do little ‘uns.”

“I’m not afraid,” said Robin, stoutly. “I am not a common apprentice. I’ve come to learn the business.”

Blincoe laughed bitterly.

“They told you that, did they?” he said. “It’s exactly what they told me, and I’m an apprentice all the same, and treated like one, and shall be till I am twenty-one.”

“Why don’t you run away? I know I —”

“Hush! Not so loud!” whispered Blincoe, in alarm. “If anybody hears you we shall get into a hobble. Some of them are arrant tell-tales, and will do anything to curry favor with the manager and overlookers. It’s all very fine to talk about cutting. It isn’t as easy as it looks, by a long way. There’s always somebody on the watch, and you’re no sooner missed than you are followed. I’ve tried it twice, and I got caught both times, and it was worse for me afterwards.”

“How? Did they punish you?”

“Didn’t they just! Tied me up by the hands and flogged me till I fainted. But it brought them no luck” — savagely. “Not long after, Lowdham mill — that’s where I was working — was burnt

[120]

down, and they said one of the apprentices set it on fire. Anyhow, the masters were rained, and I got tamed over to B. & R. Ruberry. No, Nelson, it isn’t a bit of use running away, unless you have got money and decent clothes. You cannot get a shop anywhere else without telling where you wrought last, so there’s nowt for it but either to beg or steal, and the first constable you see will lag you. The township gives ’em a reward of ten shillings for every tramp or vagabond they lag, and the masters give ’em as much more and all expenses for every apprentice they bring back. It is best to grin and abide.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Not at all! I won’t!” said Robin, hotly. “You could save money out of your wage.”

“I dare say! How much can a chap save out of a shilling a week, do you think, and find his own shoes and stockings, and pay fines — and there’s never a week without one?”

“A shilling a week! Is that all you get?”

“Ay, and it’s all you’ll get till you are twenty-one. But you’ve maybe some money with you?”

“A little; only a few shillings,” answered Robin, with a sigh, as he thought how wofully his store had diminished since he left London.

“Lucky for you! I wish I had one shilling. I’m going asleep now. Nelson; and I’d advise you to do the same. Old Dick wakens us at five, and he makes us get up, too.”

A few minutes later Blincoe’s heavy breathing showed that he slept. But Robin found it impossible to follow his neighbor’s example. His mind was too full — his heart too heavy. Blincoe had given the death-blow to the last of his illusions. Three years at a shilling a week! Three years of slavery in a pigstye, and he the son of an officer and a gentleman! If he had only Moses Weevil by the throat! Better far to have stopped in London, and taken his chance there. He boiled over with impotent rage; and then his mood changed. He thought of his mother, and wept, and murmured a prayer — first to God, afterwards to her, as he had done in the hospital, where he had often felt as wretched and lonely as he felt now. He believed, poor boy, that she could see him and hear him, and would somehow help him in his need; and, whether it was the prayer or the belief, a sense of comfort came over him, and he made up his mind that if his lot turned out to be as miserable as Blincoe had led him to suppose, he would run away on the first opportunity. Having decent clothes, and, as he thought, as much

[121]

money left as would keep him in food until he got to London, he was not likely to be arrested as a vagrant; and if he could steal away unperceived, nobody would know whither he had gone or where to look for him. But Robin was shrewd enough to perceive that to put this scheme into execution at once would be to insure its failure. He

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

must bide his time and watch for an opportunity, and, if possible, so contrive matters that he would not be missed for several hours after his departure. If he could get as far as Manchester, he would, he thought, be safe from pursuit. Then, after building a few castles in the air, in which his father, whom he always pictured as a hero, played the principal part, Robin fell asleep; and, notwithstanding the hardness and filthiness of his couch, and the snores of his companions, he slept so soundly that when Dick roused him an hour after daylight he was unable, for a minute or two, to recall what had happened to him and where he was.

“Come, get up!” said the old fellow. “It’s welly porridge time, and t’others has been at work going i’ two hours. You’d ha’ had to go too, only word came last neet as they didn’t want you in th’ factory till after breakfast, and my missus and me, we thought as we’d let you sleep a bit, and, bithmon, you have slept! Them lads made racket enough to wakken a corpse. Here, don these clothes! Th’ concern finds ’em, and you may as well save your own for a holiday suit. It would cleyn spoil ’em to wear ’em in th’ factory, and it’ll ten to one be a long time before you getten another. You’ll not want no jacket, nor yet shoes and hosen. It’s hot enough i’ them spinning-rooms to go about stark naked; but as there’s lasses it happen wouldn’t do.”

The clothes provided by the “concern” were a pair of greasy corduroy trousers and a check shirt. They did not look very inviting, and Robin was hesitating whether he should put them on, when he chanced to look up at the beam over his bunk, where he had put his things the night before.

To his dismay, not a vestige of them was to be seen.

“Hallo!” he exclaimed. “Where are the clothes I took off last night, and my valise?”

“Where did you put ’em?”

“On that beam.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite.”

“Then some o’ them little devils has hidden ’em somewheres. They oft do play tricks on new-comers. Let’s look raand.”

[122]

“I hope my money is safe,” said Robin, turning pale.

“Whew! You’d brass i’ your pockets then? How mich?”

“Four half-crowns and a sixpence.”

“By gum! you weren’t fause (wise) to leave your brass there. Them varmint is up to all sorts o’ manks; there isn’t one on ’em as I’d trust as far as I can throw a bull by his tail. But let’s look raand; we’re sure to find th’ breeches and things somewheres, and if th’ brass isn’t fun’ we mun spor (inquire). Ay, let’s look raand.”

They did look — searched every bunk, explored every corner of the garret. But nothing could be found. Coat, waistcoat, shirt, breeches, shoes, stockings, valise — all had disappeared, and with them Robin’s means of escape.

“It’s a gradely quare do,” said Dick, scratching his head. “Quarest do as ever I knew. Looks like a bugglery. Let’s go daan stairs and see what my owd woman says about it. Hoo’s as fause as a tup sheep, my Betty is.”

Robin put on the corduroy trousers and check shirt, and silently followed Dick down stairs, shivering with cold and sick with apprehension and dismay. Betty stood before the fire, stirring porridge with a Gargantuan thible. Her husband told her what had befallen.

“Lost his bag and his brass, has he?” said the old woman, thoughtfully. “He’s first ’prentice as I ever knew as had ony brass. I con understand th’ brass being stown (stolen). That is easy enough hid; but what con they have done wi’ th’ clothes and portmantle? They cannot have takken ’em into th’ factory. They mun be somewhere i’ th’ hoyle (in the place). I’ll go and look mysel’. Stir th’ porridge, will you, till I come back?”

Robin complied with alacrity. He wanted to get near the fire and warm himself.

In a few minutes Betty returned.

“Your things isn’t i’ this house. They are either hidden outside, or somebody has pyked off wi’ ’em. Did anybody know as you had brass in your pocket?”

“I don’t think so. I told nobody — except the fellow next to me. He asked me if I had any money, and I said I had a little. But I am sure it cannot be he.”

“Was it Blincoe?”

“Yes, that is the name. He told me his story. He has been very ill-used.”

“That’s true. And he’s ill-contrived, too. They sayen it was

[123]

him as seet Lowdham factory a-fire. So you towd him as you had a bit o’ brass! I wonder — He run away twice fra Lowdham factory. Well, we’ll soon know. Th’ engine is just stoppin’; they’ll be here in a minute. Has thou cut th’ bread, Dick?”

Presently a great shouting and shuffling of feet were heard at the back door, which opened into the factory yard; the apprentices trooped ravenously in, and almost before they were seated began to swallow the hot porridge which Betty” had just poured out.

“Is th’ Parson here?” she asked, looking round.

“He’s happen i’ th’ factory,” said one.

“Nay, he isn’t,” said another. “I work in th’ same room. Soon after th’ engine set on he said as he was sick, and Jim Rabbits let him oft till after breakfast-time. He’s happen i’ bed.”

“Nay, he isn’t. He’s off, and he’s takken aw Nelson’s things here — his clothes, and his brass, and his portmantle. That is what th’ Parson has done. He no doubt hid ’em somewhere about th’ house, then come back and fetched ’em, and climbed o’er th’ wall behind th’ boiler-house. It was dark at six o’clock, and th’ Parson is as nimble as a cat. Go and tell ’em i’ th’ counting-house, Dick. If they looken sharp, they’ll ten to one catch him; he cannot have gotten far.”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FACTORY.

MEANWHILE Robin covered by the fire, utterly undone. With his money and valise had gone all hope of escape, all possibility of finding his father, even though

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

he should be able to remember his name. Even the wretched things he had on, and which he felt it almost a degradation to wear, belonged to his masters. Except his nightshirt, he possessed nothing he could call his own; and, unkindest cut of all, the thief was a fellow victim, whose story had won his sympathy and touched his heart. If Robin had been alone, he would probably have found relief for his feelings in a burst of passionate grief; but, as all the apprentices were staring at him, he held up his head and looked defiant.

“Don’t be down-hearted; your portmantle is sure to torn up,” said Betty, who, though by no means a tender-hearted woman, had a weakness for well-favored lads. “Draw up to th’ table and have a bowl of porridge. It’ll do you good. No! Well, then, a bowl

[124]

o’ milk and a soft bread butter-cake. Come, now — you’ll be all the better for it,”

Robin, though he had no appetite worth mentioning, felt that it would be both ungracious and impolitic to persist in his refusal, and by the time he had eaten his bread and drunk his milk — with little relish, however — Dick came back and informed him, with an air of importance, that he was wanted in the counting-house.

Robin did not much like the idea of going out shoeless and bareheaded, but, as there was no help for it, he followed the old man into the factory-yard, which, being strewn with hard cinders, did not make the pleasantest walking for unprotected feet, and he went as gingerly as if he were treading on hot iron — to the great amusement of the factory-folk, who were returning to their work, some of whom jeered at his soft feet and white hands.

The counting-house, a plain, square building, plainly furnished, was so placed as to command a view of the gates, and the entrance to the spinning-room and other departments.

“Go forrud, and don’t be daunted,” said Dick, opening the door. “Here he is!” pushing Robin into the room.

Robin, who neither looked nor felt in the least daunted, found himself in the presence of Mr. Ruberry and three other men. One was Robert Ruberry, the younger

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

brother and junior partner — a man short of stature, sparely built, and slightly humpbacked. His keen, colorless, bony face was fringed with iron-gray whiskers; he had vigilant steel-gray eyes, and his suit of sober gray was covered with cotton fluff. The hands always addressed him as “Mester Robbut,” but among themselves he was known indifferently as “Bob” and “Owd Bob;” and with equal irreverence they generally spoke of his brother as “Owd Ben.”

Besides the brothers, there were present the book-keeper, who sat on a tall stool poring over a big ledger, and a tall, sharp-featured man, with a pock-marked face, a paper cap, doeskin trousers, and a sleeved waistcoat. This was Jim Rabbits, the spinning-master, and the Ruberrys’ most trusted servant and adviser.

“Good-morning, Mr. Ruberry,” said Robin, with easy assurance. “Dick says you want me. How is Gib?”

The three men exchanged glances. This was not the way in which apprentices were wont to address their employers.

“I haven’t seen him yet. Drunken sick, I expect. You look rather different from what you did yesterday, my lad. Where’s your clothes?”

[125]

“Somebody has stolen them.”

“Ay, Blincoe. You had some talk with him last night, I understand. What did he say?” asked the senior partner.

On this Robin related so much of the conversation of the preceding night as he thought it prudent to disclose.

“He said apprentices were ill-used, did he, the young rascal? He shall be ill-used if we get hold of him. I promise him that.”

“It’ll be a hanging job if he’s prosecuted, willn’t it?” put in Jim Rabbits.

“And he shall be prosecuted!” exclaimed the younger brother, angrily. “Hanging’s too good for that fellow. He was not only discontented himself, but he made all the others discontented. What was there in your bag, Nelson?”

“Two suits of clothes, six shirts, three pairs of stockings, two pairs of shoes, combs and brushes, some handkerchiefs, and several books.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Handkechers!” put in Jim Rabbits. “What does a ’prentice want wi’ handkechers? I never uses one except o’ Sundays.”

“Were these things marked with your name?” asked Robert Ruberry.

“Yes, sir.”

Robert Ruberry made a memorandum.

“And these books you speak of — what were they?”

“A copy of ‘Paradise Lost,’ edition of 1680; a copy of Malone’s Shakespeare, a copy of Chapman’s Homer, and copies of ‘Plutarch’s Lives’ and the ‘Arabian Nights.’”

“You can read, then?” demanded the spinning-master.

“I can.”

“And write?”

“And write,” answered Robin, with a smile.

“And cipher?”

“A little.”

“Well, I’ll be d— d!” said Rabbits, pushing back his paper cap, and eying Robin as if he had been a veritable prodigy. He’s quite a scholar!” (To Ruberry, junior.)

“Humph! That remains to be seen. How did you come by these books, Nelson?”

“They were given to me by my dear friend and benefactor, Mr. Bartlett. He wrote my name in every one of them. The ‘Paradise Lost’ and the Shakespeare are scarce editions.”

“Benefactor! What does that mean?” inquired the irrepressible

[126]

Rabbits. “It’s a word as I cannot say as I ever heard afore. It’s nowt to do with se cotton factory, has it?”

“Not exactly,” said Owd Bob, with a grim laugh. “It means well-wisher — kind friend, you know.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I’ll try to think of that; it’s what you and your brother is to me,” observed the spinning-master, with the gratified air of a man who conceives a brilliant idea. “You’re my benefactories. But hadn’t you better be sending somebody after th’ Parson? If you don’t, you’ll not be catching him.”

“Oh, never fear, we’ll catch him fast enough! He cannot be far, and I’ve sent a mounted man to make inquiries on the Manchester road, I only wanted to know exactly what he had taken, so that if he attempts to dispose of his plunder —”

“He’s sure to pop it if he gets to Manchester,” put in Rabbits.

“So that if he attempts to dispose of it he may be identified. I shall inform the constables at once, and send off three or four men in as many directions to look for him. We shall have him before nightfall, Jim.”

“I hope so. I have to saddle wi’ him for shamming sick and taking me in this morning. He groaned and rowled his e’en, and doubled hissel’ up, and rubbed his belly, as if he were going to dee th’ next minute. I’ll never believe one o’ them lads agean, whatever he says.”

“I wouldn’t advise you. They are deceitful little scamps. That is all, I think. Let me see — Nelson, come here and write out a list of the things you have lost, and then I shall be sure of having it right.”

Robin seated himself at the desk pointed out by Ruberry, junior, took a sheet of paper, and wrote. When he had finished he handed the list to Robert, who passed it on to his brother.

“Humph! The lad *can* write, sure enough,” said the senior to Rabbits, who was looking curiously over his master’s shoulder. “And it is not ill-spelled, either.”

It was so unheard-of a thing for an apprentice, or any other “child of the people,” to be a skilled penman, that until that moment none of them had believed Robin could write either easily or well.

“There, that’ll do, I think,” observed the younger brother, a little more graciously, as he laid the paper on the desk. “Go with Jim, and he’ll set you to work. You can find him something to do, Jim?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Oh, ay, I’ll set him agate. And the engine has started; it’s time to be off. Come on, Nelson!”

“A sharp lad that,” observed Mr. Ruberry, so soon as the door was closed. “Couldn’t we find him something better to do than piecing? He writes a good hand, and the spelling seems to be all right, doesn’t it?” (Orthography was rather a weak point with the senior.)

“Yes, he can both write and spell,” the other answered, coldly. “But what is the good of education for one in his position? And how ridiculous for him to have such books as ‘Paradise Lost’ and Shakespeare! The more ignorant working-people are kept the better. No; let him learn to piece like the others. It’ll bring him to his cake and milk. He’s a good deal too free and easy for my liking.”

Meanwhile Robin and his conductor had reached the entrance of the main building.

“Wor you ever in a cotton factory afore?” asked Rabbits.

“Never.”

“Well, then, I’ll show you round.”

The spinning-master did not usually pay so much attention to new apprentices, rather despising them as ignorant Cockneys who gave more trouble than they were worth; but he regarded Robin as a prodigy of learning, who knew the meaning of long words, and whose learning might possibly be turned to good account.

“I’ll show you round,” he repeated. “This is th’ devil hole” — pushing open a door.

A whirl of wheels, a clashing of straps, a diabolic din of clanking drums and fast-revolving fans; an atmosphere thick with cotton fluff, children mixing cotton, men feeding cotton into huge machines which swallow it by the hundredweight, tear it asunder, shake it aloft, and then fold it neatly in thick flakes on a great iron roller.

These were the demon denizens of the “hole.” Nowadays they are called “blowers,” for we live in a refined age, and even cotton-spinners are becoming polite.

Robin, who had never, before seen any more complicated machinery than a tinker’s grindstone, thrust his fingers into his ears and started back in affright.

The spinning-master laughed complacently.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“There’s nowt o’ this soort i’ Lunnon, I reckon? They don’t know quite everything up there,” he shouted. “But don’t be

[128]

flayed; you’ll tak’ no hurt.” And then he explained to Robin what the “devils” were doing — the initial process of cotton spinning.

This done, they went into the card-room, Robin keeping close to his conductor, lest he should haply lose himself and come to grief in the maze of machinery, cans, and skips with which the place was filled.

“How does it all go?” he asked.

“You mean what turns us? Steam. None o’ your nasty watter, as there’s too much on one week and not enough next. There’s nowt like steam. It licks everything. You never saw a steam-engine, I reckon? I thought not. Come this way and I’ll show you ours.”

With that Jim went to a corner of the card-room, where was a small door, which he opened with his “master” key, and beckoned Robin to enter. The lad, who was becoming used to portentous sights and sounds, going boldly forward (though, if possible, he was more scared than he had been in the “devil hole”), presently found himself on the packing-stage of the engine-house. The ponderous wooden beam moved up and down like an animated monster; the huge fly-wheel whizzed round with a velocity that seemed like to bring the place about their ears; the heavy spur-wheels fixed their great black teeth into each other as if they were engaged in mortal combat, and the piston-rod, as it shot in and out of the cylinder, hissed like a hundred snakes.

“That’s a hinjun as is a hinjun!” said the spinning-master, proudly. “It’s by Boulton & Watt; fifty hoss-power. You’ll have heard of James Watt?”

“The inventor of the steam-engine. But I had no idea — But how is it done? How can steam make that beam go up and down?”

Rabbits, who, though no scholar, was a clever practical mechanic, tried to answer Robin’s query; but his explanation, only half heard amid the din, did not seem to make the mystery much clearer. They next went to one of the spinning-rooms, where, as the master told Robin, he would have to stay.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You’ve to learn to piece,” he said. “That is to be your job. Th’ little ’uns mostly begin with picking up loose cotton and sweeping. But you’re too big for that. Tom Cat, here, will put you i’ th’ way. They call him ‘Cat’ because he wed a woman name o’ Kittling. Piecing looks easy; but it’s like mony another

[129]

thing — not as easy as it looks. However, you’ll never larn younger, and you don’t know what it may lead to. I was once a piecer mysel’.”

The room, which was long, low, and desperately warm, contained eight or ten pairs of old-fashioned spinning-jennies, which moved continually backward and forward, and were followed by half-naked boys and girls, who dexterously pieced up the broken threads. To and fro these children walked all day long, from six in the morning till half-past seven at night, with an interval of only an hour and a half for rest and meals — often even longer; for, though the legal limit of the day’s work was twelve hours, there were no inspectors to enforce the law, and, by early starting and late stopping, many employers lengthened the stint to thirteen hours. How heavily their severe labor told on the children was shown by their looks. Their faces were haggard, their forms stunted, their movements languid. Many did not long survive the terrible ordeal which they were compelled to undergo, and most of those who lived were broken in constitution before they reached middle age.

The journeymen spinners, of whom there was one to every pair of jennies, worked harder than galley-slaves. They supplied half the motive power, pushing the frame forward with one hand and knee, and turning a wheel with the other. Only men of exceptional strength were equal to the task, and how they performed it was a marvel. But they had a stimulus which their piecers had not. They were paid by the weight of yarn produced. The harder they wrought the more they earned. The apprentices, on the other hand, never earned more than a shilling a week, and even that pittance was often reduced to nothing by abatements and fines. The spinners, whose wages depended in great measure on their diligence, were harder taskmasters than their employers, visiting trivial faults with cruel punishments, sometimes even tormenting the unhappy children out of pure devilry — or, as they said, “for sport.”

[130]

CHAPTER XXIII.

JIM RABBITS.

TOM CAT was by no means a bad fellow, as spinners went in those days. Though he kept a strap and walloped his piecers and creelers now and then, and occasionally threw a clearer or other missile at their heads, he neither tortured them for his pleasure nor spent more than a fourth of his wage in drink. Most of his fellow-workmen, besides getting drunk on Saturdays and Sundays, consumed two or three quarts of beer every working day.

Cat, being a shrewd fellow, was too knowing not to be civil to an apprentice who had been taken in hand by the spinning-master. He gave him a first lesson in piecing, and explained the mechanism of the jenny, about which Robin was curious.

“Watch t’others and you’ll soon get into it,” he said, encouragingly. “But piecing one end doesn’t ‘mount to much. A chap, to be worth owt, should piece four in a draw; I’ve known chaps as could piece seven.”

After this Cat left Robin to his own devices. At first he felt awkward and bewildered, but the machinery interested him greatly, and as he gained confidence he attempted to piece a thread (technically, an “end”).

After many trials he succeeded by a fluke, and fancied himself very clever; but his next attempt ended in disaster. Ends are pieced as the frame (now called mule) draws out, and the further it draws out, the further have the piecers to stretch in order to reach the rollers. Robin, in his eagerness stretching too far, fell head foremost over the front part of the frame, and broke more threads in a second than he was like to piece in a month. Had he not enjoyed the spinning-master’s favor there would have been hot words — probably blows and a fight; for Robin was a lad of spirit, and knew how to use his fists. But after a big oath, just to relieve his feelings. Cat, laughing heartily, helped Robin to his feet, and stopped the frame to “piece up.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You mun stan’ me a quart for this,” he said, “and if you don’t do so no more, we’ll say nowt about it.”

[131]

Robin shook his head. He did not possess the price of a gill, much less of a quart.

“Oh, ay — I’d forgotten. Th’ Parson has run away wi’ all your brass. Never mind! If he’s cotched, and your brass is fun’, you’ll stand then, maybe?”

“With pleasure.”

“Good! We’ll have it some neet at Lucky Riddle’s. Fettle?”

“Fettle! What do you mean?”

“Hot, wi’ a bit o’ nutmeg in’t.”

“If you like.”

“That’ll be grand “(smacking his lips), “and I’ll be a noggin or two o’ rum mysel’.”

Later in the day, a small boy, with crooked legs and a wizened face, touching Robin on the arm, told him that Jim Rabbits wanted him “in th’ cabin,” and offered to show him the way.

On this Robin nodded assent, and followed his guide up two or three flights of grimy and greasy stone steps until they came to a door, in the lock of which hung a bunch of keys.

“That’s it,” said the boy, and incontinently disappeared.

After knocking at the door — an excess of politeness in the circumstance — and being answered by a request to “Come in,” Robin entered “the cabin” — really the spinning-master’s sanctum, a room about twelve feet square, furnished with a vise, a bench, and a three-legged stool. On the walls hung coils of wire, balls of twine, straps, laces, brushes, cog-wheels, and a miscellaneous collection of odds and ends.

Rabbits had before him a sheet of coarse paper, covered with cabalistic signs in red lead, which bore a remote resemblance to figures, and his swarthy face wore the rapt look of one who has been wrestling with mighty thoughts.

“You said this morning as you could cipher?” he observed, anxiously.

“I can — a little.”

“I wish yo’d cipher for me a bit. I’d make it worth your while. I’m quite at th’ far end. I’ve been trying to work this out for two hours and more, and I’m not a bit forruder.”

The spinning-master was as weak in the theory of his calling as he was strong in its practice. A calculation bothered him dreadfully, and he had many calculations to make — or rather, many that he ought to have made; for, save the very simplest, all his work of this description was done for him by the book-keeper, Tommy

[132]

Nutter, generally called Owd Nutcrackers (in playful allusion to his name, and the fact that his nose and chin promised at no distant time to meet). But Nutcrackers had not the sweetest of tempers. He rendered his help so unwillingly, and at the price of so many pints of beer, that Rabbits was intensely anxious to be independent of him.

At the outset Robin feared that he would not be able to do what was required of him; but when Jim stated the question, and produced a manuscript book, in which rules were given and examples worked out, Robin had no difficulty in solving the problem that had so puzzled his patron — something about the size of a pulley and the speed of a shaft — to the spinning-master’s great delight.

“One good torn desarves another,” he said, “and I’ll do you a good torn for this. See if I don’t. Tak’ th’ book and look at it when you’ve a minute or two to spare, and when I want some more ciphering done, you’ll know how to do it. I geet it for th’ price of a gallon o’ beer from an owd mon as wor on th’ boil (on the loose), thinking it might torn out useful, and if I could read it and write like you, I wouldn’t give a twopenny damn to call King George my uncle. I might get to be a mayster mysel’ then, and mak’ my fortune.”

Robin hinted that in these circumstances he was rather surprised the spinning-master did not learn to read and write.

“Do you think I could?” (anxiously).

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Why not? I once heard Mr. Bartlett say that a man with brains may learn anything he likes; and you have brains, or you could not be a spinning-master, could you?”

“Well, there’s summat i’ that,” said Rabbits, thoughtfully. “I know one thing: I’ve a damned sight more brains than owd Nutcrackers, and he’s th’ best writer i’ these parts, and can figure like a fourteen-day clock. But then, he larned when he wor young, and I’m thirty come next Michaelmas.”

“Still you might try, and I’m sure —”

“But who is there to larn me? I’d liefer be licked than ax th’ book-keeper. Beside, it would cost me hoaf my wage in drink. He can howd as much beer as a brewer’s vat, owd Nutcrackers can. There’s Bill Romford; he’s a gradely good scholar too — But no! It would never do. I durstna.”

“Why? Is he like Nutcrackers? Can he hold as much beer as a brewer’s vat?”

[133]

“Nay, he isn’t a supper, isn’t Bill. But he’s waur — he’s a Radical.”

This sentiment surprised Robin beyond measure, for he had an idea (gathered, doubtless, from Mr. Bartlett) that Radicals were the salt of the earth.

“How can being a Radical be worse than being a drunkard?” he asked.

“I doan’t say as it is. But both Ben and Bob’s rank Tories. They’d think th’ world wor coming to an end if I let a Radical weyver larn me to read. Why, it’s not long sin’ they bagged a chap for wearing a white hat on a Easter Sunday.”

“A white hat? What can there be wrong in that, Mr. Rabbits?”

“Well, I doan’t know as there’s owt wrong i’ th’ hat; but wearing one is th’ sign of a Radical. Owd Bob said as no mon as respects his mayster, and is loyal to his king, would have such a thing in his house, much less put it on his yed.”

“In that case it must be considered loyal to wear a black hat? I wonder why?” asked Robin, with a puzzled look.

“That’s more than I can tell you. I doan’t know much ‘bout politics; but I know when I’ve a good shop, and that’s th’ main point, Nelson. And I know another thing: if a working mon meddles wi’ politics, he’s sure to get into a hobble. There’s Bill

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Romford, now. He's been i' two or three hobbles awready, and if he doesn't get hissel' transported afore he's done, it'll chet me. But he's a rare weyver and a fine scholard, and I doan't know a B from a bull's foot. Romford's a better mon than me, Nelson, though he is a Radical."

"If you wouldn't mind," said Robin, hesitatingly, "I think — if you would let me try I could perhaps teach you to read and write. I never did teach anybody, but —"

"Let you try! Ay, will I, and be gradely fain too, and do my best to larn. But doan't say nowt. Keep it quiet, whatever you do. You shall give me my fost lesson o' Sunday. By gum! willn't Owd Bob stare when he knows? He'll be saying, as he oft does, 'Here's a letter, Jim, about them spindles,' or happen about a new roving machine. 'But you cannot read; I'll read it for you.' And then I'll say, 'You're mista'en, Mester Robbut — I can read it;' and then I'll let him see. Willn't he stare! But larn me to read, Nelson, and I'll do owt for you. Don't forget Sunday. And now I think you'd better be going back to your work. It's

[134]

welly lighting-up time; I mun be off mysel', or I shall be having Owd Bob after me."

Robin went, and as he shut the door behind him, the spinning-master laughed softly to himself.

"He's a good soort — a gradely good soort," he murmured. "He calls me Mester Rabbits, and he'll larn me to read."

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD DICK'S ADVICE.

BY the time Robin returned to his work lighting-up had begun. It was a slow and tedious process, drawbacks which were not redressed by a brilliant result, for albeit coal-gas as an illuminant was coming into use, it did not yet illuminate Birch Dene. The lamps gave a dim and vacillating light, the smoke thereof blackened the ceiling, and still

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

further fouled the air; and the heat, which before had been oppressive, became almost unbearable.

Several of the lads doffed their shirts; a girl fainted and had to be carried out; the spinners worked with evident effort; the weary and worn-out children could not “keep their ends up,” thereby incurring the wrath of their masters, who hurled at them fierce oaths and blood-curdling threats. A spinner at the next pair of wheels to Robin’s ran amuck among his piecers with a piece of strapping, and Tom Cat knocked a boy down with his fist.

When the engine stopped (ten minutes after its time) there was a general sense of relief. The hands who lived outside put on their clogs, coats, waistcoats, and caps, wound huge red comforters round their necks (comforters were a great institution at Birch Dene), and hurried off. The apprentices went as they were. Shoeless and half-naked, they picked their way, shivering, through the cindered yard to their wretched quarters. But a bright fire and hot porridge awaited them, and after thirteen hours in the suffocating spinning-room, with its jarring noises and monotonous toil, the apprentice-house was a haven of rest and a place of delight. After supper the children recovered their spirits, and began a series of pranks, which ended, as usual, in a row, the appearance of Dick with his horsewhip, and a peremptory dismissal to bed.

But he made an exception in Robin’s favor.

“You can sit by th’ fireside, and go to bed when you like, he

[135]

said. “You’re not like t’others; you’re a young mon and a scholar.”

By calling him a “young mon” Dick meant not merely that Robin was a well-grown lad who could read and write, but that he ranked in popular estimation as something very different from a common apprentice or ordinary factory hand. Mr. Nutter had been heard to say that Nelson’s handwriting was almost as good as his own, and that he had read more books than the two Ruberrys had ever seen. Jim Rabbits, on his part, had confided to the carding-master his belief that Nelson had more wit in his little finger than many up-grown folk carried in their heads.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

This expression of opinion being repeated and passed on with additions, it came to pass that before Robin had been at Birch Dene a week he was regarded as a sort of Admirable Crichton — or would have been had the Birch Dene folks ever heard of that portentous genius — and they wondered greatly who he was, and how he had become the master of so many accomplishments and so much knowledge.

Robin gladly accepted Dick's invitation to take a seat by the fireside. He was in no hurry to leave its friendly warmth for that greasy and, if the truth must be told, rather too lively bed of his in the garret.

"You'd better ha' stopped in London, I think," observed Dick, as he lighted his pipe with a coal from the fire.

"I wish I had," answered Robin, with a rueful glance at his grimy trousers and bare feet.

"If it's a fair question, I'd like to know what med you come; and there's more than me as would like to know."

On this Robin told briefly, pretty much as he told Major Dene, what had happened to him since Mr. Bartlett's death.

Dick smoked reflectively, as if the narrative contained matter for thought, then smiled complacently as if he had hit upon a very original idea.

"That's it," he said, removing his pipe from his mouth — "that's it. I thowt there was summat out of th' common. You've lived among books; that accounts for your being such a scholar and knowing so much about 'em. But I'll tell you what, that — whaten you caw him — Weevil, is a damned rogue!"

Robin nodded assent.

"He's nowt else. He is a damned rogue! If he ever comes to Birch Dene he'll get his shins punched, I can promise him that.

[136]

He told you a pack o' lies to get rid of you, and keep th' owd fellow's brass for hissel'. Are you sure, now, as Bartlett wasn't your fayther?"

"Certainly," said Robin, half amused, half indignant. "How could he be? My name is Nelson; his was Bartlett."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That’s nowt,” returned Dick, with a knowing smile — “nowt at all. Why, there’s scores o’ childer in these parts as isn’t called after their faythers, and mony a one as doesn’t know who their faythers is. Who was your mother?”

“My mother died when I was very young,” said Robin, evasively. He had a decided objection to discussing his mother with old Dick.

“Well, it’s nowt to me; but I can happen see as far into a stone wall as onybody else. Howsomever, there’s one thing clear — you’re a ’prentice, bun’ till twenty-one. It is a gradely hard case, I will say that — and you’ll happen have thowts o’ running away. But I don’t think I would if I wor you. You’d ten to one get caughted and put i’ prison, and you wouldn’t like that; and runaway ’prentices mostly does get caughted, either dead or alive.”

“Dead or alive? What do you mean?”

“Only as they sometimes dee,” said Dick, composedly. “Last winter two lads run away from here — one of th’ spinners had been hiding ’em a bit moor than usual. Well, they were fun’ th’ week after on th’ moors, frozen to death, and their een pyked out by crows. I don’t say as owt o’ that sort would happen to you. All th’ same, I’d stop where you are, if I wor you. It’s not as if you wor a common ’prentice. You are a fine scholard and a young mon, and they’re sure to find you summat better to do than piecing. Tak’ care as you keep in wi’ Owd Bob, that’s all.”

“Why with him more than Mr. Ruberry?” asked Robin, who could not yet bring himself to speak of his employers in the free-and-easy style adopted by Dick and the others.

“Because he’s th’ cock o’ this here midden. Whatever he wants is done, whatever he doesn’t want isn’t done. Th’ hands says as Ben’s bark is waur than his bite, and as Bob’s bite is waur than his bark. If Ben bags a chap, he’ll shop him ageean th’ week after; but if Bob bags a chap, he mut as weel whistle jigs to a milestone as ax on ageean. Bob’s most terrible hot again th’ Parson. He wor in here this afternoon. You’ll have yerd as his clothes has been fun’?”

“No, I haven’t. Where? Have any of mine been found?” exclaimed Robin, eagerly.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“They were fun’ in a field about a mile off, on th’ Manchester road — his owd things, nowt else. He doffed his own and donned yours, and then made off with th’ portmantle. But they’re cocksure to catch him. Th’ portmantle’ll be his ruin. He’d ha’ shown some sense if he had left that in th’ field too. He’ll be trying to pop summat, and then he’ll get dropped on. And a bonny hobble he’ll be in! They say as Owd Bob means to make a hanging job on it.”

“For stealing my clothes?”

“For nowt else. You surely don’t think as they’d scrag a slip of a lad for running away! They haven’t gotten to that yet. Not as I think Owd Bob would have owt ageean it. He’d hang a runaway ’prentice as soon as look, if he could have his way.”

Robin had no reason to bear the Parson good-will. The theft of his clothes was both mean and cruel, and if he met Blincoe, the latter would be very likely to pass a bad quarter of an hour. But hanging him would be too horrible; and for the hundredth time there arose before Robin’s mental vision the ghastly scene at the Old Bailey; the terrible words of the judge rang once more in his ears; he saw his mother sink dying in the dock, and, closing his eyes, visibly shuddered.

“You’re cowl,” said Dick. “Draw a bit nearer to th’ fire. I’ll stor it up a bit. Them clothes isn’t warm enough for you out o’ th’ factory. I mun see if I cannot get summat warmer for you by Sunday, and fit you up wi’ stockings and a pair o’ shoon. And now, if you’re not in a horry to go to bed, you’d happen not mind reading a bit for Betty and me — hoo’ll be here in a minute. It isn’t oft as we gotten onybody to read to us. Jabez o’ Jenny’s lass can do a bit, but hoo gets o’er no ground — has to spell every second word, and then hoo doesn’t know what they mean. I’ve a bit of a book there, in th’ nook, as I bowt ov a hawker for fourpence and a pint o’ beer. He said as it wor gradely good reading, and there’s an uncommon nice cut on th’ back.”

As Dick spoke he went to a corner cupboard, and returned with his “bit of a book,” which proved to be a pamphlet, giving a full, true, and particular account of an exceptionally brutal murder, and the murderer’s last dying speech and confession. The “uncommon nice cut” was a ghastly engraving of a man hanging — supposed to be the murderer — Jack Ketch pulling at his legs, and a devil in the background, presumably waiting to receive his soul.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“A gradely good ’un, isn’t it?” said the old man, admiringly. “But I never knew afore as th’ owd lad had a gimlet at th’ end of

[138]

his tail. I reckon he makes it red hot, and uses it to bore hoyles in ’em when he gets ’em there. Come on, Betty” — (shouting) — “Nelson is going to read this book as I bowt fro’ th’ hawker!”

Robin would much rather have gone to bed, but, not liking to disoblige his host and hostess, especially after the former’s fatherly advice, he complied with Dick’s wish, and read the pamphlet from beginning to end, to the worthy couple’s great delight, which, as also their admiration of his cleverness, was warmly expressed.

“What I like about his reading,” observed Betty, “is as he stops at nowt, nayther stutters nor stammers, but goes straight on, as if he wor telling it all out of his own yed.”

“Thou art reynt, lass, he does,” added her husband, sympathetically. “Th’ words comes out of his mouth like watter out of a spout on a rainy day. We’ll have some o’ th’ chaps in next time as he reads, and I’ll be twopence to’ard another book if onybody else will.”

After this all went to bed, and so ended Robin’s second day at Birch Dene — a memorable day in his life’s history — a day which he was not likely ever to forget. The expectations raised by that rascal, Moses Weevil, had been rudely and finally dispelled. Robin had learned beyond a doubt that, call himself what he might, he was nothing better than a common parish apprentice, bound to serve the brothers Ruberry for three years at the munificent salary of a shilling a week. On the other hand, he was not so badly off as some of his companions; the place and, above all, the machinery interested him; he felt a desire to understand it, and to know more of the properties and nature of steam, which seemed to him as wonderful and mysterious as the imprisoned genii he had read about in “The Arabian Nights.” Even though his clothes and his money had not been stolen, he would probably have thought twice before attempting to carry out his project of escape, and to attempt it in existing circumstances would be the height of folly.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

For the moment, moreover, his chief concern was the recovery of his lost belongings. Should he ever get them back? he was continually asking himself. To be without a change of garments; to have neither comb nor brush, nor possess a clean shirt; to be compelled, out of the factory as well as in it, to wear the miserable garments given him by his masters — all this was more than an inconvenience, it was a degradation. He felt like somebody else — could hardly believe that but a few weeks previously he was a happy youth, with, fair prospects and kind friends.

[139]

When Robin awoke next morning, he thought at first that it was all a hideous dream; but the hoarse clang of the factory bell, the cries of his comrades, and the voice of old Dick shouting that if they did not look sharp he would be at them with his whip, quickly dispelled the illusion, and, tumbling out of his bunk, he slipped on his trousers, and was one of the first down-stairs. Dick would probably have let him stay in bed a little longer, but he had made up his mind to conform to the rules, and show that what others could do he could do. One indulgence, however, he did crave and obtain; he prevailed on Betty to give him a towel and let him wash in the kitchen, instead of doing his ablutions at the pump, and struggling for “a dry wipe” with a corner of the piece of coarse sheeting used for that purpose by his fellow-apprentices. Then he took a hunch of bread and went to his work.

The day passed pretty much as the previous day had passed. Robin contrived to piece about a dozen ends without tumbling over the frame, and was warmly commended by Tom Cat for his success. In the afternoon he spent an hour with the spinning-master in his cabin, doing calculations, and giving him a preliminary reading-lesson. Fired with zeal for knowledge, Rabbits was too impatient to wait until Sunday; he wanted “summat to lam” in the meanwhile; and during the remainder of the day he might occasionally be seen taking from his waistcoat-pocket and furtively consulting the “bit o’ papper” whereon Robin had inscribed, in bold characters, the letters of the alphabet.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)
CHAPTER XXV.

A BATTLE.

IF nothing particular happened on the third day of Robin's sojourn at Birch Dene, a good deal happened on the fourth. Shortly after breakfast-time, as he was reaching over to piece an end, the machinery came to a dead stop.

"Hello!" shouted Tom Cat. "What's up, I wonder? I expect it's them spore-wheels in th' bottom room. I yerd Jim say as they worn't running true. If they're smashed we shall have to lake (play) a week, and if we do my children will have to go short o' porridge. But it's happen summat wrong with th' engin'."

A minute later the spinning-master, popping his head in at the

[140]

door, confirmed Cat's conjecture. The crank shaft of the engine had heated, but the stoppage was not expected to last more than half an hour.

Robin had not the most remote idea what a crank shaft was, or why its heating should render necessary a stoppage of all the machinery, and in his thirst for knowledge he plied Tom Cat with more questions than that worthy could satisfactorily answer.

"Go and see for yoursel'," said Tom, at last, rather impatiently. "They'll let you look. Go through No. 2, and down th' steps into the boiler-house — that's th' nearest road."

Robin acted on this suggestion at once. No. 2 was the room below No. 3 (the one in which he worked).

As he opened the door he heard shouts of laughter and cries of pain.

A spinner, known as Black Jack, was whiling away his enforced leisure by torturing one of the apprentices, or, as he would have said, having a "bit o' sport." A poor boy, not more than ten years old, had been forced to take off his clothes, and Jack was now trying to make him sit on a hot steam-pipe. The child struggled and begged for mercy, but he was answered only by jeers and laughter; and as his body touched the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

burning iron, he screamed and writhed in agony, greatly, as it seemed, to the amusement of the spinners, piecers, and others who were looking on.

This was more than Robin could stand, and, without giving a thought to the consequences, he ran forward, pushed Black Jack aside, and lifted the child from the pipe, a proceeding which was followed by exclamations of surprise from the spectators, and a howl of rage from the principal actor.

“What the hell!” he shouted. “If thou doesn’t pyke off this minute, I’ll clap thee on th’ pipe too, thou damned Cockney counter-jumper. Come, be off, now!”

And Black Jack made as if he would again lay hands on his victim.

“You shall not touch this child,” said Robin, as he stood between them, pale and in a tremor of excitement, yet with undaunted mien.

“Who’s going to stop me? Not a hatter-cropper (spider) like thee! But if thou’ll stan’ thy ground I’ll give thee what for afore I set Little Jimmy on ageean. What says thou?”

“I wouldn’t if I was you,” whispered a friendly piecer; “he’s a deal stronger than you.”

This was quite true. Black Jack (so called because of his swarthy,
[141]

ill-favored face), though short of stature, was broad of chest, and his arms, by reason of his occupation, were as strong as sledge hammers.

But Robin did not flinch.

“You may do what you like,” he said, quietly; “but I shall stay here until you promise to let the boy alone, and while I stay you shall not lay a hand on him.”

“Thou wants sore bones then, and thou shalt have ’em. Come on!”

And by way of showing that he meant what he said, Black Jack rolled up his shirt-sleeves and spat fiercely into his hands — the usual preliminary to battle. Then, drawing a few steps backwards, he paused, as if half expecting that Robin, overawed by his resolute attitude, might yield him the honors of victory without striking a blow.

On this some of the others began to laugh.

“Thou dare not tackle him. Jack,” said one.

“He’ll be too mony for thee, owd mon,” shouted another.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

These taunts stirred Jack to immediate action.

Lowering his arms, he made a rush at his opponent, as if he would bear him down by sheer strength. This rather surprised Robin, and if Jack had been armed with his clogs it might have fared ill with the lad, for he had no experience of Lancashire fighting. But, being barefooted, the spinner could make no effectual use of his feet, and being no boxer, he meant to grip Robin by the waist, throw him down, and then “punch his head.” This design Robin defeated by a very simple manoeuvre. As Jack made his rush he gave him a blow with “his left” between the eyes, delivered straight from the shoulder, and the spinner went down like a felled ox.

“Jump on him and finish him! Get on to him and throttle him! Look sharp, or he’ll be up ageean!” shouted the now excited onlookers, who could not for the life of them understand why Robin did not follow up his advantage.

But Robin, who had no idea of hitting a man when he was down, waited quietly until the spinner got up.

“Thou had better give in,” said one of his friends. “Another crack like that theer, and thou’ll be that faa (ugly) as thy own wife willn’t know thee.”

“Not I,” growled Jack, savagely. “I haven’t begun yet.” And with that he lowered his head and went at Robin like a bull charging.

[142]

The next moment Jack’s head was in “chancery.”

In vain he straggled to free himself. It is no easy thing to get out of “chancery” at any time, and when your opponent has a firm grip of your neck, and is hammering away at your face, the feat is well-nigh impossible; and Robin, who by this time was in a decidedly Berserker frame of mind, showed no mercy, showering his blows like rain, and sticking to his man like grim death.

Like James FitzJames and Roderick Dhu, they tug and strain, and at length, their feet slipping on the greasy floor, down they go, Robin uppermost, and still holding on.

And then the shouts suddenly cease, and an ominous whisper passes from mouth to mouth.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“I give in. Leave loose! Let me get up!” says Black Jack, in a hoarse gurgle. “It’s Owd Bob!”

Robin loosed his hold, and both combatants scrambled to their feet.

Robert Ruberry was at the door, looking sternly on, and the spectators of the fight were slinking away one by one, or, as they would have said, “pyking off.”

“What!” he exclaimed, “cannot the engine stop a few minutes but you must be fighting? The only way with you fellows is to keep your noses to the grindstone. Who are the fighters? Nelson and Black Jack! Why, Nelson, I thought you called yourself a scholar, and considered yourself a bit of a gentleman! I did not know that your scholarship included a knowledge of up-and-down fighting. What were you fighting for — a quart of beer? Or was it merely to decide which of you is the better man?”

“Neither one nor the other, Mr. Robert,” answered Robin, indignantly; and then he told what had happened, emphasizing his narrative by pointing to the naked child, who was cowering behind him.

“Oh, that was it, was it? Well, I think you did quite right. Nelson. Apprentices cost money; we cannot afford to have ’em frizzled on hot steam-pipes. If that lad had been injured and laid up, it might have run us into a loss of four or five pounds, one way and another. Strap ’em, if you like, but we’ll have no burning. What had he been doing? Little Jimmy, I mean.”

“I don’t know as he, had been doing owt. It was nobbut a bit o’ sport,” said Jack, sullenly, as he wiped his bleeding face with a piece of cotton waste.

“Sport! Well, sport with your own children next time. You

[143]

can stick *them* on the steam-pipe as much as you like. But I’ll have no sporting with our apprentices. Why, man, what a face you have got! It will be as black as my hat soon. Your own wife won’t know you.”

“Just what I said just now,” observed one of the fellows who had stood his ground. “He’s faaer than ever. I cannot tell what he wor doing to let a bit of a lad peyl him in that way.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“A bit of a lad!” growled Jack. “He’d lick thee ony end up, and thou caws thysel’ an up-grown fellow! He fights like him as he’s called after — Lord Nelson — crashed me down afore I knew where I wor’, by gum!”

“Come! No more of this! All of you to your places; the engine is setting on again,” cried Robert Ruberry, impatiently. “And you, Nelson, go to your own room. How came you here?” Robin told him.

“So you are both curious and combative. But take care you are not too combative. If Jack had had his clogs on you might have got a good deal the worst of it. But you cannot be too curious about owt as it concerns you to know. Learn all you can, and study your masters’ interest, and you may become a valuable servant.”

Coming from Robert Ruberry, this was a gracious saying; but Robin returned to his work with the conviction that the younger brother was a tyrannical old curmudgeon, yet fully satisfied with what he had done, and proud of his victory over Black Jack. The news of it reached No. 3 before him, and as he entered the room he was received with a cheer. Tom Cat congratulated him warmly. “You sarved him weel reyt,” he said. “I don’t hold wi’ putting childer on hot steam-pipes. But I’ve seen it done, and it is done. And, what’s more, I’ve seen a lad hoisted up to a hook by his hands, wi’ weights fastened to his feet, and then hided wi’ a piece of thick belting till he lost his senses. I don’t hold with that, nayther. But what caps me is how you managed to best Black Jack. If he is not long, he’s strong; and though you’re taller, you are nowt like as heavy. You’re a good plucked ‘un, and sharp wi’ your neaves (fists); that mun be it. They sayen as you knocked him down like winking.”

Besides congratulations, Robin’s victory made him the popular hero of the hour, and brought him a nickname. The apprentices swore by him, and before nightfall he was dubbed, by general consent, “Little Lord Nelson,” and the sobriquet, sometimes shortened

[144]

to “Little Lord,” or “Lord Nelson” simply, according to the fancy of the speaker, stuck to Robin until he found his own name.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Later in the day, while he was watching Tom Cat tighten a driving-strap, the wizen-faced lad who had summoned him to the spinning-master's cabin touched him on the arm, in the same mysterious way as before, and whispered that he was "wanted in th' counting-house."

Robin's first idea was that the brothers were going to call him over the coals for thrashing Black Jack; but, on consideration, he saw that this was hardly likely, as, on the whole, "Owd Bob" had commended him, although grudgingly and ungraciously. However, he would soon see.

In the passage leading to the counting-house were several of the hands, among them old Dick, obviously in an intensely expectant state of mind.

"Get you in," said Dick, "and yo'll see summat as you want to see."

Inside there was quite a crowd — the brothers Ruberry, Jim Rabbits, Nutter, two strangers whom Robin rightly conjectured to be constables, and a youth, whom he at once knew to be the Parson, though he had never seen him before. On the floor lay his missing valise."

All the wrath that Robin had been nursing against Blincoe evaporated at the sight of him. Never had he seen a more abject specimen of humanity. Blincoe was undersized and dreadfully knock-kneed; his arms were disproportionately long; his short-cropped hair made visible several ugly scars; he had a furtive, hang-dog look, and his ill-favored face was covered with eruptions. Altogether, a most wretched-looking creature — not naturally, but made so by cruel usage and a life of enforced servitude and excessive, toil. Had he been born under a happier star, kindly treated, and carefully trained, he might have been as healthy, as high-spirited, and as well-favored as Robin himself. Yet probably not one of the men present experienced even a passing sense of pity for the manacled victim of social oppression and unrighteous laws who stood trembling before them. They saw in him only a runaway and a, thief, fully deserving of all the punishment which his crimes might entail and justice (!) inflict.

"Is this your property, Nelson?" asked Robert Ruberry, pointing to the valise.

"Yes, sir," answered Robin, after examining the contents; "and very few of my things seem to be missing."

"You can swear to them?"

[145]

“Certainly!”

“And the clothes Blincoe has on, are they also yours?”

Robin had no doubt of it, but, in order to make quite sure, he examined them carefully, and then gave the same answer as before.

“Well, we shall want you to give your evidence to-morrow. Were you ever in a court of justice?”

“Yes, sir,” said Robin, with a strange look.

“Then there’s no occasion for me to say owt. You know all about it. Let’s see, what time do the justices meet?” — (to one of the constables.)

“Half-past ten.”

“You will have to start a bit before ten, then. Be ready at half-past nine, Nelson. Either my brother or I will go with you. It will be a very simple affair. You will have little more to do than swear to your things and be bound over to prosecute.”

“Yes, sir. But may I have some of my things? If not, I shall find it rather difficult to be more ready than I am at present.”

“I see no objection. You can swear to them just as well whether they are in your bag or on your back. What do you think, Jenkinson?”

“Oh, ay; th’ thing belongs to him. Let him have what he wants. But we must tak’ th’ portmantle and what there is beside. Th’ portmantle’s worth a sovereign, let alone owt else; and that is enough to cook his goose” (indicating Blincoe with a jerk of his thumb). “But what are you going to do wi’ him till morning?”

“I thought of locking him up in th’ old warehouse. He will not get out, I’ll warrant him; and old Dick can give him a bit of supper.”

“Ay, I dare say that’ll do; and we’ll be here first thing in th’ morning to look after him.”

And so the colloquy came to an end. The constables took their prisoner to the old warehouse, and Robin went out with Jim Rabbits, who told how Blincoe had been “dropped on.” At the outset he had a stroke of luck. After changing his working clothes for a suit of Robin’s he took to the high-road, and fell in with a carrier bound from Rochdale to Manchester, who agreed to carry him and his bag to the latter place for a

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

shilling and a pint of beer. He thus got away from Birch Dene without being seen, or leaving any clue as to the direction he had taken.

“If it had not been for that cart,” said the spinning-master, “he’d ha’ been caught afore he’d been gone two hours.”

At Manchester Blincoe put up at a small hostelry in Deansgate,

[146]

his purpose being to travel to London by wagon. But as, after settling his score at the inn, he would not have nearly enough to pay his fare and other expenses, it was necessary for him to raise the wind either by pawning or selling some of Robin’s property. Fearing to enter a “pop-shop,” lest it might lead to his detection, and desiring to keep the clothes for his own use, so that he might, as he put it to himself, “travel respectable,” he decided, after long consideration, to dispose of the books, and, by way of a beginning, took the Shakespeare and the “Paradise Lost” to a second-hand bookseller near the Collegiate Church steps.

This proceeding proved the Parson’s ruin, or, as Jim Rabbits expressively remarked, “it did for him.”

The bookseller, either struck by something in Blincoe’s manner, or the fact of the “Paradise Lost” being a scarce edition, asked Blincoe how he had come by the books.

“I bought them in London,” said Blincoe, boldly.

As it happened, this was not a bad shot, the inscription on the fly-leaf being dated at London.

“Lately?”

“Two years since.”

A very bad shot, for the inscription purported to have been written only a few months previously, and the bookseller began to smell a rat.

“This copy of ‘Paradise Lost’ seems to be rather a valuable book. What do you ask for it?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It was not lost, I tell you; I bought it. What will you give me for it and that other?”

On this the bookseller, feeling sure that the books had not been honestly come by, said that he should detain them and communicate with the police. After an angry but useless protest against this proceeding, Blincoe made off as fast as his shambling legs could carry him. But the bookseller caused him to be watched, and a few hours later he was in custody.

“If he’d been a scholar,” observed the spinning-master, sententiously, “he’d ha’ had more sense than to try to sell a book wi’ th’ owner’s name written inside. I tell you what it is, Nelson; whether a chap’s a rogue or an honest mon, or, just as it happens, sometimes a bit of one, sometimes a bit of t’other, like the generality of folk, he’s not up to much if he doesn’t know how to read and write. Come into th’ cabin a minute or two, and hear me say *my A B, ab*, and look at these pothooks as I made last neet.”

[147]

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OLD WAREHOUSE.

THE old warehouse was an isolated one-storied building, dimly lighted from the roof, with a door wide enough to admit a loaded truck. The walls streamed with moisture, and the flagged floor was thick with grease. The warehouse contained a pair of beam weigh scales, sundry bales of cotton, bags of waste, casks of oil, and barrels of tallow. Besides being a happy hunting-ground for rats, it had the reputation of being haunted by the ghost of an overlooker, who, in a fit of delirium tremens, had hung himself behind the door with a bale rope.

It was to this place that Blincoe, after being made to doff Robin’s clothes and put on his own, was conducted by the constables.

The wretched lad, who stood in mortal terror of ghosts and rats, besought them to put him somewhere else.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“For God’s sake, don’t leave me here all by mysel’!” he cried, piteously. “Anywhere but here — anywhere but here. I’ll not try to get out. For God’s sake —”

But the constables had their orders, and, as he resisted strenuously, they dragged him in by main force; and cursing him for his stupidity, threw him on a heap of waste, and left him to make the best of it.

So long as it was not quite dark, and he could hear the hum of machinery in the mill, Blincoe did not despair, but when the last glimmer of light died out, and the patter of departing feet told him that the people were going home, and that in a few minutes he would be utterly alone, he groped his way to the door, and screamed wildly for mercy and help. Yet neither mercy nor help came, and after a while he lay down again on the pile of waste. The darkness was now absolute; he could not see his uplifted hand, and the stillness was broken only by the squeaking of the rats as they tumbled from the cotton bales and raced over the floor.

Blincoe had heard terrible stories of rats setting on people in

[148]

lonely places, flying at their throats, and biting them to death, and when one of the creatures brushed against his leg, and another ran over his face, he jumped to his feet with a yell. In imagination he saw them swarming about him in thousands.

How can he defend himself? Happy thought, the scales! And the next moment he is frantically hurling all the weights he can lay hands on at his invisible foes. This seems to settle them; the squeakings cease, and he can breathe once more. But he knows not how long the respite may endure, and, not daring either to lie down or sit, he stands up, grasping the while one of the weigh-scale chains, and thinking fearfully of the long hours that must pass before he can hope to be released.

How many hours? The big factory clock strikes eight. It will not be light till seven next morning. Eleven hours — eleven mortal hours! An eternity! Would morning ever come? And the darkness! And the rats!

And — and — the rats had put it out of his mind; but now he remembers and shudders — Ned Dawson’s spirit! He is within a yard or two of the very spot where Ned hanged himself. Tom o’ Jeff’s and old Dick cut the body down, and he has heard them

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

tell that the face was black and the tongue sticking out, and that the miserable man, ruing the deed at the last moment, tore his throat almost to pieces in his desperate efforts to undo the rope. The sight, they said, was terrifying.

No wonder that Ned's spirit haunts the old warehouse!

Blincoe's blood runs cold; his teeth rattle in his head; he can feel the sweat stream down his face, and hear it as it falls in heavy drops on the floor.

God be thanked! A gleam of light! Blincoe shouts with joy. That yellow moonbeam, shining through the windows, is like water in a thirsty land. Will it go on shining all night? Rats? Not one to be seen. Yet they are running about all the same, and, by way of preparing for the next encounter, he replaces the weights, and possesses himself of a brush-handle. Then, gaining courage, he begins to pace to and fro, for the place is damp and cold, and himself thinly clad.

But what is that hanging from a beam over the door? A hideous thing, with a rope round its neck, a drooping head, and contorted limbs. A corpse, or Ned Dawson's ghost?

Blincoe feel his hair bristle on his head, his knees bend under him, and with a groan of terror he falls on the floor in a dead faint.

[149]

A few minutes later the door opens, and in come Robin and Dick, the one carrying a lantern, the other a bowl of porridge.

"Where is he?" says Dick.

"There," says Robin, holding up the lantern, and going towards the spot where Blincoe lies prone.

"Asleep! It's a queer place to fa' asleep in. I'd ha' chosen a softer place if I'd been him. There's plenty o' sacks and things about. Get up, mon! We've brought thee thy supper" — (stirring the prostrate youth with his foot).

"He's not asleep; he's dead!" exclaims Robin, starting back in affright.

"Dead! Not him. Howd th' lantern here — o'er his face. No, he's none dead. He's swooned on a hempty belly — that's what it is. We mun get some o' this porridge into him. Burn a bit o' brown papper. Nelson, and stick it under his nose."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Robin tears a piece from the wrapper of a cotton sample, lights it at the lantern, and holds it before Blincoe's face; whereupon the lad, sighing deeply, opens his eyes and looks wildly round.

"Where am I?" he murmurs.

"In th' owd warehouse, to be sure; and we've brought thee thy supper. Get up, mon, and knock some o' this porridge into thee. Thou'rt hungered."

"But the corpse — Ned Dawson's spirit? It nearly frightened me to death. And — and — it's there yet, my God! — there yet!" — (shuddering, and putting his hands before his face).

"Where — where?" exclaimed Dick.

"Over the door."

"Well, I'll be dam — I mean God help us! Another chap gone and hanged hissel'! Whatever mun we do?" And Dick, looking as scared as Blincoe himself, leans, limp and helpless, against the nearest cotton bale.

"Nothing of the sort," says Robin, laughing, for, being keener-sighted than Dick and less bewildered than Blincoe, he has already detected the true character of the apparition. "Nothing of the sort — it's only a sack."

"Well, I'll be — I do believe you're reyt. Bithmon, it's nowt else. Why, Parson, what a goamless beggar thou mun be to let a hempty sack flay (frighten) thee into a fit! Onybody can see what it is wi' hoof an ee."

And with that, Dick went boldly up to the sack and shook it.

"It looks most terrible like a corpse, though, doesn't it?"

[150]

said Blincoe, sheepishly, as, with Robin's help, he rose to his feet.

"Not it," responded Dick, contemptuously. "Thou looks a good deal more like one thysel'. Here, knock this porridge into thee; it'll give thee corridge."

Blincoe sat down on a bag of waste and did as he was told, declaring thereafter that he felt decidedly better. But when his visitors made as if they would leave, he begged pitifully that he might go with them.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“There’s thousands of rats,” he pleaded; “you know there is. Only a bit sin’ they were running all over me. And Ned Dawson’s spirit; it’s welly sure to come when th’ clock strikes twelve. Let me go with you, Dick, and sleep in a coffin. I willn’t run away. Tie my legs and arms — do owt you like; but for God’s sake don’t leave me here all night by mysel’.”

Dick shook his head.

“It cannot be allowed on,” he said, gravely — “it cannot be allowed on. Owd Bob has gan his orders, and I darn’t go ageean ’em.”

“Oh, Dick, do let me go with you. Owd Bob will never know. You can bring me back before daylight. If you leave me I shall either die or lose my senses — I know I shall.”

“Nay, nay, it cannot be allowed on. Thou’ll none lose thy senses, not thou — what bit thou has. Lie thee down and go asleep; nowt’ll hurt thee.”

“The rats will eat me up. There they are, squeaking again! Don’t you hear them?”

“Would you be afraid if somebody were to stay with you?” asked Robin, who had listened to the conversation with deep interest.

“No; I should not be lonesome then. And it is the loneliness as terrifies me so — more than the rats. But who will stay with me?”

“I will.”

“You! Why, I stole all your money and took all your clothes!”

“Never mind that. I will stay with him, Dick. He evidently is not fit to be left alone. See how he trembles, and his face is as white as a sheet.”

“Are yo’ i’ gradely arnest?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, if you are, I think it can be allowed on. Owd Bob said

[151]

as th’ Parson wor to be locked up here all neet; but be didn’t say as nobody wor to be locked up wi’ him. Ay, stop if you will. And I’ll tell you what I’ll do: I’ll fot some blankets for you — it’s a coudish neet; and, what’s more, I’ll bring Scamp. You’ll be

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

aw reyt then. He fears naythur rattens nor devil; and it is my belief as he'd fly at Ned Dawson's spirit if he wor to see it — as soon as look. He could ne'er abide him when he wor wick."

On this idea Dick acted forthwith. In a few minutes he was back with a bundle of blankets and a vicious-looking black-and-tan terrier.

"Theyre," he said. "There's blankets to keep you warm, and a tyke to tak' care on you. I'll let you out at five o'clock. Nelson, afore onybody's stirring, and then nobody 'ull know nowt. Good-need to you."

"It is gradely good of you to do me this kindness. Nelson, after the way I behaved to you," said Blincoe, when the old man was gone. "I don't deserve it."

"Well, it was not very nice of you to take my things. But I know how much you have suffered; and you were so terribly frightened that it seemed cruel to leave you in this place all by yourself, so I said I would stay with you, and as I have got all my things back, it does not matter, you know; and I always feel sorry for anybody who is in trouble."

"If you'll believe me. Nelson, if you'll believe me, I didn't mean you any ill when I took your things. I was that hot on getting away as I could think about nowt else. Over my head, within reach of my hand, was clothes and money. I felt sure as if I had them I could get back to London — and I could have done if I hadn't tried to sell them books" — (sighing). "If you only knew, Nelson. But I hope you never will know. It isn't the rough lodgings and coarse food; it isn't the blows and cursings — a chap gets used to them. It is the long, weary hours — piece, piece, piece, week after week, year after year, all day long; no hope, no rest, no change, nowt but piecing ends — factory and bed, bed and factory — nobody to care for you, nobody to say a kind word to you. Eight years I have had of it, and nearly four yet to come! I think I'd liefer die, Nelson."

And then the lad told Robin his miserable story; how he remembered, though dimly, his home and his father and mother. He thought his father must have been a prosperous tradesman in the West End of London; for they had a good house and himself a

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

nurse, and he used often to be taken for a drive in the country. And then the father died, and they went to a smaller house — where, he could not tell. After that, more trouble. His mother fell into bad health, and after a long illness she, too, died. Then strange men came, and Blincoe was taken to St. Pancras Workhouse. He did not complain of his treatment there. It was not, perhaps, all that could be desired; he did not much like it at the time, but it was, out of all comparison, better than the treatment he had received since, either at Lowdham Mills or Birch Dene. He wished he was back, how he wished he was back! He was sent away in a batch of fifty or sixty boys and girls, all of whom, under the belief, industriously fostered by the beadles, that they would be handsomely treated, and made into ladies and gentlemen, went more than willingly. Within a twelvemonth of their arrival at Lowdham, averred Blincoe, fully one half were under the sod, and the others, half starved, continually beaten, and cruelly overworked, were dragging on a miserable existence and almost more dead than alive.

And Blincoe's story was probably in no wise exaggerated. As may be seen by reference to the personal narratives of some of the victims who survived, and to Parliamentary Blue Books of the period, his sufferings were far from being exceptional. Factory masters at that time were wont to boast that they used up so many children a year, and every year thousands perished of overwork and ill-usage.

Blincoe did not seem to care much what became of him. He could not well be worse off in prison than he had been at Lowdham Mill and Birch Dene; he would at least have a rest; and, if they hanged him, the rest would know no wakening — that was all. Though he did not put his philosophy into words, he had come to the conclusion that, so far as concerned himself, life was not worth living — and no wonder.

After they had ended their talk, the two lads fell asleep, and when Dick came to rouse them in the morning, Scamp was contemplating with extreme satisfaction half a dozen rats which he had killed during the night.

[153]

**The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)
BEFORE THE BENCH.**

AFTER breakfast Robin “knocked off” work and put on his Sunday clothes. How pleasant to discard, though only for a few hours, his greasy garments, enjoy the luxury of a clean shirt — revel in the consciousness that he was himself again! He felt inches taller, and old Betty paid him the compliment of admiring glances and flattering words.

“It becomes you gradely weel, that suit does,” she said, putting her hands on her hips and eying him critically. They don’t mak’ clothes like them theer down here, nor legs nayther. Most on ’em is ayther knock-kneed or bow-legged, or else their coaves is like Tom Oddy’s crutch — thick at th’ sma’ end. And your face has a color, too, and you’ve a back as straight as a picking-rod. It is much if you’ll have ayther color, or a straight back, or straight legs after you’ve been a twelvemonth in th’ factory. You’d mak’ a rare sodger, after you’ve thickened a bit, and gotten a year or two owder. I’d a brother a sodger, but that’s a long while sin’, and he wor killed, poor lad, at Bunker Hill. I wor gradely sorry at th’ time, but I’ve thowt sin’ as it wor happen a good job. He’s missed a deal of trouble.”

Robin, who always took an interest in soldiers, encouraged Betty to go on talking about her brother, and the subject was far from exhausted when Jim Rabbits came in and told him that he was to go with Mr. Ruberry in the gig to Topleton, while Blincoe, under the escort of the two constables, was to proceed thither on foot.

Robin owed this honor to “Owd Bob.”

“Better take him with you, and then you will be sure of him,” said the younger brother. “These apprentices are not to be trusted, and you would look small if your principal witness wasn’t to turn up.”

“Very well. He shall go in the gig, though he is but an apprentice. However, he has a decent suit of clothes and will look respectable. Do you think we should have ’Torney Bruff?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“No! Why should we throw thirteen-and-fourpence away? And that is what he’d charge at the very least. Those lawyers haven’t a bit of conscience. If Blincoe had anybody to speak for him it would be different. But he hasn’t. State the case yourself. All you have to say is what he is charged with, and call on Nelson to tell his tale. Th’ magistrates will commit him, of course — they can do nowt else; and then we must get th’ crown to prosecute. It’s a capital felony.”

“As you seem to know so much about it, hadn’t you better go yourself?” said Benjamin, rather tartly; for, although he generally did his brother’s bidding without demur, he was occasionally provoked to rebellion.

“No; this sort of thing is more in your line than mine. Besides, I never leave th’ ground that something doesn’t go wrong.”

Toppleton was a small country town about three miles from Birch Dene, inhabited mainly by hand-loom weavers, factory hands, and inn-keepers. Mr. Ruberry drove to the Roundabout — a quaint old inn, with mullioned windows framed in ivy, high-pitched gables, and a ponderous, nail-studded door.

After giving his horse in charge of the hostler, and ordering him a feed, Mr. Ruberry went into the bar and ordered a “drop” of whiskey for his own consumption — partly, as he put it to himself, to keep the cold out, partly to keep his courage up; for the idea of conducting his own case somewhat perturbed his mind, and he began to wish that he had retained ’Torney Bruff — his brother to the contrary notwithstanding. But it was too late now, and when the whiskey had taken effect his spirits revived, and, telling Robin to “Come on,” he led the way towards the court-house — a big room over the shop of the leading corn-chandler. There they found Blincoe and the two constables; a gorgeously arrayed beadle, who stood sentinel over a scared-looking young woman with a small baby, and a public, consisting of two old women and three dirty boys.

Presently the clerk came in, followed at a short interval by two magistrates, who took their seats, figuratively on the bench — literally on two of several ancient arm-chairs, with dilapidated cushions. One of them (the magistrates, not the chairs) was Major Dene. The name of the other was Dogwood, a corpulent gentleman, with an apoplectic face and out-staring eyes. But he was more generally called “A Nasty Conclusion,” from a habit he had (when dispensing justice) of saying, “Don’t let us come to an ’asty conclusion;”

[155]

and he was never known on such occasions to say aught else. Being the senior justice he took his seat on the centre chair, which was slightly higher than the others.

“Good-morning, Mr. Ruberry,” said Major Dene.

“Good-morning, major,” returned Ruberry.

Mr. Dogwood contented himself with a nod.

“What can we do for you, Mr. Ruberry?” asked the clerk. “Another runaway case, I suppose?”

“That and something more, Mr. Lush. The prisoner here has committed a runnery —”

“A runnery!”

“I mean a robbery. He’s an apprentice of ours, and he not only ran away himself, but took a lot of things belonging to another apprentice, name of Nelson. He’s here now” — (pointing to Robin) — “and he’ll tell you all about it. I’m not much used to public speaking, and I don’t know as it is necessary. It’s a case for the assizes, I reckon.”

“What is the nature of the articles alleged to have been stolen, and their value?”

“Clothes, wearing apparel, and books — ay, and there’s a valise. As for their value, I should say at the very least they are worth ten pounds.”

“Where were they taken from?”

“From the apprentice house.”

“So! It is a case of felony, then. But all this is not evidence. We must have the prosecutor — what is his name? Nelson? — thank you. We must have him sworn. Step forward, Nelson, and take the book in your right hand.”

Robin stepped forward, looking pale and rather agitated, yet as if he had made up his mind to some very decided course.

“Take the book!” repeated the clerk. “You — what is your name?”

“You said just now I was the prosecutor,” observed Robin, with seeming irrelevance.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“So you are. Mr. Ruberry stated the case on your behalf — at any rate, I presume so. Take the book —”

“It is a mistake. I am not the prosecutor, and I will not be the prosecutor. I have got my things back. I have nothing against the prisoner. I decline to give evidence.”

All this was said in a breath.

“What the devil!” exclaimed Mr. Ruberry; and then, feeling as

[156]

if he were like to choke with indignation and surprise, he stopped short.

“Don’t let us come to an ‘asty conclusion,” remarked Mr. Dogwood.

“If Nelson refuses to prosecute and give evidence, the case falls to the ground — doesn’t it, Mr. Lush?” said Major Dene.

“I suppose so; but it is a very serious case, you know. Stealing from a dwelling-house is a capital felony. It is a case the crown would, of course, take up.”

“That’s what my brother said,” broke in Mr. Ruberry. “Cannot you make the young beggar prosecute, Mr. Lush?”

“I am afraid not. This court has no power to force a man to prosecute. Besides, if Nelson gave his evidence unwillingly, what would be the use? He might say that the prisoner took the things with his consent.”

“The young villain! Why didn’t you say you wouldn’t prosecute before we started, Nelson, instead of bringing me here on a dead horse?”

“You never asked me, Mr. Ruberry; and I was not sure, until I heard this gentleman say I was the prosecutor, that I had any voice in the matter.”

“What is your reason for not wanting to prosecute. Nelson?” asked Major Dene, kindly; and Robin inferred from the magistrate’s manner that he had his sympathy and approval.

“Because I would rather lose my right hand than be the means of getting Blincoe hanged, or anybody else. He is very unfortunate, and is sorry for taking my things. He has asked my forgiveness, and I have forgiven him. How can I ask for him to be punished after I have forgiven him?”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“I think you are quite right. Nelson. Were I in your place, I should do exactly the same. Is there any use pressing Nelson to prosecute, Mr. Ruberry? You surely don’t want this poor devil to be hanged? He is only a lad, and I am sure, after the lesson he has had, will not repeat the offence.”

“Well, if you think so, major” — (hesitatingly) — “I don’t care much about it either way. My brother thought if Blincoe were hanged it would be a good example for the other apprentices — that is all.”

“A very bad example, I should say. Wouldn’t it be quite a sufficient example to give him a short term of imprisonment for running away?”

[157]

“Maybe it would; and it seems to me — as Nelson won’t prosecute — it’s about all as we can do. Ay, give him a month or two for that.”

“What is your opinion, Mr. Dogwood?” inquired Major Dene, turning to his colleague, whose eyes were closed, as it might seem, in deep thought.

“Don’t let us come to an ‘asty conclusion,” muttered the senior magistrate, waking up from his nap with a start.

“You agree with me then?”

Mr. Dogwood nodded his head, and reclosed his eyes.

The charge having been made in due form, and Blincoe admitting that he had run away, he was sentenced to a month’s imprisonment.

“Are you going to the Roundabout, Mr. Ruberry?” asked Major Dene, when the business was concluded.

“Yes, I always put up at the Roundabout.”

“Well, I shall be there myself shortly, and if you are not gone, I should like to have a word or two with you.”

“Certainly, Major Dene. I’m in no hurry. I’ll wait till you come,” returned the other, with deference; for the major was the great man of the neighborhood, and Ruberry had special reason for desiring to “keep in” with him.

Before leaving the court-room, Robin shook hands with Blincoe.

“I suppose you are not very sorry?” he said.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Sorry! No, I’m fain. It’ll be the first holiday I’ve had since I was an apprentice. I wish they had made it two months instead of one.”

On the way to the inn Ruberry said very little to Robin. Everything considered, he was by no means dissatisfied with the result of his amateur advocacy, albeit he had made up his mind never to repeat the experiment. The idea of prosecuting Blincoe for felony was Robert’s, not his, and when he thought of the ill-will they would not improbably have incurred had Blincoe been prosecuted to conviction, he was by no means sorry the lad had escaped. More than one newspaper had lately called attention to the treatment of factory apprentices by their masters; the subject had even been mentioned in Parliament; and “Old Ben” had a wholesome regard for public opinion, being in this respect both wiser and more susceptible than his brother. Then, again, he had obliged Major Dene, and he wanted to oblige Major Dene. So, for the present at least, Robin did not get the scolding which he expected, and which

[158]

he had nerved himself to take without flinching, and, as he hoped, without resenting.

While he waited in the bar-parlor Mr. Ruberry regaled himself, and treated Robin, with bread-and-cheese and ale — less, however, out of any feeling of hospitality than that he might keep the apprentice under his eye. Even as it was, he would have a bad quarter of an hour with his brother, and if by any chance he returned without Nelson, he would never hear the last of it.

Mr. Ruberry had longer to wait than he expected, and when Major Dene appeared he had lighted a pipe, and was half way through a second pint of the Roundabout’s home-brewed.

“I am sorry I have kept you waiting,” said the major. “Lush had some papers for me to sign, and detained me longer than I counted on. Thank you. I will have a glass of ale. I wanted to speak to you —”

Here he paused and glanced at Robin, who, inferring therefrom that his absence was more desired than his company, made towards the door.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Don’t go far away,” continued Major Dene. “I want a word with you also. You behaved very well to-day, I should have been sorry if we had had to send that poor devil to the assizes.”

“It is about Nelson I want to speak to you,” he resumed, when Robin was out of earshot. “A very unusual sort of apprentice, isn’t he?”

“Very. Seems clever and that, and writes an uncommonly good hand. He knows a lot about books, too. You heard how boldly he spoke up just now. Gad! I was never so much surprised in my life.”

“Yes, he spoke as boldly as he acted the other day. Now, when a lad both speaks boldly and acts fearlessly, you may depend on it there’s something in him. Seeing, moreover, that in both cases he was exerting himself for others, he must be of a generous, unselfish disposition. And he looks it. Don’t you think it would be worth your while to put him in some better position than that of a common apprentice? It seems a waste of good material to make a mere factory hand of him.”

“So it does. Still, you know, I don’t quite see what else we can do with him. However, I’ll think about it, and speak to my brother. It is more in his way than mine. He takes most of the management. I look after the books and outside matters. I think I shall retire before long, major. I’m getting tired of cotton-spinning.

[159]

It’s a bothering business, and as I’ve no son to succeed me, and I’ve quite enough for my daughter and myself, I don’t see why I should go on working to the end of my days.”

“Well, I don’t think I should if I were you. I hear your daughter is coming home. She will be a pleasant companion for you.”

“Ay, she’s coming home in a month or two” — (smiling) — “and right glad I shall be. I have only seen her six times in seven years. But she has got a good education — that is one comfort. I fear, though, she will find it dull work, poor lass, living with two old fellows like my brother and me, after being so long in London.”

“Oh, I don’t know. It is quite possible she may prefer a country life to town life. You must bring her to the Hall one of these days.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Thank you kindly, major. I’m sure she will be very glad,” said Mr. Ruberry, with a look of intense gratification. “She will have very little company, and hasn’t a single female relative — except her Aunt Branscombe, and she won’t see much of her.”

“I suppose you will bring her out with the harriers sometimes?”

“Well, I think I shall. She can ride, and that old horse of mine — Tommy — will carry her first-rate. He’s as clever as a cat and as safe as houses; you’ve only to let him have his head, and he’ll carry you over owt. And as for this Nelson, as you seem to take so much interest in him, I’ve just been thinking that I might, maybe, find him a place in the counting-house. But, as he’s a scholar and has a head for figures, it might be better for him in the end to let him learn the business thoroughly, and train him up as a manager. He’d be a made man then. I’ll speak to my brother about it, and see what we can do. That was a shrewd remark you made just now, major, about waste of material. There’s not much sense in putting a blood-horse between a pair of cart-shafts.”

“Nor any gain, Mr. Ruberry. The lad is well-bred, unless I am much mistaken, and if you treat him fairly he will serve you well.” Meanwhile Robin was loitering about the inn door, contemplating the High Street of Toppleton, and mentally comparing it with Holborn, rather, as may be imagined, to the disadvantage of Toppleton. While he was thus occupied, a carriage with four horses and two postillions turned the corner and stopped before the Roundabout. In the carriage were a lady and a little boy.

The lady put her head out of the window, and asked Robin if he knew where Major Dene was.

[160]

Robin doffed his hat, made a polite bow, and answered that Major Dene was at that moment in the bar-parlor with Mr. Ruberry.

“Will you kindly tell him that I am going to the other end of the town, and will call for him as I come back — in about ten minutes?”

“With pleasure, madam. But who shall I say sends the message? I have not the pleasure —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Don’t you know? I am Mrs. Dene, of Birch Dene Hall;” and there was a slight lifting of the eyebrows, and a gesture expressive of mild surprise that anybody at Toppleton should have to ask who she was.

And then she drew in her head, the four horses sprang forward, the carriage rattled up the street, and Robin returned to the bar-parlor to deliver his message.

“My wife,” said Major Dene. “Yes, I was expecting her. I walked in this morning, and it was agreed that she should call for me. I have been talking to Mr. Ruberry about you, Nelson, and he may possibly do something for you —”

“Well, we shall see,” struck in Ruberry. “I make no promise, but, if he’s a good lad, we may happen put him forward. I will speak to my brother about him.”

“And I have no doubt he will be a good lad, and deserve all you may do for him. Here” — taking Robin’s arm and leading him towards the outer door — “you refused the money I offered you the other day because you hesitated to take a reward for doing a generous act. Take this as a simple gift — to oblige me. Put it in your pocket, and say no more about it. You will find it useful; money always is useful.”

This time Robin did not refuse. Murmuring a “Thank you kindly, sir,” he put the guinea in his pocket.

They were now outside, and the carriage was in sight. When it stopped, Mrs. Dene nodded, smiling, to her husband, and held her son up to the window to look at his father.

“Are you ready?” she asked. “How do you do?” — bowing to Ruberry, who stood, hat in his hand, and otherwise in a rather cringing attitude. “Ah, there is the youth who asked me my name.”

“Asked you your name, Edith!”

“Oh, I don’t mean that he did it rudely — quite the reverse. I told him to let you know that I had called, and would call again. It is the first time I was ever asked my name, though.”

“Well, you can hardly expect everybody to know it by intuition;

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

and, as Nelson has been only a few days in the neighborhood, his ignorance was quite excusable, I think. You must come up to the Hall some day, Nelson, and look round the gardens and the stables." Although the invitation, if invitation it could be called, did not seem to amount to much, Robin, of course, gave the answer which courtesy required, and the major, after shaking hands with Mr. Ruberry, joined his wife and son, and the carriage drove off.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FRATERNAL QUARREL.

"THAT is the lad I was telling you about, who so bravely stopped a runaway horse," said Major Dene, as he took his little boy between his knees.

"But you said he was an apprentice."

"So he is — in Ruberry's factory,"

"Why, he has quite the air of a gentleman's son — wears well-fitting clothes, and does not seem in the least gauche."

"True; and, better still, he has generous instincts and a noble disposition. You should have seen how bravely he stood up in court to-day, and refused point-blank to prosecute a poor devil of an apprentice whom the Ruberrys wanted to hang. I cannot understand how he came to be an apprentice. He told me something of his story, and I am disposed to think that he has been sent down here to get him out of the way."

"To what end?"

"That is more than I can say. He spoke of a benefactor in London who had befriended him, and of somebody who sent him here, as I gathered, under false pretences, but he did not say a word about his family."

"Dear me! All this is quite mysterious, and I delight in mysteries. Perhaps he is a lost heir. When he comes to the Hall we must find out all about him."

"If he likes to tell us, I don't think it would be right to press him. And that reminds me of another matter. Mr. Ruberry's daughter is coming home shortly, and I want you to call there, and if she is a nice girl, have her up at the Hall occasionally."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I call on the Ruberrys! You forget, Eustace, that they are tradespeople.”

[162]

“So they are, in a sense; and, for that matter, so are we. They sell calicoes, and I sell coals and slate.”

“But that is very different!”

“There is a difference, certainly. They make calicoes, and I don’t make coals and slate. They do their business in person; I do mine by deputy.”

“So you think the Ruberrys are as good as we are! “Why, Eustace, you are becoming more a Jacobin than ever!”

“Am I? It doesn’t look like it” — and he laughingly pointed to the four thoroughbreds which were carrying them swiftly towards the noble Elizabethan mansion, whose high-pitched gables could be seen in the distance — “it doesn’t look like it; while, as for the Ruberrys being as good as we are — well, I don’t like to make invidious distinctions. I am, however, free to confess that I don’t admire them much. Their ideals are low, and Robert Ruberry has the name of being a tyrant with his work-people. On the other hand, they are neighbors, and come of a good old yeoman family, with whom the Denes have been on friendly terms for generations. And I don’t ask you to associate with the two old men — I don’t think I should care to associate with them myself; I only ask you to call on Miss Ruberry.”

“Certainly, dear, as you wish it; and if I find her to be agreeable and well-educated, I will take her up. But why this sudden interest in Miss Ruberry? Did you ever see her?”

“No. She has been a long time in London — at school, I think; lost her mother when she was little more than a baby, and, as her father said just now, she is likely to have rather a dull life of it with these two old men. It would be a charity to call on her, and have her up to luncheon now and then — always provided, of course, that she is presentable and well-mannered, which you will soon see. And, to be perfectly frank with you, I have another reason. The father would esteem any attention from you a great honor; it would please him immensely —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“So he, at least, doesn’t think that the Denes and the Ruberrys are on the same social level.”

“I am sure he doesn’t — fortunately for my present object —”

“Which is—?”

“To do a good turn to Nelson.”

“Do a good turn to Nelson! You talk in riddles, Eustace.”

“It is an easy riddle to read, though. Ruberry knows that I take an interest in the lad, and if you do him the favor of calling

[163]

on his daughter he may be induced to treat Nelson more kindly than he otherwise would.”

“How deep you are, dear! Really, you know, this is becoming quite exciting — a mystery, a lost heir, and now a plot. All about a factory boy, too! But you always had a weakness for boys, I think.”

“Especially for fatherless and motherless boys who are cast adrift on the world, like this Nelson,” said the major, gravely. “Imagine our little Willy in a similar position!”

“Oh, Eustace, don’t suggest anything so dreadful!” exclaimed Mrs. Dene, snatching up her boy and covering him with kisses. “No such fate could befall my darling Willy — the heir to Birch Dene. You are right, dear. It is our duty to do what we can for the lad. We will have him at the Hall. I am sure he looks a great deal more gentlemanlike than Mr. Ruberry.”

As the Denes were driving home in their carriage, Mr. Ruberry, accompanied by Robin, was driving home in his gig.

The senior partner being slightly “sprung” with his two pints of beer and two glasses of whiskey (he had taken a second as a stirrup cup), and, elated by the major’s invitation, was in great spirits, talked incessantly and rather boastfully, also with much less caution than he had observed during the interview in the bar-parlor. He assured Robin that he loved him as his own son, and would make a man of him; talked about his daughter, protesting that she was the finest lass in those parts. He had brought her up as

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

a lady, and when the time came he meant her to marry a gentleman — “a real gentleman, of good family and ancient lineage; none of your mushrooms sprung from a dunghill.” He could give Miriam thirty thousand pounds and have as much left for himself — which was more than many a man with a handle to his name could do for his child. And as there was nobody else for his brother’s money, and Robert was even better off than himself, the lass had a right to look high, and was as good as Mrs. Dene any day, though she was an Arnside of Morecambe, while, as for the major —

At this point Mr. Ruberry’s outpouring suddenly ceased, and his countenance fell, for, catching sight of his factory chimney in the near distance, he bethought him that he was talking rather at random, and that he had still to give an account of himself and the events of the day to his strong-minded and somewhat despotic brother.

[164]

“This is all between ourselves, Nelson,” he said, earnestly. “Not a word of what I have been saying to anybody — to anybody, mind that. Keep a still tongue, and I’ll be your friend, as I promised Major Dene. But you may have to wait awhile. My brother may not be of my mind just at first — and he manages the factory, you know. Mum’s the word, mind, or it may go ill with you.”

When they reached the mill gates Mr. Ruberry told Robin to take the gig “round to the stable,” and then, descending from the vehicle, bent his steps towards the counting-house.

“Now for a rumpus!” he muttered, between his set teeth. “Well, the sooner we get it over the better, I reckon.”

Robert, who looked as fluffy as if he had just emerged from a bale of his own “raw material,” was examining and valuing cotton samples. As his brother entered the office he turned sharply round and pushed his spectacles up on his forehead.

“So you’ve got back!” he said. “How went you on?”

“Middling. They’ve given him a month for running away,” replied Benjamin, coming to the point at once.

“And what have they given him for the burglary?”

“Nowt.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Nowt! What mean you? How was that?”

“Nelson refused to give evidence.”

“Just like his impudence! What the devil for, I should like to know?”

“He said he wouldn’t be the means of getting Blincoe hanged.”

“But I want Blincoe to be hanged. Curse Nelson! Why didn’t you make him give evidence?”

“How could I make him? And Major Dene thought it was better not to press the matter; and after such an expression of opinion from the bench, I thought so too.”

“You thought so too, did you? So Nelson wasn’t so much to blame, after all. It was you and your friend, Major Dene, that put him up not to give evidence, and a nice mess you have made of it, one way and another. We shall be laughing-stocks for all the countryside. Beaten by a bit of a Cockney apprentice! If you had engaged Bruff, as I wanted you, this would never have happened.”

Though Benjamin generally let his brother have his way, because being himself of an easy-going nature, he found submission easier than resistance, and disliked contention, and for other good and sufficient reasons, there were limits to his endurance, and the limit

[165]

had now been overpassed. To be reproached for not doing the very thing which he had reluctantly refrained from doing, at Robert’s own instance, was more than flesh and blood could bear.

“What the deuce do you mean?” he cried, angrily. “It was just the other way about. I wanted to engage Bruff, and you would not let me. And it isn’t the first time, either, that you have blamed me for following your advice when things have not turned out as you wanted. It is time an end was put to this, Robert. You forget, I think, that I am your elder brother and the head of the firm. I am glad Blincoe has got off, and I am pleased that Nelson behaved as he did. I should have put my foot down at first, and refused either to take Blincoe to Topleton or let him be prosecuted. The next time you want to hang an apprentice you’ll have to do it yourself. It is true what people say about you, Robert. You are a hard taskmaster, and if you don’t alter, it will

be the worse for us both.”

“You are in a passion, I think,” said Robert, taken aback by this unexpected outburst.

“Well, haven’t I a right to be? You’d provoke a saint, and I never pretended to be more than a good churchman. You are too hard and domineering, and you get worse; and no good will come of it, mark me if there does. I dare say you will be vexed, but you began, and I mean to have my say out while I am at it. Now, there’s that Nelson. I am not going to have him punished or ill done to, or owt o’ that sort, on account of what’s happened to-day.”

“Who’s going to do ill to him? A lad as can lick Black Jack in an up-and-down fight may be trusted to take care of himself, I think.”

“Did he lick Jack? I had not heard. Ay, he’s a lad of spirit. Major Dene said so to-day. The major takes a great interest in him. Couldn’t we turn Nelson to better account than making a common piecer of him, Robert? He’s a good scholar, and nobody can deny as he’s clever.”

“Ay, too clever by half. Do with the lad what you like. Feed him on turtle and champagne, clothe him in purple and fine linen, make a gentleman of him, and wed him to your Miriam, if you like. I don’t care a brass farthing. But I know one thing — no good will come of it. However, it’s nowt to me. You’re my elder brother, and head of the firm, and can do as you like, I suppose. What is the use of asking me? Only mind one thing. The concern mustn’t suffer — not for all the majors and apprentices in creation!”

[166]

And with that “Owd Bob “dashed his spectacles on the desk, put his hands in his pockets, and rushed out of the office in a huff.

It were hard to say which of the two brothers was the more surprised by the result of this encounter, for never before had Ben so resolutely resisted his junior’s dictation, or come off so completely victorious. As a rule, he came off the reverse of victorious, partly, as has been already hinted, owing to the easiness of his temper, partly because he knew by experience that Robert’s judgment on matters of business was

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

generally sounder than his own, and that to Robert's energy and hard-headedness their common prosperity was mainly due.

The relations between the brothers were somewhat remarkable. Their father had been a yeoman and a farmer at a time when agriculture was the most flourishing of English industries, and they inherited from him several hundred acres of good land and a fair amount of ready money. Benjamin would have followed in the old man's footsteps, and stuck to the land. Robert, on the other hand, was eager to embark in the new business of cotton spinning. The elder reluctantly consented, and Birch Dene Mill was built and filled with the best machinery of the period. Into this enterprise the younger brother threw himself with almost preternatural energy. He spared neither himself nor others — "following the work," as the saying is, from morning to night, literally dividing" his time between factory and bed. When not asleep — and he never slept long — he was at work. His sole indulgence was an extra glass of grog on Saturday night, and staying in bed until breakfast-time on Sunday morning. This devotion to business, practised at first as a duty, ended in becoming so entirely a second nature that, outside his factory gates, Robert Ruberry was never content. He had been heard to say that, except to "clean up," and let the bearings cool, machinery should never be allowed to stop. Twice in twenty-five years he had ventured to take a holiday for the benefit of his health, but, unable to bear separation from his beloved factory, and fearing that in his absence the business would go to the devil, he returned on each occasion in less than a week, declaring that nothing should ever induce him to repeat the experiment.

Yet "Owd Bob" was by no means a miser. He made money because he could not help it — he had no other pleasure — and saved because, as he said, he had no time to spend. But when his brother married, Robert settled five thousand pounds on the bride;

[167]

he subscribed a thousand towards the cost of the war with France, and two or three sums of five hundred each towards the building and endowment of churches. As for his work-people, however, it never occurred to him that they had any other needs than plenty of

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

work and just enough wage to keep body and soul together. He had a theory that the less they earned the harder they wrought; and on one occasion, being asked to put the cottages in which they lived in a better state of repair, answered that the cottages were quite good enough to sleep in; their living place was the factory.

The elder brother was a man of another stamp. Though shrewd and keen, he preferred farming to spinning, liked better to punch the ribs of a fat bullock than value a sample of cotton, and spent money with almost as much pleasure as he earned it. Ben was looked upon, and looked upon himself, as the gentleman of the concern, attended markets, pretended to keep the books, and managed the farm. He was fond of horses, hunted with the harriers, and liked to ride about, wearing a jockey cap and followed by a couple of dogs, like his father before him. When he married he enlarged and, as he thought, otherwise improved the old house, and Robert took up his abode in a double cottage near the factory gates; but after Mrs. Ruberry's death the brothers again lived together in the ancestral home.

The only child of the marriage was a girl, and when she was ten years old, her father, after several unsatisfactory experiments with nursery governesses and lady housekeepers, took the sensible course of sending Miriam to her Aunt Branscombe, in London, who had offered to superintend her education. There she remained nearly seven years, and Mrs. Branscombe would fain have had her stay longer. But Mr. Ruberry yearned for his daughter's company. He thought that with his help she would be quite competent to undertake the management of his house, and, as he had informed Major Dene, she was expected at Birch Dene in the course of a month or two.

This was the state of things when the two brothers had their first serious difference, and the elder was left free to deal with Robin as he thought fit.

[168]

CHAPTER XXIX.

ROBIN AT CHURCH.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

RICH once more, Robin should have been happy, but before Major Dene's guinea had been in his possession many minutes, it began to breed him trouble. He was so afraid of losing it that, during the ride home, he kept the coin in his hand and his hand in his pocket. But this could not go on forever, and while he drove the gig to the stables (at Mr, Ruberry's house) he was obliged to let the guinea take care of itself, which fortunately it did. How to dispose of it when he went to work was the next question. To take it with him would be to insure its loss, the pockets of his working breeches being full of holes; while to leave it behind, whether in his valise or elsewhere, would be running a big risk. It might go the way of his other money, and Robin, schooled by experience, was growing preternaturally cautious. After long thought he came to the conclusion that the only safe course was to place the guinea in the hands of somebody who had a strong-box, and could be trusted to return it upon demand.

Mr. Ruberry! Yes, why should he not make Mr, Ruberry his banker. He seemed very friendly at present, and there was a big iron safe in the counting-house, where he felt sure his fortune would be quite safe. But suppose, when he required it for the expenses of the journey to Portsmouth, which he still contemplated, Mr. Ruberry should make difficulties, or ask awkward questions? How then? No, this plan would not do at all.

Old Dick! He seemed honest, was kind in his own rugged fashion, and evidently held Robin in high respect for his clerky qualities. Unfortunately, however, Dick, like everybody else at Birch Dene, was fond of drink, and Robin had a strong suspicion that if he intrusted him with his guinea it would all go down his throat. No, Dick would not do either.

But — happy thought! old Betty might. She was at least as honest as her husband; she did not drink, and if she had not a strong-box, she had probably an old stocking, or some other secret receptacle, where the guinea could be safely put away.

[169]

So on his return to the apprentice house to change his Sunday suit for his working garments, Robin broached the subject to the old woman — nobody being present but themselves.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You’ve gotten a guinea!” she exclaimed, with a gesture of surprise. “Major Dene’s gav’ you a guinea! Why, it is one pound one! It’s more than a spinner addles in a week, and happen three or four childer to keep. Nobody ever gav’ me a shilling, let alone a guinea. But they do say as Major Dene is very fluent wi’ his brass. Keep it for you! But where mon I keep it? I’ll tell you what I’ll do, if you like: I’ll stitch it i’ my stays. It’s about th’ last place where onybody would look for a gowd piece, and as I wears ’em all day, and they lie on a chair by my bedside all neet, I don’t think they are like to get stown. But if they do, I’s e not be answerable. You’ll mind that. Nelson — I’s e not be answerable.”

To this condition Robin gladly assented. It was to the last degree improbable that anybody would steal the old woman’s stays, and he went to his work with a lighter heart than he had known since he became a factory lad. His prospects were brightening; he had saved Blincoe from being hanged, and recovered his clothes, and, thanks to Major Dene’s gift, he possessed the nucleus of a fund which would enable him, if he kept in the same mind, and a favorable opportunity should present itself, to leave Birch Dene and go in search of his father — so soon as he could think of his name. He did not put much trust in Mr. Ruberry’s promises, and was firmly resolved to remain an inmate of the apprentice house no longer than he could possibly help.

On the Saturday night he received his wage — one shilling. Jim Rabbits, who paid him, mentioned that it was not customary to pay apprentices until they had been at work three months, and even then they generally began with sixpence. But “Owd Ben” had ordered that he should have a shilling “from the start.”

“I never knowed it done afore,” said the spinning-master. “That comes of your being so larned. Not as a shilling a week is much for a scholar like you. All th’ same, it’s better than a punch on th’ shins wi’ an iron clog, and it shows as Ben thinks well on you. That’s summat.” And then he tendered Robin two-pence as an honorarium for his lessons, and invited him to breakfast at his house on the following morning.

Robin took the coppers and accepted the invitation. He wanted money, and was getting tired of porridge.

Rabbits had a managing little wife, two children, and a roomy

cottage with a small parlor. The breakfast, greatly enjoyed by Robin, was a substantial meal of black puddings and fried eggs, washed down with small beer. Coffee was too costly for common use, and the Birch Dene people only indulged in tea (diluted with rum) on festive occasions, or when they felt out of sorts — which, for some reason or another, generally happened on Mondays.

The morning was given to a reading and writing lesson, to which the spinning-master applied himself so energetically that he had to take off his coat and roll up his shirt-sleeves, and he declared that learning to be a scholar was the hardest work he had ever tried.

After dinner they took a walk in the fields, which Robin enjoyed even more than he had enjoyed the black puddings and fried eggs. The other apprentices spent the morning, some of them the entire day, in bed-which, seeing how hard they were compelled to work during the week, was perhaps the best thing they could do. Those who felt so disposed were allowed to play at “blackthorn,” tag-rag, marbles, or anything they liked, in the factory yard, but were never allowed to go outside unaccompanied by Dick or the watchman.

A few Sundays later Robin breakfasted as before with Jim Rabbits, and they were in the midst of a lesson when the spinning-master — who was trying his hand at writing large M’s — threw down his pen and proposed that they should go to church.

“Ay, let’s go,” he repeated, earnestly. “I can howd th’ prayer-book reyt end up now, and I said as I’d ne’er put my yed in a church ageean till I could.”

Robin looking rather mystified. Rabbits explained that the last of the few times he had ever been to church (some two years previously), “an owd mon wi’ a big stick” politely gave him what Rabbits presumed to be a prayer-book, which (not liking to make a public exhibition of his ignorance) he took, and made as if he could read, and was following the parson. As ill-luck would have it, however, somebody who could read noticed that he held the book wrong side up, and afterwards unfeelingly bruited the fact abroad as an excellent joke, thereby causing the poor fellow to be unmercifully chaffed, or, as he put it, “trotted.”

“Damum!” he said, bitterly; “they geet agate a-calling me ‘Top-end-up’ one while!”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

So they went to Birch Dene church — a hideous concern with slab sides and a squat steeple, towards the building of which the brothers Ruberry had contributed five hundred pounds apiece.

[171]

The pews for the commonalty were high-backed, with narrow, uncushioned seats; the pulpit was a huge, three-decked affair, the lowest tier being occupied by a clerk with a red nose and a cracked voice. When the service began Robin found the place for his companion, but, prompted by a spirit of mischief, put the prayer-book into his hand wrong side up. After a puzzled stare, Jim, with an *Et tu, Brute* look, turned the book round, and tried diligently to follow the parson — though he made rather a stern chase of it; being always a long way behind.

Then, for the first time, Robin looked round. On either side of the three-decked pulpit was a large state pew, lined with green baize, comfortably cushioned, and strewn with hassocks. One was occupied by Major Dene, his wife, and another lady. Mrs. Dene was a tall, fine-looking woman, with a healthy color, soft brown eyes, and a comely countenance, albeit the expression of it was somewhat haughty and reserved. A profusion of chestnut ringlets shaded her face, her hat (hats were in fashion) was adorned with drooping ostrich feathers, and she wore a black satin gown, richly trimmed with lace.

In the other state pew were the brothers Ruberry and a young girl. Old Bob was so transformed that Robin hardly knew him. His calves were clothed in black silk stockings, his shoe-buckles were of silver, his yellow waistcoat and ample blue coat were resplendent with gilded buttons, and on his nose was perched a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He looked intensely respectable and devout, followed the sermon with close attention, and made the responses in a loud voice and with seeming fervor.

“By gum, there’s Owd Bob! What’s made him buck hissle’ up i’ that fashion, I wonder?” whispered Rabbits. “I haven’t seen him i’ that coat sin his brother wor wed.”

But just then Robin had eyes only for the young girl. Her face was the most winsome he had ever seen — oval, with violet eyes, a fair skin, straight nose, dainty lips, and a dimpled chin. It wore an expression of sweet gravity befitting the place and

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

the occasion. Though she was somewhat below middle height, her figure was shapely, and her movements were graceful and unconstrained. This young girl's attire was of an almost Puritan simplicity. The sole ornament of her velvet hat was a scarlet ribbon; her gown was silver gray; her beautiful arms were bare to the shoulder; her hair, glossy black, was confined by a velvet band; and a coral necklace, with a golden clasp, encircled her shapely throat.

[172]

"That's th' lass," whispered the spinning-master. "It's for her as Owd Bob has bucked hissel' up so."

"That must be Miriam," thought Robin; and happening to look at the same time towards the Dene Hall pew, he noticed that Major Dene was gazing intently, and with troubled eyes, at Mr. Ruberry's daughter.

Then the sermon began, and, save the three-decked pulpit, the tops of a few tall men's heads, and the backs of a few tall women's bonnets, nothing was to be seen. After trying to puzzle out the text (found for him by Robin), Jim Rabbits composed himself to sleep. Robin, though he felt drowsy, made a strong effort to keep awake; but the sermon, delivered in an almost inaudible monotone, was too much for him — it had the same soporific effect as a nurse's lullaby or the babbling of a distant brook — and he, too, made an excursion into the land of dreams. When he awoke, the rector, undisturbed by a few snores, was calmly saying, "And now, sixthly, my brethren" — from which the young fellow rightly inferred that he had been asleep rather a long time. A few minutes later the sermon came to an end, and Rabbits, roused by a furtive pinch from Robin, wakened up with a start.

"Bithmon!" he exclaimed; "I do believe I've been asleep!"

The rector frowned visibly, old people stared, young ones tittered, and the spinning-master, to his utter confusion, became the cynosure of every eye.

"I shall never hear the last of this," he murmured; and as the old clerk uttered the final "Amen," Jim hurried out of church, painfully conscious of the fact that he had committed an offence for which ability to hold his prayer-book right side up would not be considered a sufficient atonement.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Robin followed at his leisure, not leaving his pew until the great folks had left theirs. When he reached the porch Mrs. Dene was getting into her carriage, while the major was talking to Mr. Ruberry; but Robin observed that he looked more at the daughter than the father, and with the same wistful expression as before.

As he was about to join his wife, he caught Robin's eye, and returned his greeting with a friendly nod.

"I like Miss Ruberry," said Mrs. Dene, making room for her husband, "and I shall take her up. She has rather a sweet face, don't you think?"

"I call it a very sweet face. Why didn't you stay and let her be introduced to you?"

[173]

"I hate being introduced to people at church. All the rustics stop to stare and listen; but I shall call."

"When?"

"When we come back from York; I shall not have time before. I say, Eustace."

"Yes, Edith."

"Did you ever notice your *protégé's* head?"

"My *protégé's* head! What on earth do you mean?"

"That factory boy you take so much interest in — Mr. Ruberry's apprentice. The lost heir, you know."

"Oh, Nelson! No, I don't think I ever noticed his head much. Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Not wrong. It is strange, though. While in church he generally stood with his back to our pew — I think he was looking at Miss Ruberry — and I noticed above his right ear something white, which at first I took for a piece of cotton; but I soon saw that it was a lock of white hair. That is very unusual, is it not? — a white lock on a nearly black head, and so young a head, too!"

"Unusual, certainly, yet not so much so as you might think. There was a fellow in my regiment who had a black head which was simply fringed with white locks. Over the right ear, did you say?"

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Yes, over the right ear.”

“I will make it a point of looking at it the next time I see Nelson. It is strange that so marked a peculiarity escaped me. But, though I am rather given to the study of faces, I am not in the habit of paying much attention to heads.”

This seemed to exhaust the subject; Mrs. Dene made no further remark, and her husband, turning to the window, pensively contemplated the landscape.

When they alighted from the carriage she went straightway to the nursery, like the good mother she was; he to his own room. Like the house of which it formed a part, this room was quaint, old, and picturesque. The walls were wainscoted, the windows deeply embayed. Over the carved oak mantelpiece was the stuffed head of a wolf which the major had killed in Spain, surmounted by a trophy of arms and the dented cuirass of a French dragoon whom he had slain in single combat at Waterloo. At one end of the room was a well-furnished gun-rack; at the other a well-filled bookcase, flanked by an ancient brass-bound desk; in the middle a large table on which were works of reference, packets of official-

[174]

looking documents, writing materials, and a pair of double-branched silver candlesticks.

Major Dene, after locking the door, unlocked the old desk, and from one of the drawers he took a packet carefully wrapped in tissue-paper. Then, seating himself at the table, he proceeded to unfold the packet. It contained a miniature, a lock of hair, and several letters. Taking up the miniature, he looked at it intently for several minutes.

“The likeness is wonderful,” he murmured. “It might be her own portrait, and yet there can be no kinship. It is quite impossible. Poor girl! I wonder —”

Then he opened one of the letters, and, as he read, heavy tears rolled down his cheeks and fell on the paper,

A knock at the door.

“Yes. What is it?”

“Luncheon is ready, Major Dene.

Hurriedly, and with trembling fingers, refolding the packet, he replaced it in the desk and left the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

MIRIAM.

THE spinning-master's cabin. Robin doing what appears to be a somewhat elaborate calculation. Rabbits, who holds in his hand a number of small wheels strung on a wire, watching him admiringly.

"A twenty-nine-toothed pinion will do it," says the young man, looking up from his paper.

"I think I've gotten it here," answers Jim, selecting one of the wheels and beginning to count the teeth. "Why, you're welly as sharp at sums as th' bookkeeper, and a good deal sharper than Owd Bob. Ben wor talking about you yesterday. He did not know till I towd him how good you are at ciphering. He says I mun put you up to all as I can, and as you needn't spend all your time piecing. You may go about a bit and help me. I towd you how it would be; and after a while you'll have to go in th' card-room, and pyke up what you can there, and I mak' no doubt as your wage'll be raised afore long. But it's all Ben's doing. I wish it wor Bob's, for your sake. It is him as is th' real mayster. But

[175]

he never mentions your name, and I don't think he hoaf likes you. But that's nowt. I don't think he likes owt but th' factory and hissell', though some folks says as he sets a deal o' store by Ben's hiss. Hello! Who is there? What's up, I wonder?"

A sound of hurried footsteps, excited voices, and a cry of pain, followed by the opening of the door, and the appearance of two big lads, who support between them a small boy.

"Little Harney's gotten catched," they say, pointing to the poor child's right hand, all covered with blood.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Little foo’! What has he been doing? Bring him here, and let’s see what it is,” says Rabbits.

Robin takes the half-fainting child on his lap. He is one of the youngest and smallest of the apprentices who came with him from London.

“Won’t you send for a doctor?”

“Nay, we mun have no doctor for a job like this. He’s nobbut gotten two of his fingers smashed. I’ll bind ’em up i’ th’ blood — Whitworth bottle and a rag — that’ll about do this time, I reckon.”

As Jim speaks, he reaches from the window-sill a bottle containing a red mixture, a few drops of which he lets fall on the wounded fingers. Harney moans pitifully.

“It keens a bit at fust, I know,” continues the spinning-master, “but it’ll soon be o’er. There’s nowt like Whitworth bottle for killing pain and making a cure.”

And then, with strips of linen rag, he bandages the crushed fingers swiftly and deftly — for Jim, in his way, is quite an amateur surgeon.

Again Robin suggests that a doctor should be called in.

“I cannot, and Owd Bob willn’t,” says Rabbits. “If you wor to speak of such a thing to him he’d go fair mad. It’s the last shift when he sends for a doctor. Why, he’d charge hoaf a crown for one visit, and you may be sure he’d come seven or eight times, to say nowt o’ bandages and bottles o’ stuff. Now” — (to Harney) — “thou can go and lake” (play). “Thou’ll do no more piecing for a week or two.”

But the unfortunate child being still too faint to walk unaided, Robin raises him in his arms, and carries him to the apprentice house.

“Getten caught, has he?” exclaimed Betty. “They’re allus getting caught. Two fingers! If it had been one I should ha’ said he’d happen done it o’ purpose.”

[176]

“On purpose! Why should the poor boy get himself hurt on purpose?”

“To get a holiday, to be sure. There was one lad geet caught so oft that Owd Bob ordered him to be weel hided every time, and have nowt to eat but skilly till he went back to his work. It cured him, that did; but he geet killed at last.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“How?”

“Put his yed between a pair o’ big spur-wheels, and geet it ta’en off.”

“Poor boy! But surely not on purpose, Betty?”

“There wor them as thowt so — and it’s like enough; he wor a queer lad. But th’ crowner’s quest wor accidental death; and it wouldn’t do for any of us to say owt different, you know. Put Harney in this rocking-chair by th’ fireside. He’ll not want to run about much to-day, I reckon.”

Neither that day nor the next was Harney able to run about much, or at all. He passed a wretched night, and in the morning seemed so weak and ill that Robin would not let him get up. On the following day he was no better, and, though he rallied somewhat towards the end of the week, a change for the worse set in on the Saturday night, and Robin became seriously alarmed. On the Sunday morning he insisted that Dick should send for a doctor.

“I’se do nowt o’ th’ sort,” said the old fellow, gruffly. “You may ax Owd Bob, if you like; but I can tell you aforehand what he’ll say: ‘Let him dee; he’s nobbut a ’prentice, and I can get two fro’ London for less than th’ doctor will want, whether he cures him or not.’ ”

“I don’t believe Mr. Robert is as bad as you say, Dick, and I am sure Mr. Ruberry isn’t. At any rate, I shall go and ask them, and at once. I am sure Harney is very ill.”

The Ruberrys were breakfasting at (for them) the unusually late hour of half-past eight. Miriam was at the head of the table, looking, in her neat print gown, as fresh and rosy as the morning itself. Her father was busy with his matutinal egg, and her uncle just finishing the dish with which he always began the day — porridge and ale — when the door opened, and a red-cheeked maid entered.

“There’s a young mon fro’ the factory wants to see you,” she says — “name o’ Nelson.”

“Nelson! What does he want coming bothering of a Sunday morning?”

“I don’t know; but he says it is very serious.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Say we are all at breakfast, and let him wait in th’ kitchen,” answers Robert. “I’ll come and see him directly.”

“Nay, if it’s serious, let us have him in and hear what it is,” says Benjamin. “Tell him to come forrud, Phoebe.”

So Robin was ushered in, and, after respectfully greeting his masters and the young lady, told his tale — how ill Harney had been, how much worse he was, and how serious were his symptoms, concluding with an urgent appeal that a doctor might be sent for while there was yet time.

“Nay, we willn’t have a doctor just yet,” said Robert “We’ll see how he is to-morrow.”

“But suppose he dies to-day?”

“Well, there’s plenty more where he comes from. He’s only a bit of an apprentice.”

“Oh, uncle, what are you saying?” exclaimed Miriam, with heightening color and indignant eyes. “Only an apprentice! Poor child! Is he not one of God’s creatures? Has he not a soul? If he dies, the sin will be at your door. You don’t mean what you say. You will send for a doctor. Do, please, at once.”

“We happen had better send for Radley, Robert,” suggested the elder brother.

“Ay, send for him, if you like,” returned Robert, with a somewhat disconcerted look.

The idea that an apprentice might have a soul to be saved, as well as himself, had, so to speak, taken the wind out of his sails.

“Shall I fetch him?” said Robin.

“Nay, we’ll send Gib to Toppleton with the gig, and then he can bring Radley back. If we don’t, he’ll most likely not come till towards night — and then worse for drink.”

With that Mr. Ruberry summoned Phoebe, and sent the order to Gib. Robin bowed, and made as if he would retire.

“Have you breakfasted?” asked Miriam.

Robin admitted that he had not breakfasted.

“Won’t you have a cup of coffee? I’m sure you must be hungry.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

The brothers looked as if the world was coming to an end; but, as neither of them liked to say Miriam nay, they made no objection. Benjamin even seconded the invitation.

“Ay, draw up to th’ table. Nelson,” he said. “Take that egg; or you’d happen liefer have a bit of this rasher.”

“Give him both, father. He must be very hungry after his walk. The air is sharp this morning.”

[178]

Robin, nothing loath, thanked his hostess, and did as he was told. It seemed an age since he had tasted coffee or enjoyed the perfume of a rasher.

“It is very good of you to take so much trouble about that poor boy,” said Miriam. “You belong to the factory, of course. What are you?”

“Only an apprentice. Miss Ruberry.”

“An apprentice! I thought the apprentices were all little.”

“Not by any means. Some are nearly grown up. They remain apprentices until they are of age.”

“And you are really one of them. Do you live in the apprentice house?”

“I am really one of them, and I live in the apprentice house.”

“But you don’t look — I mean I shouldn’t have thought — Father, I want to go to the apprentice house and see what it is like, and this poor boy.”

The brothers exchanged glances of dismay. Had Miriam proposed to become a common factory girl, and take up her abode at the apprentice house, they could not have looked more horrified.

“That would not do at all, Miriam; I could not allow it. It’s quite out of the question, you know — quite out of the question,” said Mr. Ruberry, when he had recovered from the confusion into which his daughter’s extraordinary demand had thrown him. “Isn’t it quite out of the question, Robert?”

“Quite. I never heard of such a thing in my life.”

“But why is it out of the question?” asked Miriam, quietly, yet in a tone which showed that she had by no means abandoned her project.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“For many reasons. The lads are rough-spoken, and some of ’em never gets up of a Sunday. That is quite enough, if there were nowt else.”

“But they will get up; I’ll run down and make them get up,” put in Robin, eagerly. “And Harney would be so pleased and proud — he is such a little fellow, and nobody to nurse him. He would think an angel had come to see him.”

“That’s all nonsense!” interposed Robert, impatiently. “It wouldn’t do, I tell you. It would make ’em all think too much of themselves; they’d be past managing. And then — I don’t think you should let her go, Benjamin — I really don’t. Th’ apprentice house is no fit place for a young gentlewoman.”

[179]

Miriam rose from her chair, and, going to her uncle, placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Uncle,” she said, “suppose you were a little child once more, but without either father or mother, among strangers in a strange place, and sick perhaps unto death — would you like me to come and see you?” — (kissing him).

“That — that’s hardly a fair question, I think, Miriam,” stammered Old Bob, after vainly scrutinizing his inner consciousness for an answer to his niece’s *argumentum ad hominem*.

“Yes, it is — quite fair; and I want you to answer it, as I am sure you will, honestly — would you like me to come and see you?”

“Ay, lass, I would; but —”

“That is enough. ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so unto them.’ You were at church last Sunday, Uncle Robert, and you are going again to-day.”

“We shall be like to let her have her way, I think,” said Ben, who was not altogether displeased with his brother’s discomfiture.

“It seems so; she’s too many for us old fellows,” returned

Robert, with a forced laugh. “Run down to th’ factory, Nelson. Make th’ lads wash and don theirselves, and tell Dick and Betty as th’ young missis is coming to see Harney and look ’em up.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Let him finish his breakfast first, uncle,” said Miriam, with a pleasant smile. “He has only just begun. Is your coffee quite agreeable, Mr. Nelson?”

Robin blushed, and protested that it was the most agreeable coffee he had ever tasted.

Old Bob made no further remark, but looked unutterable things. The shock of hearing an apprentice addressed as “Mr.,” and asked whether his coffee was agreeable, had reduced him for the moment to impotent silence.

A few minutes later Robin, having drunk a second cup of coffee, made his bow and withdrew.

“You’ll quite spoil that lad, Miriam. You’ll spoil ’em all if you carry on in this way.”

“How, Uncle Robert;? What have I done wrong?”

“You called him ‘Mr.,’ and asked if his coffee was agreeable.”

“And why not? He is well spoken, and behaves like a gentleman.”

“I say nowt about that; but what I do say is as he’s a hand, and hands are bad enough to manage as it is. If we don’t rule ’em.

[180]

with a tight hand and keep ’em in their places, they’ll be th’ masters of us instead of us being th’ masters of them.”

“Couldn’t you rule them by kindness, uncle?”

Robert, leaning back in his chair, laughed heartily.

“Rule ’em by kindness! Rule ’em by kindness! Who would be such a fool as to try, I should like to know? Where did you get your ideas, Miriam? Not from Aunt Branscombe, I reckon. I always thought she was a sensible woman.”

“So she is, and a good woman. I owe her much. It was she who taught me that ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ means that we should love everybody — that every fellow-creature is a neighbor. You believe the Bible, Uncle Robert?”

This was taking him on his weak side, for he prided himself on being an orthodox Christian and a good Churchman, and though in his heart he strongly demurred to much of his niece’s theology, fear of seeming to impugn the authority of

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

the Old Book prevented him from contesting the point, and rendered his reply somewhat irrelevant.

“Of course I believe in the Bible. Whatever made you ask such a question?” he exclaimed, with more indignation than he felt. “Did you think I was an infidel? There’s no infidels at Birch Dene, Miriam. If I heard a man say as he did not believe in the Bible, I should send him about his business that very minute, whoever he was.”

“Do you think that would make him a believer. Uncle Robert?”

“That’s more than I can say. But, whether or not, we’ll have no infidels about us.”

“Nor Jacobins neither,” put in Ben. “They are just as bad. Ay, six of one and half a dozen of t’other. Jacobins generally are infidels, I think, and should be treated as traitors. However, there’s neither on our ground, I am thankful to say; and I’ll take care as there isn’t.”

After this the brothers drew up to the fire and lighted their pipes, and Miriam, who had household matters to attend to, and to prepare for the visit to the apprentice house, left them to themselves — an opportunity by which they profited to talk her over, as they had done nearly every day since her return. They could not make her out. It was not merely that she had gone away a frolicsome child and come back a comely young woman, with (as they deemed it) queer ways and a Cockney accent. This was to be expected. But she had also come back with ideas and a will of

[181]

her own, together with a sweet imperiousness of manner which nobody seemed able to resist. Her father was as wax in her hands, and though Robert grumbled and protested, he mostly ended by submitting. In one respect she was a girl after his own heart — being active and energetic to a fault, and familiar with all the details of domestic economy. She had already assumed the management of the household — rather to the disgust of the servants, who, under Mr. Ruberry’s rule, had done pretty much as they liked; for Ben was easy-tempered, and Robert never meddled with his brother’s private concerns. Miriam declared that the house was positively dirty, and within a few days of

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

her arrival there was such an overhauling and cleaning-up as there had not been for years. She was always doing something, and in the course of a few weeks revolutionized her father's establishment and renovated his house — not before they wanted it — and Old Bob was heard repeatedly to affirm that she had not an idle bone in her body.

Miriam's energy and brightness were native to her, but her love of order, her good sense, and most of the ideas which had so much startled her father and her uncle she owed to her Aunt Branscombe, under whose care she had passed the greater part of her conscious life. This lady, herself highly cultured, had married into a Quaker family, and albeit she did not formally join the Society of Friends, she approved of their principles and sympathized with their aims, was intimately acquainted with Clarkson, Wilberforce, and Mrs. Fry, and had a part in that philanthropic movement which was destined, ere long, to bring about so momentous a change in the ideas of the classes and the condition of the masses. Thus, thanks to her aunt (who was a notable woman), Miriam had not merely been well educated in the ordinary acceptation of the term, but taught, both by precept and example, to love her neighbor in that higher sense of which she had spoken to her uncle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN LOVE.

SUNDAY was an easy time at the apprentice house, and disorder ruled the roost. The apprentices were allowed to rise pretty much when they liked, and breakfast as it pleased them — always on condition that if the porridge was cold, or the “first-downs” had

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

eaten more than their fair shares of bread, the “last-downs” should not grumble — and Dick and Betty did not begin “siding up” until the clock went twelve.

When Robin returned, several of the apprentices of both sexes, mostly half dressed, were seated at the table, eating, gossiping, and making coarse jokes; others were washing themselves at the pump, and a lot of lads and lasses, who had risen betimes, were playing a noisy game of “blackthorn, new milk, and barleycorn” in the factory yard. On one side of the fireplace sat Dick, in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a long pipe, his braces about his heels, and a week’s growth of grizzly stubble on his cheeks and chin. On the other side sat Betty, also smoking a long pipe, her cap awry, her hair tousled, and her face unwashed.

“Well, how have you gone on? Did you persuade him?” asked Dick.

“No, I didn’t.”

“I towd you so, but you wouldn’t heed me. I know Owd Bob, mon. I knowed him when he wor a lad.”

“I did not persuade him, but Miss Ruberry did.”

“What! And is the doctor coming, then?”

“Yes. Gib has gone for him. Miss Ruberry is also coming to see Harney and inspect the house.”

A live shell dropping from the ceiling, or a living snake coming down the chimney, could scarce have caused a greater sensation. Dick stopped smoking and stared in open-mouthed astonishment. Betty let her pipe fall on the hearthstone, and sprang to her feet.

“Say that ageean — say that ageean, if you dare!” she exclaimed.

Robin laughed and said it again.

“Bithmon! there’s nowt to laugh at. Aw these fine folk coming — and hor fresh fro’ London — and me i’ this state, and th’ hoyle upside down!”

“And me not shaved, and my razzur that dull as it wouldn’t shave a scalded pig, not if you lathered it wi’ sainted soap. Where’s my holiday shirt, Betty?”

“How do I know? Thou mun find it for thysel’. But first of aw go and waken th’ lads, and tell ’em as if they aren’t down to breakfast i’ five minutes they’ll have to go wi’ empty bellies till dinner-time. Tak’ thy whip. I’ll look after th’ lasses and get

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

some on 'em to side up a bit, while I get mysel' tidied and don my holiday cap and bedgown. I never knew such a thing i' my life.

[183]

What has put it into her yed, I wonder? How soon will hoo be here, thinken yo'? In about an hoar! Well, we can get sided up a little bit afore then. But I wish I had known last neet — I do that."

By this time Dick was up-stairs, cracking his whip, and threatening the direst vengeance on all who did not "look sharp;" and the loiterers, mortally afraid of losing their breakfast, were coming down-stairs almost heels over head, many of them with their garments in their hands or under their arms.

A few minutes later the "siding up" began in real earnest, and by the time Miriam appeared, the place, though far from being clean, was less dirty and disorderly than Robin had yet seen it. As, moreover, Dick had banished to a remote corner of the factory yard all who did not possess something like Sunday clothes, the apprentices who remained looked almost respectable, and having promised to administer "a d— good hiding" to any who misconducted themselves, he had every reason to believe that they would "behave dacent."

Miriam was accompanied by her father and her uncle, who had not been without misgivings as to the condition in which they should find things — for the brothers were beginning to have a dim perception of the fact that the apprentices had possibly a right to expect something more at their hands than shelter and porridge.

It was, therefore, with a sense of relief that they saw that Dick and Betty had turned the short time at their disposal to good account, and put the place into some sort of order. Nevertheless, when Miriam entered the "living" room, she could hardly repress an exclamation of dismay. The blackened ceiling, barred windows, rude furniture, and greasy floor; the bold looks of some of the girls, the evil countenances of some of the boys — a considerable proportion of whom were of the lowest type of London Arab — their pale, unwholesome faces, and stunted forms, gave her a sense of pained surprise, followed by a feeling of repulsion and disgust.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“How is that poor boy?” she asked, after the “masters” had exchanged greetings with Dick and Betty. “Let us go and see him.”

Whereupon the party went up-stairs, and Robin, though uninvited, followed them.

Harney was tossing about in his narrow crib, moaning, and seemingly in great pain.

“This is no place for a sick child,” said Miriam, regarding with

[184]

a shudder the grim array of “coffins” and their dirty counterpanes and pillows. “The very sight and smell of it are enough to make anybody ill.”

“Nay, nay; that’s going too far,” remonstrated her father. “It is not a bad place for an apprentice-house bedroom. We have not much sickness, and it’s only now and then as one dies. I don’t think there has been a death among them for ever so long. Has there, Robert?”

“Not for nearly a month,” returned Robert, complacently; but he took care not to mention that two had died the month before.

“Besides,” continued Mr. Ruberry, “where else can we put him? This is the only lads’ room we have.” “We might take him home, and —”

“Take a sick factory lad to our house! Nay, by Heaven!” interrupted Mr. Ruberry, passionately. “What will you propose next, I wonder?”

Miriam, perceiving that her father was really angry, and that her persistence might do more harm than good, wisely made no reply. This gave him time to cool; and thinking that his language had, perhaps, been a little more violent than was either seemly or necessary, he urged, as a conclusive reason against her proposal, that if they took Harney into their own house, they could not consistently refuse to do as much for other sick apprentices — “and that would not do at all, you know.”

“Of course not. But wouldn’t it be possible to convert one of the cottages into a sort of hospital?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I don’t think your uncle would agree to that. We are short of cottages, as it is; and then, consider the expense!”

Miriam was prevented from replying by the arrival of the doctor, a little man with a big paunch, a pink nose, and a peremptory manner. His first proceeding was to order the visitors to the other end of the room.

“Leave him to me and Betty,” he said. “She knows what to do. I have had her as helper before. I must examine these fingers.”

“Do you sleep here, Mr. Nelson?” asked Miriam, as they moved away.

“Yes, I sleep in the coffin next to Harney’s.”

“Coffin! Why do you call them coffins?”

“Partly, I think, because the bunks, being, as you see, narrow and painted black, are not unlike coffins; and there is a tradition

[185]

among the apprentices that somebody has died in every one of them.”

“How dreadful! I wonder how you can bear to sleep here. It reminds me of Newgate.”

“Newgate! But you were never in Newgate, Miss Ruberry?”

“I went several times with Mrs. Branscombe and Mrs. Fry to see the female prisoners, and read to them. Were you ever there?”

“Yes, I have been in Newgate,” answered Robin, with a deep sigh, as he thought of his mother.

“You have been in Newgate, Nelson! What for?” asked Old Bob, who, though engaged in conversation with his brother, had overheard Robin’s answer.

“I went with Mr. Bartlett to see —” (hesitatingly) — “to see a prisoner in whom he took an interest.”

“Who? What prisoner?”

Miriam, seeing that Robin looked embarrassed, came to the rescue.

“Did you not hear him say, uncle, that it was a prisoner in whom Mr. Bartlett took an interest? Mrs. Branscombe took an interest in several prisoners. There was one I

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

remember particularly — a poor creature under sentence of death, and she had a little boy. I wonder what became of him? But the prisoners are much better treated now.”

“Humph! I did not know as young folks were allowed to visit prisoners in Newgate, unless they belonged to ’em in some way;” and with a curious glance at Robin, who was pale and all in a tremble, he resumed his conversation with Ben.

“I am not surprised that you are overcome with the recollection of the scenes you witnessed in Newgate,” said Miriam, softly. “They are terrible. Sometimes they haunt my dreams.”

“And mine. Newgate is associated with the most terrible event in my life. The prisoner I went to see —”

And then, remembering himself, he stopped short. Miriam’s manner was so sympathetic, her voice so low and sweet, that he had been on the point of telling her all. But if she knew who the prisoner was, and that his mother died in the dock of the Old Bailey! — What her uncle and others would think and say, if they knew, was only too evident, and rendered the strict guarding of his secret more imperative than ever.

Miriam, surprised and curious, but too courteous and kind-hearted to press Robin with questions, hesitated what to say, or whether to say anything, and there ensued a pause which was

[186]

only saved from becoming embarrassing by an exclamation from the doctor.

“Will you come hither a moment, Mr. Ruberry, if you please?” he said; whereupon all returned to the bedside. “Look at these fingers! These are no mere flesh wounds. The bones are broken. Why was I not sent for at once? How can you expect a surgeon to treat a case successfully when it has been well-nigh ruined by one of your cursed factory bone-setters? For the child’s sake, I will try to save his hand; but” — lowering his voice that Harney might not hear — “it is a very serious case, and I should not be surprised if it were to end in lockjaw or blood-poisoning. A thousand pities I was not called in sooner!”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

And then, while the poor child writhed and sobbed with pain, the doctor bound up and spelked his maimed fingers.

Robin and Miriam exchanged pitying glances.

“I knew how it would be when we sent for him,” said Rob to Ben, in an angry whisper. “If th’ lad gets better, it will be all his cleverness; if he dees, it will be all our fault. It comes of heeding Miriam. You are too soft, Ben.”

“So are you. It was your doing as much as mine. And, to tell the truth, I think it would have been just as well if we had sent for him sooner.”

Old Bob made no reply, but he looked as black as thunder.

“Can anything more be done for the poor boy. Dr. Radley?” inquired Miriam.

“Nay, I think everything has been done for him that can be done — for the present. I have brought a soothing mixture, which Betty can give him as directed. He will have a good deal of pain, I dare say. It is a serious case, but I hope we shall be able to save his life and avoid amputation. I will come again to-morrow. Good-day to you all;” and with that the doctor went his way.”

After saying a few kind words to Harney, Miriam asked Robin whether he were going to church.

“Yes — no — I think not,” was the rather confused answer. “I should like, but somebody had better sit with Harney — poor little chap! He might want something, and Betty has the house to look after. I think I will stay here.”

“By all means do so,” she said, with glistening eyes. “And could you run up this evening and let us know how he is? I should be so glad.”

“Certainly, Miss Ruberry. I will do so with pleasure.”

[187]

He was going to say “with all my heart,” but checked himself in time.

“Who is she, Nelson?” asked Harney, when his visitors were gone.

“Miss Ruberry — Mr. Ruberry’s only daughter.”

“Did you hear how she spoke to me? Such a sweet voice! She makes me think of my sister that died.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“And such a sweet face! She makes me think of my mother.” She made him think of his mother. In many respects Miriam strangely resembled her. Both had the same violet eyes, dark hair, oval face, and fair skin, the same sweet voice and sympathetic manner. At the same age, he thought, his mother must have been still more like Mr. Ruberry’s daughter. Or was it that the resemblance existed only in his imagination, and that he ascribed to one the qualities of the other? For, all unconsciously, and without, as yet, even faintly realizing the fact, Robin had fallen in love with Miriam. Nor was there in this anything very surprising. Most lads of eighteen or nineteen have either been in love, or fancied they were — probably more than once. With Robin, however, it was no case of mere calf-love. To love somebody was a necessity of his nature. He had worshipped his mother as a superior being; he had loved Mr. Bartlett as a second father; and the love which he had cherished for them, or which, in happier circumstances, he might have cherished for brothers and sister, he gave to Miriam. So far from holding herself coldly aloof (as, having regard to their relative positions, she well might have done), she had spoken to him kindly, and treated him with a delicate consideration which was as gratifying as it was unexpected. And then her manner was so gracious, her face so fair — how could he help loving her? He more than loved her — he worshipped her; she was enthroned in his heart. For the mere pleasure of being near her, and sometimes seeing her and speaking with her, he would be content to remain at Birch Dene for years — always. Yet in this love of Robin for Miriam there was nothing earthly or sexual, whatever it might subsequently become. Rather was it the affection of a brother for a favorite sister grafted on the passion of a mediaeval knight for an ideal lady-love. The thought that he should ever avow his love had not so much as crossed his mind. So to conduct himself as to win her approval and secure her friendship was all — for the present — to which he aspired.

To this end he had already done an act of severe self-denial.

[188]

Nothing would have gratified him more than to follow Miriam to church, and get an occasional glimpse at her over the pew backs, but he felt that it would please her better if he stayed with Harney. It may be, also, that he was moved by a generous impulse.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Virtue and love went together, as they always should. And he did not go unrewarded. She had smiled approval of his resolve, and asked him to go up to Oaken Cleugh in the evening. That would be better than seeing her at church.

“Why cannot you speak, Nelson? What are you thinking about?” said Harney, querulously.

“Thinking about? Nothing — “that is, nothing very particular,” said Robin, waking up from his day-dream. “How do you feel now? Can I do anything for you?”

“My hand does so ache, Nelson, right up to the shoulder. But I think it will be a little better soon. They say you are a scholar. If you could read something out of a tale book, it might make the pain easier to bear.”

“Of course I can. Let me see! What shall I read you? Did you ever hear of ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves?’ ”

“No, Nelson. Was they hanged?”

“No, they were boiled.”

“Boiled! I am sure that would be nice. Do read it, Nelson.”

“I’ll go and fetch the book. I shall be back in two minutes.”

Robin kept his books in Betty’s linen press. Among them was a copy of “The Arabian Nights” — a gift from Mr. Bartlett. Dick saw him take it, and asked what he was after. Robin told him.

“I’ll go wi’ you and hearken,” he said.

Two or three of the apprentices, who were by, said they would also like to hearken, and all followed him up-stairs, each carrying a three-legged stool. After raising Harney’s pillow, and letting him drink, Robin sat down on a rush-bottomed chair without a back — the only one in the room — and proceeded to read the story of “Ali Baba,” to which his auditors listened with rapt attention. Then, bethinking him that “The Arabian Nights” was not exactly a Sunday book (he wondered what books Miriam read on Sundays), he fetched a Bible, and, by way of striking an average, read the fine Oriental story of Joseph and his brethren.

“They’re both good tales,” observed Dick, thoughtfully; “but I like that about them thieves best. That Morgiana wor a gradely lass — fit to turn out, hoo wor. I don’t quite see, though, where hoo geet aw th’ hot water. It would tak’ a sight o’ hot water to

[189]

scawd forty thieves. It tak's five or six gallons to scawd a pig. But what a foo' that chap wor to forget th' word — 'Oppen Sezme!' Onybody could mind that. 'Oppen Sezme!' It's welly same as 'Oppen, sez I!' ”

“I am not so sure of that,” said Robin. It's a good deal easier to forget than to remember, sometimes. I have forgotten a word which I would give a great deal to remember.”

“What is it?”

“That is exactly what I want to know.”

“I mean what mak' of a word is it — owt like 'Oppen Sezme?' ”

“No, it's a name.”

“A lass's name?”

“No, a man's name.”

“Who wor he?”

“A man I knew a long time ago.”

“It'll come to you one o' these days — ten to one when you're least expecting it. It is no use hosting” — (trying) — “when you've forgotten owt. There's nowt for it but to wait, and the less you think about it the better.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

A VISIT AND A VIGIL.

“EVENING” is a word of varied signification. Among common folks, who rise betimes, go early to bed, find say “good-night” before sunset, it means almost any time after noon; while among M. P.'s, slaves of the pen, and people of fashion, who turn night into day, evening only begins with the dinner hour.

Robin found this looseness of definition useful. He had agreed to see Miriam in the evening — an arrangement which left a good deal to his discretion. After long thought he came to the conclusion that he would be none too soon if he went about four

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

o'clock. So at half-past three he put the finishing touches to his toilette (with the help of a cracked looking-glass, borrowed from Betty), and a few minutes later set out on his errand.

Meanwhile Miriam sat all alone in the drawing-room at Oaken Cleugh, reading the "Imitation of Christ." Every now and again she would lay down her book and glance pensively into the leaf-strewn garden, where drooping dahlias and faded rose-trees be-

[190]

tokened the coining of winter; and over the wild stretch of moorland beyond, now crimsoned with the last rays of the departing sun.

Her father and her uncle, who had dined heartily and drunk quite as much wine as was good for them, were dozing and smoking away the afternoon in the breakfast-room.

A chill sense of disappointment was beginning to creep over the girl. Birch Dene hardly differed more from London than Oaken Cleugh differed from her Aunt Branscombe's house at Clapham. There she had friends of her own age and sex, congenial society, a refined home, and the continual companionship of a woman whom she revered as a mother and loved as a sister. Here she despaired of finding even a potential friend. Society was limited to the rector and his wife — the one a lazy latitudinarian, the other an empty-headed gossip; and, so far as Miriam knew, there was nobody in the neighborhood to whom she could appeal for the sympathy for which she yearned, and the counsel of which she already felt the need. True, she was beloved by her father, and loved him warmly in return; but they had been so long separated, he was so much her elder, their views of life differed so widely, that it was scarcely possible there could ever prevail between them that community of feeling and aspiration, that tender love on the one side and trustful affection on the other, which sometimes unite father and daughter in the bonds of an ideal and life-long friendship. Lonely she was, and lonely she feared she would have to remain. On the other hand, she need neither be idle nor unhappy. There was more than enough for her to do, as Mrs. Branscombe had hinted there would be.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It will be a great change for you,” she had said, “and I dare say you will often get terribly homesick. But, whatever you do, don’t brood. Work! You will find scope enough for your energies down there — perhaps more than enough.”

Her aunt spoke with knowledge, and was proving a true prophet. The management of the house and the reform of the household had so far provided Miriam with a sufficiency of occupation, and the condition of things at the factory and the farm simply appalled her. Everybody about the place drank, and nobody seemed to care. Her father and her uncle did not appear to have the faintest conception that their duty as Christians involved any concern either for the bodies or souls of those whom they employed. The mill was contrivance for making money, regardless of the welfare

[191]

or even the lives of those by whose industry its owners were enriched. Those unfortunate children! The state of the apprentice house was simply shameful, the squalor of some of the cottages into which she had looked past belief. Yet what could she do? Her father she might possibly awaken to a sense of his responsibilities, but her uncle was made of less yielding stuff, and, although he had so far been unexpectedly kind, she felt sure that in anything which seriously affected his pocket, or ran counter to his prejudices, he would be as hard as iron. And who was there to help her in the struggle which, unless she was content to rest with folded hands, she saw was before her? Not a soul — Yes, Nelson. He was intelligent and kind-hearted, seemed anxious to please her, and would surely help her all he could. He had been very good to that poor boy. How did he become an apprentice? she wondered; and why was he so strangely moved at the mention of Newgate? She did not like to ask him, yet would like to know. Her uncle had said at dinner that he believed Nelson had gone to Newgate because he could not help it — “meaning that he had gone as a prisoner. But she did not. Besides, as she well knew, there were many innocent in London’s great prison. No, it would not be right to question him — perhaps an opportunity —

While Miriam thus thought, Phoebe, the rosy-cheeked, entered the room, and announced that the object of her musings was in the hall, and would like to speak to her.

“It is about Harney. Show him in, Phoebe,” she said.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

When Robin appeared, with a bright blush on his face, and agreeably surprised at finding Miriam alone, she bade him be seated, and, after thanking him for coming, asked how he had left “that poor boy.”

Robin answered that Harney seemed easier, but also weaker, and that Betty, who was an experienced woman, and had seen many such cases, had very poor hopes of him.

“Indeed!” said Miriam, gravely. “I did not think it was so bad as that. I should be very sorry if — if he were not to get better.”

“So should I. He is such a quiet, inoffensive little fellow. Not rough and foul-mouthed, like most of them.”

“Poor boy! Who are his friends?”

“I don’t think he has any, unless I may call myself one.”

“No parents?”

“I have heard him speak of a mother and a sister; but I believe

[192]

both are dead. It is not often that workhouse apprentices have parents — who care anything about them.”

“You mean they have been deserted.”

“Yes.”

“Where does Harney come from?”

“He came hither from St. Pancras Workhouse.”

“And you, Mr. Nelson — you are surely not —”

“I am an apprentice like the others; but I was never in a workhouse in my life, Miss Ruberry.”

“I beg your pardon. I should be sorry — I had no intention of hurting your feelings or asking an indiscreet question,” said Miriam, reddening. “I was merely going to say that I was sure you could not be a workhouse apprentice.”

Robin hesitated. Should he tell her all? He felt sure she would not betray his confidence, and it might make her his friend. But he was growing cunning, and it occurred to him that if he told her all then, there would be nothing left to tell another

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

time; whereas if he told her merely a part, she might peradventure (her curiosity being whetted) favor him with another interview.

“Why were you so sure, Miss Ruberry?” he asked, smiling.

“For several reasons. But mainly because you have the speech and manner of an educated person.”

“Yes; my dear friend and benefactor, Mr. Bartlett, gave me a good education. It was he who encouraged my love of reading. I owe him everything, in fact. If he had lived, I should not be here.”

“Friend! Benefactor! You have no father, then?”

“I hope so, but I am not sure.”

“Not sure whether you have a father! But that is dreadful. You cannot mean that.”

“Oh, no; my father has not deserted me. He is not that sort of a man. He is an officer and a gentleman. We have lost each other. I don’t know where he is, and he doesn’t know where I am.”

“But surely it is possible to find him! You could make inquiry.”

“I might; but, unfortunately, I don’t know his name. I have forgotten it.”

“Forgotten your father’s name! But it is not possible. You are joking, Mr. Nelson!” exclaimed Miriam, impetuously, and almost angrily.

“It is quite possible. I had a serious illness — brain fever —

[193]

which left me with an impaired memory. But everything has come back except my father’s name, which is, of course, my own. The doctor said that would come too. If I heard it I should recognize it— just as when I heard the name of the ship on which I was born I recognized it at once.”

“Born on a ship! How strange! And your mother — “have you also lost her?”

“Utterly. She is dead;” and, in spite of himself, Robin’s face blanched, and his voice trembled.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“What a sad story! I am very, very, sorry for you. Nelson,” murmured Miriam, shading her face with her hand. “I, too, have lost my mother, but, thank Heaven, my father still lives.”

She was sorry for him! Tears of gratitude sprang to the lad’s eyes.

“It is a terrible story, that of my mother’s death,” he said. “Some time, if you like, I will tell you all about it. But I should not like it to be known, even by your father or your uncle, that I am ignorant of my true name, and that I know not whether my father be alive or dead.”

“Have no fear; I will keep your secret,” returned Miriam, earnestly. “Nothing you tell me shall go any further; and it might ease your mind to tell me more about your mother and yourself. Who knows?” — (smiling). “Perhaps I might help you to remember your father’s name and to find him.”

“It is possible,” said Robin, smiling in return, “though I don’t quite see how. But never mind that. It would, as you say, ease my mind to tell you all, though I can never think of that time without pain, and I will.”

Just then the door opened, and Phoebe appeared with a pair of candles and a snuffer-tray, and Robin, looking at the clock on the mantelpiece, saw that the interview had lasted a full hour. It was time for him to go. The idea of inviting her guest to supper had crossed Miriam’s mind; but, as neither of her elders was present, she thought she had better not. Nor did she ask him to prolong his visit. Her father might come in at any moment, and perhaps inquire what they had been talking about.

“Another time,” she said, with one of the smiles that made her look so like his mother. “We shall meet again before long, and I must not keep you longer from poor Harney. You will let me know in the morning how he is?”

“If they will let me leave ray work, I shall be very glad.”

[194]

“I was forgetting that to-morrow is Monday. Never mind, I will send down, or come myself. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” repeated Robin, taking for a moment Miriam’s proffered hand.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

And then he went out into the darkness, but with a lightened heart, for he felt that he had in truth found a friend — a friend who understood him, whom he could love without stint, trust without reserve. As for the precise nature of this love, to what it might lead, or how his friendship with Miriam would be viewed by her father, he did not trouble himself in the least. He was young, and one of the privileges of youth is power to enjoy the present without misgiving and think of the future without fear.

But for the moment, at least, Robin's enjoyment was purely mental. It consisted in thinking about Miriam, and after the pleasant hour which he had passed with her in the drawing-room, with its red curtains, carpeted floor, and shining rosewood furniture, the apprentice house looked more uninviting than ever, and he almost shuddered as he heard the gabble of rough voices and screams of shrill laughter within.

"Here's Lord Nelson!" shouted several of the girls, as he opened the door. "Wheer have you been, Nelson? Look how smart he is! Why, he's quite a buck! That hat is th' last London cut — isn't it. Nelson? Is that a white shirt, or is it nobbut a dickey?" were among the questions addressed to him.

Then one of the lasses suggested that he had been "a-courting" — a remark which produced a shout of laughter.

Robin disdained to reply, and turned towards the staircase.

"Nay, don't get mad, and go off!" exclaimed Nanny Gorton, a pale young woman with red hair. "We only want to know wheer you've been."

"I've only been to Oaken Cleugh with a message," answered Robin, curtly, "and now I'm going up-stairs to see how Harney is."

"Been to Oaken Cleugh, has he? Then it's that Phoebe as he's after — hor wi' red cheeks and black een."

"Nay, Lord Nelson will have no sarvant. He'll have a factory lass — one of his own soort."

"And I know one as would be fain to have him, Nanny. Do you want a sweetheart, Nelson? You can have one for th' axing."

With an indignant gesture, Robin again turned away. It was not the first time he had been given to understand that he had made an impression on the heart of Nanny Gorton.

[195]

“Nay, you’ve no occasion to go. Don’t get mad ageean, mon. If you don’t want a sweetheart you’re no waur for ’t. You happen will some time, and if you do, you’ve nobbut to speyk — that’s aw. We want you to read us that tale as you read to ’em up-stairs this morning, about a lass boiling forty thieves in a washing-mug. They mon ha’ been little ’uns, I think.”

“Not aw i’ one mug, thou foo’! There wor forty mugs, and they worn’t washing-mugs nayther,” growled old Dick, who had evidently been drinking. “Ay, read it ageean. Nelson; it’s a gradely good tale, and it’ll be a good example for th’ lasses.”

Robin had no particular desire to read “Ali Baba” a second time; but knowing that refusal would both cause disappointment and bring him ill-will, he consented, stipulating, however, that, before he began, he should see Harney.

Old Betty was with him. In answer to Robin’s inquiry, she said that she did not think he was any better.

“But you surely don’t think he is any worse?” whispered Robin. “He seems very quiet.”

“Ay, that’s just it. He’s a good deal too quiet for my liking. He’s been lying i’ that way, wi’ his e’en shut, aw th’ time, and he hardly ever oppens his lips. I’m feared as he’s getting wayker; and it’s not as if he had summat on his bones to fa’ back on. He’s as thin as a lath. But there’s no telling; he’ll happen pyke up a bit to’ard morning.”

“At any rate, he isn’t in pain, and that is a great blessing,” said Robin; and after telling the old woman that he would return shortly, he went to keep his engagement with the people below. They found him a place of honor near the fireplace, and none listened more attentively than those who had heard the first reading. When Robin saw how much pleasure he had given, he was glad that he had complied with their request. The comments that followed the reading were many, and in some instances amusing.

“I say, lads,” asked one of the older piecers — “I say, lads, who would you most like to boil in a mug, if you’d th’ chance?”

“Owd Bob!” — “Owd Bob!” chorused a score of voices.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Howd your noise, and don’t tak’ your mayster’s name in vain!” exclaimed Dick, angrily. “You’d like to boil Mester Robbut in a mug, would you? What next, I wonder? You’d happen like to boil me too?”

“Nay, there’d be no use i’ that. You boil yersel’, Dick.”

This sally evoked a burst of laughter — (“boiling” being a Lancashire

[196]

synonym for fuddling) — from all save the victim, whom it put in a towering rage.

“I’ll boil you!” he exclaimed, jumping up and seizing his whip. “You sha’n’t have a bit o’ supper — not one on you. Be off to bed this minute, or, bithmon, I’ll flay you wick!”

This ferocious threat was followed by an outburst of angry protests. The lads swore, the lasses scolded, yet, though all kept beyond the reach of Dick’s whip, none showed a disposition to obey his order, and a serious attempt to enforce it would probably have provoked a mutiny. To be sent to bed supperless was bad enough in any circumstances, but when supper consisted of baked potatoes and red herrings, as was the rule on Sunday nights, the deprivation was more than human nature could bear. But at the critical moment, when Dick stood at bay, whip in hand, facing the crowd of excited apprentices, and uttering curses both loud and deep, Robin succeeded in stilling the storm.

“Come, Dick,” he said, soothingly, “don’t get angry. It was only a joke. Sit down, and I’ll read you another story.”

The effect was magical. Dick laid his whip aside, and beckoned the apprentices to resume their places.

“Another tale!” he said, hoarsely. “Come on, then; let’s have it. But, I’ll tell you what, if ony on ’em says owt to me about boiling ageean — bithmon, I’ll knock its yed off, let it be who it will!”

Robin then read “The First Voyage of Sindbad the Sailor,” and by the time it was finished the potatoes and herrings were smoking on the table.

When supper was over — and it did not take long in the eating — Robin went up-stairs to relieve Betty of her charge.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“He’s just the same,” she said, “nayther spaykes nor stors, and scarce ever oppens his een. I fear me he’s but in a bad way. I’ve gan him his physic; he’ll not want no more for two hours. You’ll be going to bed to’ard ten o’clock, I reckon?”

“I shall watch all night, or until there’s a change for the better.”

“Change for the better! Well, it would happen be as weel; he is in a bad way. I’ll look in last thing to see if you wanten owt, and Dick’ll let you lie a bit longer i’ th’ morning.”

After a while the apprentices came to bed — out of consideration for their sick comrade, making as little noise as possible — and were soon asleep, and the only sounds to be heard in the room were deep breathings and an occasional snore. Robin sat on the old rush-bottomed chair; and on a three-legged stool, which served as a table,

[197]

were placed a candlestick, a bottle of medicine, a broken wine-glass, and an iron spoon. The candle guttered, for the place was draughty, and, as the house did not boast a pair of snuffers, Robin had to do the snuffing with his fingers. It was, moreover, a “dip” of indifferent quality, and gave a dim, uncertain, and almost ghastly light. When Robin wanted to look at Harney, he had to hold it over his head. Now and then he asked the poor child, in a whisper, how he felt, but as often as not received no answer.

And so the hours wore on.

The time and the circumstances were propitious for thought; and Robin did think, or, rather, dream, in a fitful, erratic fashion. He thought about his past life, his mother, Bartlett, Major Dene, very little about his father, and a great deal about Miriam, whom he pictured as he last saw her in the cosy drawing-room, with her comely face and winsome smile, her gray silk dress, the rose at her breast, which matched so well with the damask of her cheek, and in imagination heard again her sympathetic, sweet-toned voice, and felt once more the soft pressure of her hand.

Betty, coming with another candle, roused him to a sense of the present and his duties as nurse. The candle came none too soon; the old one was nearly burned out, and the brown paper with which it was packed nearly in a blaze.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“There!” exclaimed Betty, planting the new candle in the molten remains of its predecessor. “That’ll last you an hour or two, and here’s two more ageean when it’s done. How is he?”

“There’s no difference. He has not spoken for a long time.”

“Let’s look!” and the old woman held the candle over Harney’s head. Her experienced eyes detected a change which Robin had not perceived.

“I’se stop wi’ you,” she whispered; and with that she put the candlestick and other things at the foot of the bed, and herself on the three-legged stool.

“There isn’t the least need, Betty. You go to bed. I’ll watch.”

“Howd your noise! We shall nayther on us ha’ to watch so long.”

“What for?”

“He’s deeing; that’s what for.”

“Nonsense, Betty! He has been like that all the time.”

“Wait, and you’ll see.”

Robin said no more, but he bitterly reproached himself for letting his thoughts wander so far from the poor child whose life, though he knew it not, was ebbing away.

[198]

A little later Harney opened his eyes.

“Who’s that?” he murmured, in an almost inaudible whisper.

“Me — Nelson and Betty,” said Robin, bending over him.

“Where are the others?”

“In bed, asleep.”

“And you are keeping me company! You’ve been very good to me, Nelson. I say, Nelson.”

“Yes, Harney.”

“We came from London together, didn’t we?”

“Yes, dear boy, we did.”

“You and me and the others. But I shall never go back to London. I’ve had a dream. Nelson, and I’m going to my mother and Mary. I say, Nelson.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Yes, Harney.”

“You’ve been very kind — “kinder than anybody else. Will you kiss me?”

Robin pressed his lips on the child’s pale brow, already damp with the dew of death.

“You’ll — you’ll think sometimes of little Harney — “won’t you, Nelson?”

“As long as I live I’ll think of you.”

“Put your arm round me, and raise me up. I — I feel faint.”

Robin raised him up tenderly, and laid the dying lad’s head on his shoulder.

“The candle burns dim,” whispered Harney. “Bring it nearer, please.”

Betty, with a significant glance at Robin, brought it nearer.

Then the child made as if he would pick something from the coverlet of the bed and the air with the forefinger and thumb of his unwounded hand. While this was going on Betty, thinking to make a better light, tried to snuff the candle, and in her agitation snuffed it out.

“I mun go down-stairs and leet it at th’ fire,” she said. “I’ll be back directly.”

“Dark! Dark! Mother! Mary! I’m coming!” Robin heard the child murmur; and then all was quiet.

When Betty returned the two were still in the same position.

“Look!” she whispered, raising the candle.

There was no mistaking the meaning of those glazed eyes and pallid cheeks and that drooping jaw.

“He’s goan dead,” said Betty,

[199]

“God has taken him,” said Robin, in a broken voice.

“Ay, he is better off than ayther on us now. Nelson. It mak’s more than fifty as I’ve seen dee i’ this ’ere house, and I’ve allus thowt as it wor th’ best thing as could happen to ’em. Life’s most terrible hard for poor folk. But get you off th’ bed, and I’ll shut his een and tie up his face, and when morning comes I’ll get Dick to measure him for a coffin. It’s but a little ’un as he’ll need, poor lad!”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A FRIEND AT COURT.

AS Robin crossed the factory yard next morning, nearly an hour after the engine had "set on," he met Robert Ruberry.

"Is this your first appearance, Nelson?" asked his master.

"Yes, sir."

"What the devil! I cannot have this, you know. My time is six o'clock at th' latest; and a piecer should be at his wheels by half-past five. You must get up as soon as you are wakened."

"So I did; but Dick let me sleep a bit longer. I sat up till nearly midnight with Harney."

"Harney be hanged! I cannot have work neglected for the sake of a sick apprentice."

"I am sorry if I have done wrong, sir; but the offence is one I cannot repeat, even if I would."

"Cannot repeat, even if you would! How so?"

"Poor little Harney is dead," said Robin, with difficulty keeping down a sob.

"Harney dead! Nonsense! You don't mean that?"

"I do, indeed, sir. He died last night."

"Ah, well, that does make a difference, certainly. I wasn't aware you had been sitting up with him. Very sudden at the last, wasn't it?"

"It seemed so to me; but he was very ill when the doctor came, and Betty had poor hopes of him all day. Will you let Miss Ruberry know, sir? She was very anxious about him."

"Yes, I'll let her know. I'll tell her when I go up to my breakfast. That is all, I think. I shouldn't have spoken to you as I did just now if I had been aware — Be off to your work. I think Jim Rabbits wants you."

Robin went.

“Nelson!”

“Yes, sir!” said Robin, returning.

“The doctor wasn’t much use, was he? Doctors seldom are, I think. It would have been just the same if we had sent for him at first.”

“I don’t think so,” answered Robin, resolutely. “I believe that if a doctor had been called in at first, and Harney had received proper attention, he would have been alive now, and in a fair way for recovery.”

“What, curse it, do you mean to say —?” exclaimed Old Bob, savagely; and then, without another word, he turned on his heel and went his way.

All this rather surprised Robin; but he had not been long enough at the place to understand its full significance. Never before had the death of an apprentice caused Robert Ruberry the slightest apparent concern. His usual remark, when any thing of this sort happened, was: “Dead, is he? Get him buried as soon as you can.” Yet, when he learned the cause of Robin’s tardiness, his tone became almost apologetic; he had evidently an uneasy feeling that the fatal termination of Harney’s illness might possibly be ascribed to the delay in sending for a surgeon. Moreover, instead of going to his breakfast, he despatched a note to his brother, saying that he was too busy to “come up,” and asking that his breakfast might be “sent down,” adding, in a P. S., “Miriam will be sorry to hear that Harney died last night.”

In truth, the cynical old money-spinner was beginning to be rather afraid both of Robin and his niece; for, being neither utterly devoid of conscience nor deliberately cruel, he could not help seeing in their humanity (softness, he called it) an implied reproof of his own hardness. Here was this lad, fresh from London, refusing to give evidence against Blincoe, stopping all night with him in the old warehouse, sitting up with Harney, and almost telling him (Robert Ruberry) to his face that he had incurred the guilt of murder by not sending sooner for a doctor! What a piece of impudence! He had felt almost angry enough to strike him, and a few weeks earlier he probably would have struck him. Nevertheless, he could not help paying Nelson the homage of a reluctant admiration. Nelson was outspoken, and Robert Ruberry liked outspokenness;

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

bold, and he liked boldness. He was also disposed to believe him honest (with one slight reservation), and,

[201]

next to passive obedience, Ruberry held honesty to be the highest virtue a youth could possess. For these reasons Robin's respect was worth having; and the idea that the young fellow probably regarded him as a tyrannical old curmudgeon was anything but soothing to his feelings.

As for his niece, he knew what she would think — how grieved she would be about Harney's death, and that, like Nelson, she would ascribe it to his neglect. Yet "Old Bob" liked Miriam so well that he was anxious both to save her pain and secure her love. Not for fifty pounds, he said to himself, would he have told her the news, and he looked forward to their next meeting with some misgiving.

And there were other causes at work which might well have tended to disturb Robert Ruberry's tranquillity, and suggest grave doubts as to the wisdom of the course which he had hitherto followed. Distress was widely prevalent, political agitation active; the operatives were bitterly discontented, and almost ripe for rebellion; even his own hands were showing signs of insubordination; in several districts there had been serious rioting; the tyranny of factory masters had been violently denounced, both on the platform and in the press, and strange and startling doctrines were being openly promulgated. Only the day before had he read in a Manchester paper a protest by several leading physicians against the iniquities of the apprentice system; it was asserted that overwork was destroying annually thousands of lives, and impairing the health of a whole generation. One audacious innovator had actually gone so far as to propose an enactment for restricting the labor of women and children to eleven hours a day, and forbidding the employment of children under ten altogether!

All this, besides making Robert Ruberry uneasy and apprehensive, rendered him much more pervious to the influence of Nelson and his niece than he otherwise would have been.

The respite he gained by sending for his breakfast was of short duration. He had scarcely finished it when Miriam appeared in the office — after calling at the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

apprentice house, and getting from Robin and Betty a full account of Harney's death. Her face was pale, and her eyes looked reproach.

“Oh, uncle,” she exclaimed, “that poor boy!”

“Yes, it's a bad job. I — I am very sorry. You see, it did not do much good sending for the doctor, after all.”

“He was sent for too late, uncle. If he had been sent for sooner,

[202]

Harney would probably have been alive this moment. Both Betty and Nelson think so.”

“Curse Betty and Nelson!” thought the uncle. What he said was: “They may think as they like, but you may depend upon it that it was the shock to the system that killed him. I don't believe all the doctors in Manchester could have saved him.”

“Perhaps not; but we cannot be sure of that; and, at any rate, if you had called in a doctor at once we should have done our best; the issue would have been with God. It is a terrible thing to trifle with the life of a fellow-creature. Don't let anything of this sort happen again, uncle; it would be too dreadful.”

“I am sure I don't want anything of the sort to happen again, Miriam. It is no interest of ours for apprentices to die; they cost money, and a dead apprentice is of precious little use. What would you have us do?”

“I would have you send for a doctor at once, whenever an apprentice, or anybody else, is hurt — unless it be something very trifling —”

“Hum! But that would cost a lot of money.”

“And I would have you turn two of the cottages into a hospital — one for boys, the other for girls. I have seen London hospitals, and I am sure it could easily be done. There is something horrible in the idea of the sick being in the same room as the whole — perhaps dying there, like Harney; and, but for Nelson, there would have been nobody with him at the last. He would have died in the dark and alone.”

“Turn two cottages into a hospital! That would be an expensive job, Miriam, and we should lose ten or twelve pounds a year in rent, to say nowt of the expense of fitting them up. The concern must not suffer, whatever happens.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

To Robert Ruberry “the concern” was a thing apart, and almost sacred. He held it his bounden duty to protect its interests and promote its prosperity by every means in his power, and was as devotedly loyal to it as some men are to a mistress, a monarch, or a cause. The factory cottages were a part of the business and a permanent source of profit. Every man about the place, whether a benedict or a bachelor, whether he liked it or not, was compelled to take one. Several single men, who were domiciled with their parents, paid rents for not taking cottages. The idea of turning two of them into a hospital went strongly against the grain; and when he said that the concern must not suffer, he thought he had said the last word — that the question was settled.

[203]

But Miriam, whose notions about business were somewhat hazy, failed to see the matter in the same light.

“Ten or twelve pounds a year!” she said. “What is that to a man like you! My father says you are better off than he is — “that you are worth nearly a hundred thousand pounds.”

“Your father talks nonsense. He’s quite wrong; I’m not worth owt like it — at least, I don’t think I am — and, for Heaven’s sake, keep it to yourself. If th’ hands thowt I was worth half as much they’d be striking for a rise of wages, and my life would be made a burden by folks asking for subscriptions.”

“Will you make the hospital, then? I’ll engage to obtain my father’s consent — in fact, I have done so already.”

“I cannot, Miriam — I really cannot. As I said just now, the business must not suffer, whatever happens. But I’ll tell you what I’ll do” — briskly, as if struck by a happy thought — “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll do it out of my own pocket. The rent shall be debited to my private account, and I’ll be at the expense of making the alterations and maintaining a nurse — and, yes, I’ll make an arrangement with Radley — give him so much a year to come whenever he’s wanted — and then there’ll happen be no more bother. Will that suit you?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Excellently well!” said Miriam, gladly, and inwardly much amused to think that, out of consideration for the concern, her uncle was assuming a charge which he might just as well have shared with her father. “Excellently well, and I thank you with all my heart.”

“Is there owt else!”

“Yes; I want to speak to you about Nelson. Couldn’t you put him in some better position? I am sure he is clever; he was wonderfully kind to poor Harney, and, from what Betty tells me, he is an influence for good with the other apprentices. He reads to them on Sundays, and they think all the world of him. And yet he goes about without shoes and stockings, just like a common sweeper or piecer!”

“That lad again!” exclaimed Robert Ruberry, with a laugh that sounded like a gibe. “That lad again! Everybody’s wanting us to treat him different from the others. It is Nelson, and no end. But I have nowt to do wi’ him. I’ve made him over to your father. Speak to him.”

“I will, and I am sure my father will do his best. But, if you would take it in hand —”

[204]

Here Miriam paused; but her uncle knew what she meant, and the implied compliment pleased him. She meant that he had more backbone than his brother — that what he willed was generally done, whereas Benjamin, though he promised freely and meant well, sometimes forgot his promises, and did not always see that his orders were carried into effect.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I think of doing,” he said, confidentially; “but don’t let it go any further at present. As soon as Nelson has got an insight into things — and he’s sharp, there’s no denying that — as soon as he’s got an insight into things, I mean to have him into the counting-house — he’s a good scholar — “and both make him useful and give him a better position. Will that please your ladyship?”

“Very much, indeed, and I am sure Nelson will be grateful. But do you think it will be good for the concern?” asked Miriam, trying, not very successfully, to keep a grave countenance.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

But it never occurred to Robert that anybody could be either ironical or jocular on so serious a subject, and he answered the question with all gravity.

“I do think so,” he said. “If I did not, he would have to stop where he is. The concern must not suffer, whatever happens.”

“Of course it must not. But if I take up your time any longer, I am afraid it will. Give me a kiss and let me go, you dear, good uncle. I thank you with all my heart; you have made me very happy.”

Robert accepted the compliment, and gave the kiss with evident pleasure, and a minute afterwards Miriam was walking sedately across the yard, the observed of all observers. It was the first time within living memory that a lady had visited Birch Dene factory, and the “hands,” particularly the female portion of them, crowded, to the windows to have a look at “Owd Ben’s lass.”

“I’ve got well out of that,” said Owd Bob to himself, with a chuckle. “I feared she’d ha’ cried, and put her arms round my neck; and, if she had done, I could hardly have said her nay, whatever she had asked me; and they call me keen and hard! But she has such winning ways, and that smile of hers there’s no resisting. Gad! it’s a good thing that I had never time to get wed, for I do believe I’m a bit soft in th’ bottom. However, there is no harm done so far. I’ve promised nowt as will be detrimental to th’ business. I don’t think Miriam’s cottage hospital will gain us much credit with th’ hands. They are an ungrateful lot, always

[205]

hankering after higher wages, or something quite as unreasonable; but if it should ever be said as we don’t treat our apprentices kindly, we can point to it as a proof to th’ contrary. The same with Nelson. We shall be able to say that at Birch Dene, whatever may be th’ case at other factories, an apprentice as shows ability is sure to get on. And I can make him useful. He may save his porridge by seeing as the daily hands stick to their work; and we want help in the counting-house. Ben doesn’t look after things as he should, and Nutter is getting old and goamless. He did not take a single short-weight off that last invoice of cotton. And if we were to get another, he’d ten to one do no better. A known nowt is better than an unknown nowt. Ay, Nelson has shaped well, so far —

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

there's no denying that, though it wouldn't do to tell him so; and if he is honest, and I believe he is, though there's something queer about that Newgate business — however, I'll soon find that out — if he's honest, I'll do as I promised. That will be a good thing all round. Miriam will be pleased, Ben will be pleased, and Major Dene will be pleased, and, best of all, the concern will be benefited.”

As for Miriam, she had good reason to be satisfied with the turn things were taking; her uncle was proving more tractable than she expected, and, though there was still much to be done, she had made a good beginning. It, moreover, pleased her greatly to think that Nelson would be put in a position better suited to his abilities and education than that of a common apprentice. She had also ascertained the limit of her power; her uncle evidently loved her, and was disposed to meet her views, but it was equally evident that he would refuse to sanction changes by which the supreme object of his affection was likely to suffer.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PROMOTION.

ROBERT RUBERRY was not the sort of man who lets the grass grow under his feet, and on the following day, after a talk with his brother, Robin was sent for to the counting-house, whither he went, wondering whether the summons boded him evil or good.

“You make calculations sometimes for Jim Rabbits, about speeds and that, I understand?” said Robert, rather gruffly.

[206]

“Yes, sir; but only when Jim asks me,” answered Robin, thinking that helping the spinning-master was going to be imputed to him as a fault.

“Oh, it's all right so long as you don't make mistakes —”

“I don't think I have, sir. If you'll ask Jim —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I have asked him” — (grimly) — “but never mind that. Do you know anything about bookkeeping?”

Robin had to admit that he knew very little about bookkeeping, his performances in that line having been limited to making an occasional entry in Mr. Bartlett’s waste book, and checking additions in the cash book and ledger.

“Well, that’s summat, and I suppose you could learn if you had the chance!”

Robin supposed he could.

“Well, you shall have the chance, and I hope you will make a good use on’t.” And then the younger brother told Robin what had been resolved in his behalf. He was to spend part of his time in the mill, part in the counting-house. As for his duties, they were to be rather multifarious. He was to see that the hands on daily wages did not shirk their work, and report to Mr. Robert any instances of neglect or waste which he might detect, superintend the weighing of cotton and yarn, and make himself generally useful.

“How useful you are depends entirely on yourself,” said Robert. “You have got your foot on the first stave of the ladder. Climb as high as you can — only no tumbles, mind. And don’t you think you’d let him keep th’ petty cash, Ben? He’d manage that.”

“But what would Nutter say?”

“Oh, never mind Nutter; he’d have more time for other things. And you say he’s very slow.”

“He is; and he gets slower. Very well, let it be so then. This is it, Nelson” — (taking up a long, narrow book). “I’ll give you some money at the beginning of every week, and you’ll have to set down everything as you pay — postage of letters, expenses to Manchester, allowance to carters, and such like. You’ll soon see how it’s done, and at the week end I’ll balance you up.”

“That is it,” put in Robert. “All as you have to do is to pay as little as you can, and set down everything as you pay. If you don’t you’ll get wrong.”

This was his expedient for testing Robin’s integrity. It would

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

be quite within his power to enter from time to time a few pence or even shillings without paying them. But he meant to watch him, and, as Old Bob knew, or thought he knew, from past experience, almost exactly how much the weekly petty cash should average, he would soon be able to make a pretty shrewd guess whether Robin was honest or otherwise. He had probably heard the story of the ingenuous youth who, on applying for a post as assistant-bookkeeper, and being asked how much wage he wanted, said, "Thirty shillings a week," but if he might keep the petty cash he would take twenty!

The change in Robin's fortunes, albeit somewhat ungraciously announced, rejoiced him greatly, and his thanks were warmly expressed.

"Never mind thanking me; thanks are only words. I'd liefer have deeds. Thankful is as thankful does. But if you must thank somebody, thank my niece. It is more her doing than mine."

This Robert Ruberry said because he hated sentiment and did not believe in gratitude; yet nothing he could have said would have given Robin so much pleasure. The youth forgot the ungraciousness of the uncle, and thought only of the kindness of Miriam, of which he inwardly registered a vow to be worthy.

"Yes, sir," he answered, quietly — "when shall I begin?"

"To-morrow. But you cannot go about and come here in them things" (pointing to his greasy garments). "Have you a decent working-suit?"

"No, sir."

"You'll have to get one, then. There's a ready-made shop at Topleton; you can buy a good fustian suit and a couple of check shirts for about thirty shillings."

"Yes, sir. Shall I pay for them out of the petty cash?" asked Robin, smiling.

"He has you there, Robert!" laughed Ben. "How can th' lad find thirty shillings? We shall have to help him."

"Help him! I don't know about that. I was thinking he had happen as much laid by."

"Laid by! Did not Parson pick his pocket, and you know how much he has had since."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Oh, ay! — I was forgetting. Well, I suppose we shall have to lend him thirty shillings then. But it must not go through th’ books. If you’ll find one half, I’ll find t’other.”

“Agreed! But hadn’t we better say ‘give’ instead of ‘lend’?”

[208]

put in Benjamin, who, always more generous than his brother, happened just then to be in an exceptionally generous mood.

“Give it him! These aren’t times for giving. I was thinking of stopping it at so much a week, however, he shall have the thirty shillings, and if he shapes right, we’ll say no more about it. You’ll have to leave th’ apprentice house. Nelson.”

“Where must I live, then?” asked Robin, eagerly, as a wildly absurd hope crossed his mind that it might be at Oaken Cleugh.

“With Jim Rabbits. He can find you a nook to sleep in. The concern will pay for your tooth, and your wage will be — Three and sixpence a week, didn’t we say, Ben?”

“We said five shillings.”

“The deuce we did! Well, if we said so— It’s a lot of money, though. Thirteen pounds a year! But you’ll have to find your own clothes. Nelson — no more loans or presents. And now” — (turning to his brother) — “hadn’t you better give him the thirty shillings, and let him go to Toppleton and get what he needs this afternoon?”

Ben, nodding assent, produced the money, which Robin, having no faith in his pockets, dexterously tied in his shirt with a piece of twine.

“That’s all, I think,” added the other, by way of terminating the interview. “But you’ll just bear in mind. Nelson, that you are still an apprentice, and willn’t be your own master till you are of age; and if you don’t give satisfaction, you’ll have to go back to your piecing, and live in th’ house again. It’s just an experiment we are trying, as I said before, to please Miss Ruberry. She thinks you behaved well about Harney; but, for my own part, I don’t expect much good will come of it.”

The purpose of which observation was to prevent Robin from getting uppish and conceited, or ascribing his promotion either to his own merit or to Mr. Robert’s

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

kindness; its principal effect, to convince him that he owed nothing to his masters, and everything to Miriam.

Great were the lamentations at the apprentice house when it became known that “Lord Nelson” had received orders to change his domicile. Betty almost cried, Dick swore that he was the cleverest young fellow he knew, and expressed his belief that he had a “yed and a hoof,” and several of the maiden apprentices shed tears.

Though, as may be supposed, Robin was by no means sorry to leave the house, he could not help being touched by these demonstrations

[209]

of affection, and he reminded his friends, by way of consolation, that flitting to Jim Rabbits’ was not quite the same as going to “foreign parts,” offering, at the same time, to come in and read to them on Sunday afternoons — an offer which was loudly applauded and gratefully accepted.

His fresh quarters were nothing to boast of, and had he gone thither direct from London he would probably have thought himself ill-used; but everything is relative, and compared with the apprentice-house garret, his new bedroom seemed almost luxurious. True, it was small — about nine feet by six — and unpleasantly near the slate; and the bed barely big enough to turn round in. On the other hand, it was clean, and he had it all to himself; he could fix a shelf on the wall for his books, and find a place of safety for his guinea, which Betty refused to “bank” for him in her stays any longer, and which he had been sharp enough to prevent Robert Ruberry from making him invest in a suit of clothes.

Old Bob’s motive for ordering him to quit the apprentice house for more expensive lodgings was, nevertheless, not quite obvious. In the first instance, Robin was rather disposed to attribute it to the influence of his adored protectress — an illusion which was, however, speedily knocked on the head by Jim Rabbits.

“What for has Mr. Robbut shifted you fro’ th’ ’prentice house to mine, seeing as it costs him more?” said the spinning-master. “Well, he hasn’t towd me, but I think it’s middling plain. You’re too clever for th’ ’prentice house. You can read and talk, and he has happen an idea as you’ll be talking and reading too much. If you took wrong

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

ways, you might play awkerd tricks — stor up a strike, or summat o' that soort. He thinks you're safe with me — and it doesn't cost him so much more as you mut think. He beat me down most terrible. I wouldn't ha' done it, nobbut as now you are here constant I shall larn a sight faster; and when I can write and cipher, th' owd devil may go and hang hissel' for owt I care. I shall be able to mend my shop then."

This deliverance surprised Robin. He had always supposed that Jim and the junior partner were on excellent terms; but it was evident that the latter was no better liked by the spinning-master than by anybody else. He doubted even whether Miriam could really like her uncle, and it pleased the young fellow exceedingly to think that he owed her an infinity of gratitude, and none whatever to him, whom, rightly or wrongly, he regarded as half tyrant, half rogue.

[210]

One of Robin's new duties was to examine accounts, and a few days after his promotion Robert Ruberry gave him some cotton invoices to check.

"See as they are right added up and cast out," he said. Whereupon Robin, going diligently to work, found an error of twenty pounds.

"That's right!" exclaimed Old Bob. "Why, you've saved your wage already! Try if you cannot find another."

Robin did find another; but on the other side — ten pounds too little charged.

"Humph!" grunted Old Bob, when he pointed this out.

"Shall I make a note of it?" asked Robin.

"Ay, you happen better had. It'll look honest. But th' next time you come across owt o' th' sort say nowt about it. It's no business of ours to find out other folks' mistakes — when they're against us."

Robin doubted whether this was seriously meant, for, albeit Mr. Robert seemed to be in earnest, there was a something in his manner which rather belied his words. At any rate, Robin continued to note all the mistakes he found, whether they were for or against; and he did wisely, Ruberry, junior, being fairly honest, according

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

to his lights; and, had the youth acted as he suggested, he would certainly have drawn conclusions unfavorable to his personal integrity, or, as Old Bob put it tersely to himself, "If he helps me to rogue other folks, he'll help other folks to rogue me."

In one respect Robin's removal to Jim Rabbits' was not to his liking. He saw less of Miriam than he would have done had he remained at the apprentice house. She called there two or three times a week, had the place thoroughly cleaned and whitewashed inside and out, talked to the girls, and took great interest in the conversion of the two adjoining cottages into a hospital. Robin seldom saw her, except at church, whither he went every Sunday morning, rain or shine. She had always a nod and a smile for him, and they exchanged an occasional greeting, but several months elapsed before he had a chance of thanking her for the propitious change in his fortunes which her influence had wrought. It happened on a Sunday. He was reading to the apprentices the story of "The Three Calendars," when a general rustle and exclamation of surprise caused him to look up, and he found that among his hearers were Miriam and her father, who had stepped into the room almost unperceived.

[211]

"Pray go on, Nelson," she said, taking a chair vacated for her by one of the maiden apprentices. "We will wait till you have finished."

When the reading was over she hinted that she had something to say to him, and he followed her out of the house, Mr. Ruberry bringing up the rear.

"You read very well. Nelson, and 'The Arabian Nights' is interesting; but don't you think you could find some book more suitable for the day?"

Whereupon Robin explained that he, unfortunately, possessed no more suitable book, and that unless he read something rather exciting the apprentices either ceased to listen or fell asleep; that even the reading of the Bible produced this result, and they would listen neither to "Plutarch's Lives" nor Milton's poems. He observed, further, that though "The Arabian Nights" might not contain much useful information, or be religiously edifying, it excited the children's imagination, took them out of themselves, and made them forget for a while the hardship of their lot.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“I never thought of that,” she said, frankly. “Yes, it must be good to make those poor children forget, sad as it is to say so; and, for my own part, I enjoy tales immensely. Still, you know, this is Sunday, and I think — I have a good many books at home, and, as you are a judge of books, why not come with me, and we will try to choose something which is edifying without being dull.”

Robin protested that nothing would please him better, and Mr. Ruberry making no objection, he went with them to Oaken Cleugh. The house was rather large of its class, containing, in auctioneer phraseology, “four entertaining rooms.” One was the parlor par excellence, beloved by the brothers. In it they took all their meals, smoked their pipes, and spent their rare moments of leisure. The drawing-room was laid up in lavender, and the dining-room was used only on Sundays and three or four times a year, when Mr. Ruberry gave a heavy dinner to half a dozen hard-drinking friends. But Miriam changed all this. It seemed to her a waste of good things to have rooms merely for ornament, so she had them swept and warmed every day, and on Sunday evening would tempt the brothers into the drawing-room by playing a few old-fashioned hymn tunes on her harpsichord — a present from her uncle. The fourth room was her own. Beforetime it had been called the “little room” and the “library” indifferently — albeit, until she came home it contained nothing more literary than an empty book-case

[212]

Now it was known as “Miss Ruberry’s room” — for the word *boudoir* had not yet come into use at Birch Dene. It was a cosy little room, adjoining a small conservatory, which she filled with choice flowers. She, moreover, replenished the book-case with her own literary treasures, and hung on the walls several of her water-color sketches.

Into this room Miriam introduced Robin, and as her father, who knew nothing about books and cared less, had betaken himself to the parlor and his pipe, the two young folks were left to themselves.

**The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)
AT OAKEN CLEUGH.**

“HERE are my books!” said Miriam. “Now, let us see if we cannot find among them something — I won’t say more entertaining, but better adapted for Sunday reading than ‘The Arabian Nights.’ ”

“I am sure we can; but you must remember that Sunday is the only time factory folks have for reading of any sort.”

This, though a sufficiently appropriate answer, had a purpose not obvious to Miriam — Robin being just then much more desirous of leading up to a conversation about themselves, and thanking her for her good offices on his behalf, than helping her to select books suitable for Sunday reading.

“That is quite true. I wish it were not. But, so far as you are concerned, you have surely more time for reading than you had?” said Miriam, falling straightway into the trap.

“Thanks to you, I have, and I do thank you very much. Do not think me ungrateful for not thanking you sooner. I had not the chance. I shall never forget your kindness as long as I live, Miss Ruberry.”

“It is very good of you to say so, but I don’t know what I have done to deserve so much gratitude; it was my uncle and my father,” returned Miriam, who was both amused and surprised by the impetuosity of the young fellow’s manner and the warmth of his words.

“Oh, yes; they advanced me, and removed me from the apprentice house, I know; but not because of any merit of mine. It was to please you.”

[213]

“To please me!”

“Your uncle said so. He said you had asked him to put me in a better position, and that I must thank you for my advancement, not him.”

“Yes; I believe I did suggest that he might give you a better position, but had I known that he would put it in that light I almost think I should have held my peace,” said the girl, with a smile that belied her words — for, in truth, Robin’s gratitude was by

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

no means displeasing to her. "And I am sure my uncle would not have advanced you if he had not thought you worthy of it. At any rate, he is quite satisfied with you so far — that I know."

"Does he say so?"

"He was saying only yesterday to my father that you were diligent and useful, and would soon be a great help to them; and, from my uncle, that is high praise."

"I am very glad. It is pleasant to know you are giving satisfaction, especially when you are trying your best. All the same, it is to you I owe the opportunity of winning your uncle's praise, and I decline to be grateful to anybody but you."

"Oh, but you must be grateful to my father and my uncle as well as to me — more than to me, for I did very little," said Miriam, with a slight blush. "But let us look at the books. What do you think of this?"

Robin answered by inquiring what she thought, and there followed a little discussion on the general subject; into which, however, neither of them put much heart, for both were thinking of something else. He wanted to continue the personal narrative, which he had left unfinished on the occasion of his previous visit, yet hesitated to resume it without being asked; and though Miriam was burning with curiosity to hear it, she equally hesitated to ask him — partly out of a feeling of delicacy, partly, perhaps, from another and less definable feeling.

From this embarrassment they were relieved by an opportune accident.

Robin took up at random a book, the title of which happened to be, "Where is your Father?" It had a religious application, but it applied in a special manner to himself.

"This might be meant for me?" said Robin, showing Miriam the book.

"So it might. How strange it is you should light on that book! Have you — I suppose you have not yet been able to think of the

[214]

name of your father — your earthly father, I mean — for the title refers to our heavenly Father?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I am sorry to say I have not. You said you might perhaps help me to remember it.”

“Perhaps I might if I knew the whole of your story. At the same time, if you would rather not tell me, don’t hesitate to say so. I should be very sorry to give you pain, and you said —”

“But I rather would, Miss Ruberry, if you would kindly let me. True, mine is a mournful story; but if I might — you said, you know, that it might ease my mind, and that you might perhaps help me to remember my father’s name and my own. You have no idea what a strange feeling it is not to know your own name. May I?”

“Of course you may. The little you told me the last time you were here interested me so much that I shall be glad to know all.”

“And I will tell you all, Miss Ruberry. It were ungrateful to have any secrets from so kind a friend.”

Miriam, slightly blushing, acknowledged the compliment with a gracious smile, and signing to Robin to take a seat (they had been standing near the bookcase), took one herself.

“If you are ready to begin I am ready to listen,” she said, simply. “My father and uncle are in the parlor, and we are not likely to be interrupted. We can look at the books afterwards.”

On this hint Robin spoke. He told Miriam all that the reader knows, and something more, for he began with his earliest recollections — gave an account of his life in Hampshire and a dimly remembered visit of his father; of the summons to meet him in London, and the journey thither; of the gradual waning of his mother’s hopes; of their deepening poverty and growing despair; of their expulsion from their lodgings; of the arrest, the trial, the terrible scene in the Old Bailey, and everything that had since befallen him.

To this strange, eventful history the young girl listened with intense interest and undisguised sympathy; and when Robin, in a voice broken with emotion, told of his mother’s imprisonment, and described her death and his own illness and despair, Miriam bent her head and wept.

So much was she moved, indeed, that it was some minutes after Robin had finished his tale before her feelings would permit her to speak.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“I never heard the like! she said, at length. “Poor boy! Poor

[215]

mother! If I had not seen with my own eyes — if I had not visited Newgate, I would not believe that men could be so cruel. Yet I am sure your story is true. But the pity of it — the pity of it! Just now you called me your friend. You did right; I am your friend. Look on me as a sister, and I will help you to find your father and think of his name. We must find him. Your heavenly Father, who has so wonderfully protected you, will open a way. Be sure that he has led you here to Birch Dene for some wise end, though it is still hidden from us.”

“Do you really mean that — that you will let me call you sister — Miriam, and that you will call me brother — Robin?” demanded the young fellow, with glistening eyes and perhaps more impetuosity than the occasion absolutely required.

“Yes,” answered Miriam, dubiously, after a moment’s consideration; for she had not expected to be so promptly taken at her word — “yes, I think so; for if I am as your sister, you are of course as my brother. But only between ourselves. My father and my uncle might possibly not view the matter as we would like them.”

“That is what I mean — only between ourselves. I would not mention it to anybody for the world. It is happiness enough for me to think of you as my sister, and to know that you regard me as your brother.”

“I think we had better continue our examination of the books,” said Miriam, dryly, at the same time rising from her chair and suiting the action to the word.

Though Robin was quite at a loss to understand what this sudden change of mood might portend, he felt that he had somehow put his foot in it, and, with an abashed look, silently resumed his inspection of the bookcase.

And perhaps it was as well he did, for shortly afterwards the door was unceremoniously thrown open, and Mr. Ruberry, fragrant with tobacco smoke, entered the room.

“What! Among your books yet?” he exclaimed, good-naturedly. “I never saw owt like it. It might be a big business. How soon will you have done?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I think we have done now, father,” returned Miriam, quietly. “The work of selection has been — just a little difficult. If you take these four. Nelson, I dare say they will be enough for the present. Use those you think the most suitable, and when you want more, you can come again. I suppose you will want your

[216]

tea soon, father? I will see after it myself. I have let Polly and Phoebe go out, and there is only Margaret in the kitchen.”

“Well, when it’s ready for us, I dare say we shall be ready for it. Will you be playing on your harpsichord after tea, think you?”

“Certainly, father, I shall be very glad — unless you and uncle prefer your pipes.”

“Nay, we’ll have some music first; th’ pipes will do later on. Are you going, Nelson?”

“Yes, sir. I think it is about time,” answered Robin, as he tied a piece of string round his books. “Can I do anything more for you. Miss Ruberry?”

“Thank you, I am not aware that you can — at present. But there is no need for you to go just yet. Tea will be on shortly. He might stay and have a cup — mightn’t he, father?”

“Ay, let him stay if he likes,” was the not very gracious response.

“Would you like to stay and take tea with us. Nelson?” added Miriam, kindly, with a glance which, as he thought, meant that it would please her if he did, and which made amends for his recent rebuff. So he thanked her and said “Yes.” This matter being settled, she betook herself to the kitchen, and on Mr. Ruberry’s invitation Robin accompanied him to the parlor, where they found “Old Bob” sitting on a rocking-chair by the fireside, wearing his Sunday spectacles and deep in a newspaper. Working days being too precious for such trivialities, he always got up the news of the previous week on the Sunday afternoon; and, when he had not been to church in the morning, squared the account by reading a chapter in the Bible as well.

It was the first time Robin had seen the junior partner taking his ease, and he looked so different from his usual self that it needed an effort to believe him to be the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

same man. His face had lost, for the nonce, its hard, cynical expression, his lips wore something like a smile, his manner was mild, and his voice subdued. Robin was at first disposed to ascribe the metamorphosis to Miriam's influence, and to this cause it may have been in some measure due; but he learned afterwards that Robert Ruberry was always affable at home, and as popular with the maids as he was unpopular with the hands. It was the difference between a general at the head of an army in the field and in the bosom of his family.

"Oh, it is you, is it. Nelson?" he said, looking up. "Willn't you take a chair? How's th' petty cash going on?" — smiling.

[217]

"It is hardly for me to say, sir. But I think I have kept it right so far."

"Ay, has he," put in Mr. Ruberry, heartily; "and what is more, he keeps it down. I've balanced him up regular, and for the time as he has had it, th' weekly average is fifteen shillings less than it used to be."

"And that is how long?"

"Going in six months."

"That's a fair average. One week does not amount to much, but five or six months tells a tale. Let's see! Twenty times fifteen makes fifteen pounds. That's a fine saving. Keep it up, Nelson — keep it up! Always do your best for your employers, and they'll do their best for you, to say nowt of the satisfaction it'll be to your conscience. See how many folks we find in porridge every week! Yet I don't believe as there's half a dozen on th' ground as ever think how much they owe us, and if it wasn't for our capital and the way we look after things they'd have to clem (starve). They think more of robbing us — and they do, too."

And as if the mere idea of ingratitude so base had touched him to the quick, the speaker's face darkened, and his voice trembled with sorrowful indignation.

"Robbing you!" exclaimed Robin, moved in turn to indignation by this sweeping imputation on the characters of the hard-working, ill-paid factory hands of Birch Dene. "Hardly that, Mr. Robert. How can they rob you?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Oh, I don’t mean as they actually carry things off th’ ground. They are too well looked after for that. I mean as they idle away a good deal of their time. When I see a chap idling, I feel it just as much as if he had his hand in my pocket.”

“But most of them are on piecework, and if they are idle, the loss is their own, you know.”

“And isn’t it ours too? Aren’t the fixed expenses — rates and taxes, interest of money, wear and tear of machinery — aren’t they just the same, whether we turn out owt or nowt? And if we don’t turn out a good deal, we shall soon be ruined.”

“Business again, uncle!” said Miriam, who just then came in. “I thought you did not let it trouble you on Sundays?”

“No more I do, except when summat brings it to my mind. Nelson here seemed to think that hands on piecework can waste their time without th’ concern suffering, and I was merely explaining that fixed expenses are just th’ same, whether we turn out much or little.”

[218]

“What deplorable ignorance! I hope he has grasped the point. Have you, Nelson?”

“I think I have. All the same —”

“Never mind all the same. If you say any more, uncle will consider it his duty to make another explanation, and we shall be talking business all the evening.”

“That is right, Miriam — we shall,” observed her father. “Ay, let’s talk about summat else. What do you think them bullocks made, Robert, as I sent to Preston?”

“Oh, it has to be bullocks, has it!” laughed Miriam. “I think I would rather have a discussion on fixed expenses than a talk about bullocks.”

“Why, God bless me! what would the lass have?” exclaimed Mr. Ruberry, with a bewildered look. “Neither business nor bullocks! What must it be, then?”

“Uncle has been reading the papers all afternoon. Has he no news to tell us? Perhaps he will oblige us by starting a subject which has no relation either to bullocks or fixed expenses?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That is a good idea. Ay, do, Robert,” interposed his brother. “I never read owt but th’ market reports and cock-fights myself. You read everything. Is there owt going on?”

“Lots. There has been a mill between Conkey Jim and the Hammersmith Pet. Two or three of the royal princes were there, and ever so many noblemen. They say as the Prince Regent backed th’ pet to th’ tune of a thousand pounds. If he did, he lost it, for th’ pet came off second best. Then there was a bull bait last week at Leeds, and th’ bull broke loose and tossed six or seven folks over his head, and as many more were thrown down and trodden to death; and th’ Carlisle mail coach has been robbed by two highwaymen between Garstang and Lancaster —”

“What! I thought all the highwaymen had been wiped out.”

“It doesn’t seem so; and, really, what wi’ robbery, riot, and murder, I don’t know what th’ country is coming to. However, I’m glad to see that th’ authorities are acting with vigor. Seven men and two women have been sentenced to death at Lancaster — two of ’em for stealing pieces off a croft — and a meeting of weavers at Burnley to petition for reform has been dispersed and th’ ringleaders arrested. And serve ’em right too! I’d transport every one of ’em. What do they know about politics? Let ’em stop at home and mind their looms, and be contented with that state of life as God has given ’em, I’m content; why shouldn’t they be? —

[219]

and I work as bard as anybody. To bear some folks talk, we might be the most down-trodden and ill-used people as is, yet I’ll be bound to say as that there isn’t anywhere a better governed or a happier country than this.”

“Although, what with robbery, murder, and riot, you don’t know what it is coming to. Uncle Robert,” observed Miriam, with an amused smile.

“Did I say so? I didn’t mean; I mean I did not — you take one up so sharp, Miriam,” be stammered, after a stare of annoyance and surprise. “And if things are not quite what they should be, it isn’t the fault of the government or the laws. While the war lasted the Jacobites were never tired of prating about peace and plenty. Well, we’ve got peace, and now plenty seems farther off than ever. Shows what fools they are.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“That reminds me — talking of peace, I mean — that reminds me of Major Dene,” put in Mr. Ruberry — “Colonel Dene, I should say; he’s got promoted, you know. Is there owt about him in th’ papers you have been reading?”

“In what way? There’s been no *Gazette* lately, has there?”

“Don’t you know? I thought I’d told you. His regiment forms part of the army of occupation in France. He had been on furlough since Waterloo — owing to his wound — and when he was promoted to the colonelcy, had to go off at a minute’s notice. That’s why Mrs. Dene did not call on Miriam; she went with him. I thought the regiment might have been ordered home. When it is he means to retire on half-pay, and settle down at Dene Hall for good. He doesn’t think there’s any likelihood of another war for a long time, and he would rather lead the life of a country gentleman, and look after his estates, than waste his time in country quarters. That’s what he told me.”

“He’ll ten to one be back soon, then?”

“He’ll not leave the regiment before it leaves France, and that mayn’t be for twelve or eighteen months; at least, so th’ steward was saying t’other day.”

“Well, he hasn’t been at home much since he came into th’ property, has he?”

“About six or seven months in as many years. He has seen a lot of service. Colonel Dene has.”

“Colonel Dene was old Mr. Dene’s nephew — wasn’t he, father?” asked Miriam. “I just remember him driving about in a low carriage, with a pair of piebald ponies. He always gave me a kindly nod.”

[220]

“Ay, a fine old English gentleman was Mr. Dene. Uncommonly fond of cock-fighting he was; never had less than a hundred brace of game birds in prime condition. Many a main I’ve seen ’em fight, and before he got so gouty he’d ride fifty miles any day to see a bull or a bear bait. And the cellar of port wine he kept! Nobody had to dine with Mr. Dene as couldn’t carry two or three bottles of it away under his belt; and he made a rule of getting drunk at least once a week. He had a head, he had. I never saw his like; there’s no such heads nowadays” — sighing.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“What a pleasant old gentleman! Major — I mean Colonel — Dene doesn’t seem to resemble him much.”

“Not a bit. He hasn’t a head worth a row of pins. Why, he drinks claret, and I’ve heard of him saying as he thought cockfighting and bull-baiting cruel sports. But then there was not much kinship between them.”

“I thought old Mr. Dene was the colonel’s uncle.”

“Not quite. They came off th’ same stock, however. Th’ colonel’s mother was own niece to Mr. Dene’s half-brother. Th’ old squire had nephews of his own, and all of ’em expected to get th’ property; and they say as he left it to th’ colonel just to spite ’em all. And a good job too; them nephews were a rare lot of wastrels.”

“He had to change his name, hadn’t he?” put in Robert.

“Ay, that was the condition, I believe.”

“Indeed! I did not know that,” said Miriam, in some surprise. “What used the Colonel’s name to be?”

“I’ve clean forgotten, lass. It’s a long time since I heard it, and I’ve never known him as owt but Colonel Dene. What was it, Robert?”

“Nay, I can’t tell. I’ve quite enough to do to mind my own business, without keeping other folks’ names i’ my head, as I haven’t heard for years, and care nowt about. And what does it matter? We know who he is now.”

At this point the door was furtively pushed open a few inches, and Margaret (who was given to shyness) informed her young mistress in a stage whisper that “tay was ready.”

Thereupon all filed into the dining-room, and Robin had the felicity of sitting at Miriam’s left hand.

The tea-service was of exquisite old china, as fine and as transparent as a sea-shell, and the teapot (which had belonged to her grandmother) was something to live up to, and would have made

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

a modern collector die of envy. But there were no plates — wooden platters for tea and breakfast being still the fashion at Oaken Cleugh. The bread was served up in slices of wafer-like thinness, well buttered, and there were muffins, crumpets, boiled eggs, and ham collops in almost lavish profusion. The beverage which gave its name to the repast was strong and fragrant, which, seeing that tea at that time cost from five to six shillings a pound, was perhaps more than might have been expected. But it was a tradition at Oaken Cleugh to have everything of the best, especially in the way of eatables and drinkables.

After tea the party adjourned to the drawing-room, and Miriam, seating herself at the harpsichord, sang and played, chiefly old-fashioned hymn tunes. Robin, who stood by with beaming face, turned over the leaves of her music-book. The improvised concert concluded with the singing of the doxology, in which “Old Bob” joined with seeming fervor, and in a somewhat harsh, yet not untuneful voice. The young fellow would fain have lingered a little longer; but when Mr. Ruberry said something about whiskey and water, and its being nearly bedtime, he took it as a hint that he had outstayed his welcome, and, after bidding the brothers and Miriam good-night, and thanking them for their hospitality, he went his way.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

REBUFFS.

“WHAT do you think of this reading and going on, Robert?” asked Benjamin of his brother, as they were sipping their grog in the parlor, after Robin’s departure.

“Well, I cannot say as I particularly like it. The less apprentices know about books and such like the better, in my opinion. But what can you do? It pleases Miriam, and happen does not do so much harm, after all. It isn’t as if the apprentices were learning to read — that wouldn’t do at all. They’d be lazier and more discontented than they are now. But there’s one thing you’ll have to mind. You’ll have to take care as them two doesn’t get too thick.”

“Too thick! What do you mean?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“What I say. What folks generally do mean when they talk about lasses and lads getting too thick.”

[222]

“But — you don’t know what you are talking about, Robert!” exclaimed Mr. Ruberry, excitedly. “It is quite impossible. You forget, I think, that Miriam is my daughter, and Nelson nowt but a common parish apprentice.”

“And she’s a lass and he’s a lad, and when lasses and lads get together, they do sometimes get too thick. However, it’s nowt to me. I only thought —”

“It’s absurd — impossible!” interrupted the other, angrily. “I wonder at you, Robert! You are too suspicious — too suspicious by half.”

“Well, I happen am; but Miriam is very young, remember, and when lasses are at that age —”

“What does an old bachelor like you know about lasses?”

“Humph! There’s many an old bachelor knows more about lasses than married men do,” rejoined Robert, with a cynical laugh. “That’s the main reason why they keep single.”

“It’s perfectly ridiculous, I tell you!” said Ben, now quite in a fume. “Such an idea could not possibly enter Miriam’s head. She’s as good as gold!”

“You’re right there, she is, but very inexperienced and without a mother; and Nelson is a good-looking young fellow, and he knows about books, and can talk gradely English.”

“What by that? He’s nowt but a factory lad, and she’d never think, and he’d never dare — It’s all nonsense! I mean Miriam to marry a man of birth and breeding, and what I tell her she’ll do.”

Robert Ruberry leaned back in his chair, and laughed heartily.

“You think so, do you?” he exclaimed. “Well, I don’t reckon to be much of a prophet, but I’ll prophesy one thing: When th’ time comes she’ll please herself, not you. Mark me if she doesn’t. All th’ same, I shall be fain if she does wed a highflyer — what you call a man of birth and breeding — but you may take your davy as she willn’t let

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

you pick and choose for her. Miriam isn't a lass of that sort, and if you let on as you're expecting owt of th' sort, it will just set her against it. However, it's nowt to me. She's your daughter, not mine. I only thought as I would just drop you a bit of a hint."

"A bit of a hint! I call it a damned broad hint," growled Mr. Ruberry, as he mixed himself a glass of punch. "And I don't know as I want any hints. I dare say I can see as far into a stone wall as anybody else."

Robert smiled sardonically as if he were not quite sure about it.

[223]

Ben, however, made no further remark, but went on silently smoking, as if his thoughts were too big for words.

Although Mr. Ruberry resented his brother's interference in his family concerns, and affected to despise his warnings, they made their mark, and the longer he pondered them the less he liked them. The contingency suggested by Robert was at least possible, and, albeit he tried to persuade himself that Miriam "would have more sense," and Nelson "would never have the impudence to think of such a thing," the result of his musings (extending intermittently over several days) was a resolve to forbid him the house, and put Miriam on her guard.

"Have you seen owt of Nelson, lately?" he asked her, with assumed indifference, as they sat one evening at tea. "You said something about him having some more books, didn't you?"

"It is hardly possible he can have read those he took already. It was only last Sunday but one that he was here."

"So you don't think he's likely to be coming again just yet?"

"Unless he finds the books unsuitable."

"And he very likely will."

"What makes you think that, father?"

"For th' sake of coming here — and getting asked to tea."

"And do you think so ill of him, father, as to believe that he would tell an untruth on the chance of getting an invitation to tea?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Why, no. I don’t think I would go so far as to say that,” said Mr. Ruberry, perceiving that he was rather on a wrong tack. “But he likes coming — there’s no denying that — and if it isn’t to get his tea, it must be for something else.”

“What else can it be, father?”

“How should I know? You are more likely — I mean” — (abruptly) — “I mean that I don’t want him to come any more; and if he does come, I want you not to see him.”

“Why, father, what has Nelson done wrong? You were saying only the other day that he was shaping so well!” returned Miriam, with a surprised look.

“So he is. But that’s nowt — I mean, it’s business. Anyhow, I don’t want him here.”

“Because he is an apprentice, I suppose? All the same, father, he is a gentleman — and of good breeding too.”

“Who says so?”

“It is evident in his manner and appearance.”

[224]

“Well, that’s the very reason I don’t want him to come here,” said Mr. Ruberry, with an impatient gesture, as if he found his daughter’s questionings both embarrassing and irritating.

“You don’t want him to come here because he is a well-bred young man! You are talking in riddles, father.”

“I don’t want him to come here because — because people might talk, if you will know!” blurted out Mr. Ruberry, now really angry, albeit the next moment he bitterly regretted both his display of temper and his not very discreet remark, which he would have recalled had it been possible.

“I think I understand what you mean, father, and it shall be as you wish,” said Miriam, with bowed head and burning cheeks; and when tea was over she quietly withdrew.

Of all this Robert Ruberry had been keenly, though silently, observant.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Well, if anybody had towed me, I wouldn’t have believed ’em,” he exclaimed, when his niece was gone.

“Believed what?”

“That you could be such — that you could be so foolish.”

“Why, what have I done?” asked Mr. Ruberry, defiantly.

“The very thing you shouldn’t have done. You’ve put it into her head. She’ll think about nowt else now.”

“Come, come, now! Didn’t she say as it should be as I wished?”

“She did say so, meaning as she wouldn’t ask him here again; but she didn’t say as she wouldn’t think about him.”

“Well, I happen did say too much. I know I said more than I meant to. But she put me out so with her questions. However, it’s very easy to find fault; what would you have done?”

“I would have begun at the other end — given Nelson to understand as he isn’t welcome at your house. He would have troubled you no more after that.”

“I can do so yet. But wouldn’t it be best to get rid of him altogether — send him about his business?”

“You cannot. We are as much bound to him as he is to us.”

“We might send him back to his spinning.”

The very worst thing you could do. It would set folks talking at once. Besides, he is getting very useful, and the concern would suffer. Best let it drop. At any rate, you have put an end to her seeing him here, and I don’t suppose there is much likelihood of her seeing him at the factory, or calling on him at Jim Rabbits’. Not as I think there’s owt between ’em, ox as such a thought has

[225]

ever entered her head — unless you put it there just now. I could tell that by her face when she began to see what you were driving at.”

“I wish you hadn’t put owt o’ th’ sort into my head,” growled Ben. “It has bothered me ever since, and it bothers me yet.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I wish I hadn’t,” returned Robert, with a sardonic smile. “However, as we both seem to have done our worst for our best, let’s say no more about it. Some things are better let alone, and this seems to be one on ’em.”

On a Sunday evening, some two or three weeks after this conversation, Robin presented himself at Oaken Cleugh and asked for an interview with its young mistress.

“Tell Miss Ruberry,” he said to Phoebe, who opened the door for him, “that I have brought back her books, and should be glad to have another or two.”

“Certainly, Nelson. If you’ll wait here a minute I’ll let her know, and bring you word,” answered the maiden, graciously; for, though she looked upon him as being socially rather beneath her, he had a comely face and nice manners, and the thought had more than once crossed her mind that he would make an eligible sweetheart.

In five minutes she returned.

“Miss Ruberry is sorry she cannot see you,” said Phoebe; “but she will be pleased if you will step into her room and take what books you like. Shall I go with you?”

Robin, who looked very glum, nodded assent, and, accompanying the maid to Miss Ruberry’s room, restored to their places the books he had brought, and took two others at random.

“What a scholar you must be to read so many books. Nelson! I wish I could read,” simpered Phoebe, with a killing glance of her big black eyes.

“You don’t read!” said Robert, observant of the glance, but unconscious of its meaning.

“No; I wish I did. Nobody never larned me,” murmured the girl, with a second glance, even more eloquent than the first.

“Why don’t you go to school, then?” and with that Robin turned on his heel and left the room.

“Well, I never!” exclaimed Phoebe, in a towering passion. “Go to school, indeed! Let him go to school hissel’, and larn manners. I wouldn’t have him for a sweetheart at any price — not if there wasn’t another lad left at Birch Dene.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

After a decent interval Robin repeated the experiment, with precisely the same result, save that Phoebe gave him a cuttingly cool reception, and he declined to take any more books.

“Tell Miss Ruberry that I am very much obliged to her, but for the present I don’t require any more books,” he said.

“Yes, I’ll tell her,” answered the young woman, with a saucy toss of her head; “and, if I was you, I wouldn’t come bothering any more about books, for I am sure she doesn’t want you.”

Having delivered this Parthian arrow, Phoebe, by way of driving it home, banged the door behind him, and Robin knew, as he already suspected, that he was no longer a *persona grata* at Oaken Cleugh. And he half guessed the truth — that his exclusion was more Mr. Ruberry’s doing than Miriam’s, for whenever they met casually, at church and elsewhere, she always gave him the same kindly nod, and, opportunity serving, a word of friendly greeting. There were times, moreover, when he thought he could discern in her beautiful eyes a wistful, pathetic look, as if she regretted as much as he did a separation which she had been unable to avert. But it all came to the same thing: their pleasant meetings and fraternal relations were at an end, and he had little hope that they would ever be renewed.

The brothers Ruberry were naturally cognizant of Robin’s rebuffs. They knew that he had been twice at Oaken Cleugh, that on neither occasion had he been seen by Miriam, and they gathered from Phoebe that he was not likely to come again.

Benjamin was jubilant; he saw in this consummation a proof of his superior sagacity, and crowed loudly over his would-be-wiser brother.

“What do you say now?” he exclaimed. “Wasn’t I right in speaking to Miriam as I did? If I hadn’t, he would have been coming yet. You’re very knowing about business, I’ll admit — nobody more so; but about lasses, and farming stock, and crops—”

“I’m not up to much, you think. Well, I never reckoned to know much about farming; it is not in my line. But about lasses I reckon to know as much as here and there an odd ’un; and I believe yet as I was quite right about Miriam,” said Robert, who never, if he could help it, owned to a mistake. “I still think you went the wrong way to work. Anyhow, if I hadn’t spoken, you would neither have seen nowt nor said nowt.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Well — ay — happen,” said the elder, rather taken aback by this way of putting the matter. “But I am not quite sure as there

[227]

was owt to see. Folks sometimes see trees when there’s no wood. However, it’s happen as well as it’s put a stop to. A parish apprentice, let him be as learned as he likes, is no fit companion for my lass. Have you heard as there’s some talk of the Denes coming back?”

“No. When are they coming?”

“I haven’t heard exactly when. To tell th’ truth, I don’t think as anybody knows. It’s just talk. I wonder how soon after they do come back Mrs. Dene will be calling on Miriam?”

“So do I,” said Robert, with one of his sarcastic laughs.

“You mean as you don’t think as she will. I am sure she will. Colonel Dene is a man of his word.”

“I don’t deny it. But man and wife are not always of one mind, and highflyers like Mrs. Dene don’t take kindly to manufacturers’ daughters.”

“Manufacturers’ daughters! Ay, and summat more. The Ruberrys are a good old family, and I’m a country gentleman, though I am in trade.

“So you are — after a fashion. You’d be but a poor one, though, if it wasn’t for th’ factory. However, we shall see; and I wouldn’t be so cocksure about it if I were you. It’s a bad thing to be cocksure about owt.”

“What an unbelieving old sinner you are, Robert! Come now; I’ll bet you owt you like as Mrs. Dene comes to see Miriam.”

“Ay, but when?”

“Within a month after she gets back.”

“Well, I’m not much given to betting — it is not in my line — but I’ll wager a five-pun note as she doesn’t.”

“Done with you; and I hope you’ll lose, if it’s only to punish you for being so doubtful about everything, and going against everything as I say. You haven’t got quite all th’ sense, Robert.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A MOMENTOUS VISIT.

THE drawing-room at Oaken Cleugh; Miriam reclining in a rocking-chair reading a book, which, judging from the frequency with which she lays it down and thinks — or dreams— does not seem to be of absorbing interest. Are her thoughts about Robin? Possibly,

[228]

for the day before she had seen him at church, and they had exchanged greetings in the porch, and when their eyes met for an instant it seemed to her that his looked reproach. And no wonder; for had she not, after promising to be his counsellor and friend, and letting him call her “sister,” refused to see him when he called, and terminated their intimacy, and let nearly a twelvemonth pass without a word of explanation? Yet how could she explain — how tell him that her father — And, as she recalled her father’s words, she bowed her head and blushed as deeply as at the moment when their significance first flashed on her mind. And yet — and yet she would like to let Robin know that he had not offended her, that his exclusion from the house was not her doing, and that her sisterly affection for him was unaltered and unabated. True, she could write; but, even though it were maidenly to do so (as to which she had grave doubts), it was quite out of the question, after her father’s warning, to open a correspondence with Robin. For the letter would have to go either by hand or post.

In the former case she would need to confide in a servant, and post letters were so few and far between that nobody at Birch Dene could get one without everybody else knowing. So there was apparently nothing for it but to wait with what patience she might for an opportunity of putting herself right with him. A word would do; she need only say that she still regarded herself as his friend (there could surely be no harm in that) and would always take an interest in his welfare.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

And then, trying to dismiss the subject from her mind, she resumed her reading; but before she had reached the bottom of the page the door opened, and Phoebe appeared on the threshold in a state of intense though suppressed excitement.

“The carriage from the Hall has just turned into th’ coach-road,” she said, eagerly. “It’ll ten to one be Mrs. Dene. What shall I do?”

“Show her in, of course.”

“And th’ footman? — it’s him wi’ th’ big fat coaves— must I show him in too?”

“Of course not,” laughed Miriam; “he will wait outside with the carriage.”

“Thank goodness!” murmured the maid, with a sigh of relief. “That man frightens me; he’s so grand; a peacock’s a fool to him.”

Notwithstanding Miriam’s seeming coolness, she felt both nervous

[229]

and excited, for Mrs. Dene was the greatest lady in the neighborhood, a “highflyer,” as her uncle said, and her visit a momentous event.

But her guest quickly put her at her ease.

“At last!” she exclaimed, taking Miriam’s hand. “I promised myself this pleasure long ago. But we were called away so suddenly, it was quite impossible. I called on nobody. But now we are at home for good, and I hope we shall see much of each other.

How have you been? Very well! I am glad to hear it. We have had, oh, such a pleasant time in France, and my boy has grown so much! You would hardly know him. I would have brought him with me, but he still feels the effect of the journey — took a little rheum, in fact, from which he is not fully recovered. Ah, you have been reading. May I look? I am a great reader myself. Molière. *Vous savez le Français?*” — (with a gesture of surprise).

“*Oui, madame, je le sais, un peu.*”

Whereupon Mrs. Dene said something further in the same language, but, finding that Miriam knew it better than herself, she fell back on her mother tongue.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It is so nice that you have a knowledge of French,” she went on. “I have brought several French books back with me, and I shall be glad to lend them to you. And we are expecting shortly a French visitor. Captain de la Faucille, an officer of the king’s guard. It will be very nice for you to talk with him. He doesn’t know a word of English, poor man. Yes, I enjoyed my visit to France greatly. The regiment was quartered at Boulogne, not Boulogne-sur-Mer, but Boulogne-sur-Seine, which is quite near Paris. We attended all the duke’s receptions, and ‘assisted’ at a great banquet at the Tuileries, and went out somewhere or other nearly every evening. But I had one great anxiety —”

“What was that, Mrs. Dene?”

“My husband had to fight a duel. But he was very good; he did not tell me until it was over. He says it is wrong for a married man to risk his life except in his country’s cause, or to save the life of another. But the quarrel was forced on him, and he had no alternative. A Bonapartist officer, a noted bully, publicly insulted Colonel Dene in a *café*, and the colonel knocked him down. A challenge followed, as a matter of course. They fought in the Bois, and —”

“Yes, Mrs. Dene?”

[230]

“The Frenchman was killed.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” said Miriam, with a shudder.

“It was, indeed,” returned Mrs. Dene, gravely; “but it would have been much more dreadful had my husband been killed. And Captain Espinasse — that was his name — was a bloodthirsty ruffian. He made a practice of insulting and challenging our young officers, whom he invariably killed, out of revenge for Waterloo. He did not know that Colonel Dene was one of the best swordsmen in the British army. I think my husband did quite right — don’t you? He put an end to a career of murder.”

“I do think so. How brave he must be!” exclaimed Miriam, warmly. “Birch Dene ought to be proud of him.”

“I will tell him what you say; the compliment will please him,” said Mrs. Dene, with a gratified smile.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

She delighted to hear her husband praised.

“And now, when will you come to see me?”

“When you please, Mrs. Dene.”

“Shall we say next Thursday?”

“Certainly! If it be convenient for you, Thursday will suit me very well.”

“Come early, then, in time for luncheon, and we can have a long afternoon; and Colonel Dene would like you to bring that young man with you. I forget his name, but he does something at the factory. I always call him the lost heir.”

“You mean Nelson?”

“Yes; that is his name, I think.”

“I don’t know,” said Miriam, reddening. “I mean that he has his work to do, and — I am not sure that he could be spared. He is in the counting-house now, and they find him very useful. But, if you would write a line to my father, I dare say they would let him come.”

“Certainly, if you wish it; or my husband shall,” returned Mrs. Dene, with a slight lifting of the eyebrows and a keen glance at the girl. “But isn’t that your father passing the window? I might ask him now, and save the trouble of writing.”

The next moment Mr. Ruberry entered the room, booted and spurred, a hunting-crop under his arm and a jockey-cap in his hand.

“I must pray you to excuse this dress,” he said, after greeting Mrs. Dene with great respect. “I was just starting for Toppleton, when I heard you were here.”

“Don’t mention it, I beg. I always think it is the dress which

[231]

best beseems a gentleman — especially a gentleman of the old school, like yourself.”

Mr. Ruberry (who had put on his best company manner) smiled with all his face, and bowed in acknowledgment of the compliment, which made him feel two inches higher, and at least five years younger.

“I have just been asking your daughter to take luncheon with me next Thursday.”

Mr. Ruberry bowed again.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“And my husband would like Mr. Nelson to bear her company, if you would kindly let him.”

“Of course, certainly — anything you like, madame,” answered Mr. Ruberry, with effusion. And he would probably have said the same had she included Jim Rabbits and old Dick in her invitation.

“On Thursday, then,” said Mrs. Dene, rising from her chair and shaking hands with Miriam.

Mr. Ruberry accompanied her to her carriage, the door of which was opened by the footman with the “coaves,” and as she drove off he doffed his hat and made another low bow. Miriam, looking from the window, smiled. She had no idea that her father could be so courtly. Then he returned to the drawing-room, exultant.

“Didn’t I tell you so?” he exclaimed, with a boisterous laugh, clapping Miriam on the shoulder. “I knew as she’d come. And wasn’t I right when I said you would get asked to th’ Hall — though you are but a tradesman’s daughter. I wonder what your Uncle Robert will say now? Anyhow, I’ll make him pay me that five pounds, and thou shall have it, lass, to spend as thou likes.”

Robert did not say very much, but he contrived to take the gilt off his brother’s gingerbread for all that.

“You’re right for once,” he said; “and Mrs. Dene has more common-sense and neighborly feeling than I gave her credit for; but I don’t see what occasion there is for so much fratching (boasting). Nelson has to go, too, hasn’t he? That looks as if she doesn’t see so much difference between a parish apprentice and — what shall we say? — a country gentleman’s daughter. Does it? And, what’s more, they’ll be thrown together again. However, if it suits you, I have nowt to say against it.”

This was a consequence which, in his excitement, Mr. Ruberry had overlooked. He had almost forgotten, in fact, that he had promised to let the young fellow bear his daughter company.

“What a kill-joy you are, Robert!” he exclaimed, in a deeply

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

mortified tone. "I never make the least bit of a mistake that you don't pounce on it at once. But I don't think Mrs. Dene had the least idea of putting Nelson on th' same level as Miriam. It's just a whim of the colonel's. And I willn't let him go with her — I'll be hanged if I will. It came so sudden, I really hadn't time to think."

"Nay, nay; that would never do. You must keep your promise, or else the fat will be in the fire with a vengeance. If one goes, t'other must go. It's a pity you hadn't presence of mind to make an excuse; you could easily have said as he couldn't be spared, or as you would speak to me. However, it cannot be helped now. You'll just have to make th' best of it"

"Ay, it is a pity," repeated Benjamin, ruefully; "but, to tell th' honest truth, I was that pleased when I saw Mrs. Dene I never gave Nelson a thought, confound him! But it's not likely to happen again; and I don't suppose any harm will come of it. Miriam's a sensible lass."

"Well, there's no telling. Harm does oft come of it when lasses and lads get together. However, we'll hope for th' best," said Robert, with an exasperating smile — so exasperating that his brother disdained to reply.

The next question that arose was how Miriam should travel. Birch Dene Hall was within easy walking distance of Oaken Cleugh, but Mr. Ruberry did not deem it becoming for his daughter to proceed thither on foot. To send her in the gig, he thought, would be equally *infra dig.*, and as the old chaise, when overhauled, was found to be in an extremely dilapidated condition (it had not been used since the late Mrs. Ruberry's death), there was nothing for it but to get one from Manchester, and horse it with a pair of Mr. Ruberry's own animals. Still another difficulty was the disposal of Robin. To let him walk while Miriam rode might, feared Mr. Ruberry, give offence at the Hall. On the other hand, to let him go inside the chaise with Miriam was quite out of the question for several reasons. So the matter was compromised by putting him on the box with our old friend Gib Riding, who, in default of the hostler (laid up with rheumatism), had to act as coachman.

Mr. Ruberry flattered himself that he managed this rather delicate business with consummate address, so contriving matters as to keep the young people apart without letting his object be perceived.

After informing Robin of the invitation, and telling him to be

[233]

sure to “behave” (as if he had been a small boy), he observed loftily, and as if it were quite an afterthought:

“If you’ll be up at our house about half-past twelve, you may happen ride in th’ chaise.”

Robin, it need hardly be said, was punctual to the minute, and he had an opportunity of greeting Miriam as she stepped into the chaise.

“I think you’d better get on the box, and see as Gib doesn’t take th’ stoop” (drive against a post), he said, half laughing, to Robin. Then, in an undertone, “See as he drives careful, specially coming back. Gib isn’t as good a whip as Carroty Joe (the hostler). Captain hasn’t been in double harness afore, and I shouldn’t like there to be any lumber. I’m a bit doubtful how he’ll shap.”

Robin, after promising faithful compliance with these instructions, took his place beside Gib, and the team went at a slapping pace down the avenue — for, though Mr. Ruberry sometimes kept a screw, he had a rooted objection to a slug.

“It’s a different consarn this fro’ that owd cart as I once druv yo’ fro’ Manchester in, isn’t it?” said Gib, proudly, as they turned into the main road. Th’ mayster thinks as I corn’t tool a pair o’ hosses. He wor never more mista’en in his life. I worn’t three year in a coaching stable for nowt. I’ll drive wi’ onybody, whether it be a ploo or a post-chaise. Bithmon! I never thowt as I should be driving yo’ to th’ Ho wi’ th’ young missus! Yo’ve ben getting on, yo’ have that. And yo’ desERVE to get on, if it’s nobbut for never axing me for that shilling as yo’ lant me when yo’ coom at fost — and that’s going i’ two years sin’ — I’d ha’ paid yo’, but I haven’t had as mich i’ my pocket sin’ — I haven’t, as true as — Th’ wife olus draws my wage, and hoo willn’t gi’ me more than sixpence a week for beer brass — Whoa! Steady, Captain! — and it’s hard slacking yer thirst on sixpence a week. However, I reckon as yo’ and me’s more than straight now, and yo’ll be in my debt to th’ tune of eighteen pence after to-day.”

“I in your debt to the tune of eighteen pence! How on earth do you make that out? Why, you owe me a shilling. But, as it’s so long sin’ —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Come, now! Don’t yo’ think as driving yo’ and th’ young missus to th’ Ho in a chaise and pair desarves hoaf a crown? — and th’ chaise new done up and th’ hosses as fresh as paint. Eighteen pence’ll just settle it. And I olus said as yo’ wor a gentleman i’ th’ bottom; and your fayther wor one afore yo’, I’ll be bun!”

[234]

Robin laughed, but the appeal, backed by so handsome a compliment, was irresistible. Gib got his eighteen pence.

“I knew yo’ would,” he said, complacently pocketing the money; “and if ever I hear onybody say as yo’re not a gradely gentleman I’ll punch his shins for him. And look yo’ here, now! If yo’ like to get inside as we come back, I’ll say nowt — a nod’s as good as a wink, you know. It’ll be to’ard th’ edge o’ dark, I dar say, and I’m sure hoo’d liefer have yore company than be boxed up aw by hersel’; and yo’re not th’ lad I take yo’ for if yo’d have owt ageean it. Whoa, Captain! Did thou never see a black jackass afore, thou goamless beggar?”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AT DENE HALL.

AN old historic mansion was Birch Dene Hall, the oldest part of it dating from the time of the first Tudor, to which had been added one wing in the Elizabethan style, and another in that of Queen Anne, the whole forming a somewhat incongruous yet picturesque building — a quaint mixture of dormer-windows, timbered walls, high gables, and red chimney-stacks, clothed in a mantle of creeping ivy. Before the terraced front stretched the park — a wide expanse of undulating turf, studded with grand old trees — and the long avenue wound between a double row of ancient elms, which in summer met overhead and made a cool and grateful shade.

“If I lived here I couldn’t help being as happy as a king, even if I’d to wait on mysel’ and nowt to eat but porridge and blue milk; and they say as Colonel Dene has

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

ten thousand a year, to say nowt of his handsome wife and that bonnie little lad,” observed Gib, as they sighted the house.

The same thought occurred to Robin. It was impossible not to envy the owner of such a fine old place and so beautiful a domain.

As they drove up to the door the gentleman in question, with a gun under his arm and a brace of setters at his heels, rounded the corner of the house. On seeing the carriage he hurried forward, and was just in time to help Miriam to alight. Colonel Dene greeted his guests cordially, and with less of formality than was customary at the period. Then he took them round the building,

[235]

pointing out some of its more remarkable characteristics, and relating a little of its history. The outer door, of massive oak, was studded with enormous nails, and pitted here and there with bullet-holes, the bullets being still quite visible.

“We are supposed to be very proud of these bullet-marks,” said Colonel Dene, pleasantly. “My wife thinks all the world of them, and they certainly are an interesting historical relic — although, if I had been living at the time, I fancy I should have been among those who made them.”

“You mean that the house was held for the king, and the bullets were fired by the Roundheads?” asked Robin.

“Exactly; and a brave defence the garrison made of it — I will say that for them, albeit I think they were on the wrong side. But come in, and I will show you something of which I am proud.”

As the colonel spoke he led the way into a spacious hall, panelled in oak, whereon hung trophies of arms, tattered and moth-eaten banners, and old family portraits, which looked down on several suits of ancient armor, standing erect on their pedestals.

“What a glorious old place!” exclaimed Robin, enthusiastically. “It is like seeing history, or the realization of a dream. How proud of it you must be, Colonel Dene!”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“All the more so as I wasn’t brought up in the expectation that it could by any possibility ever be mine. Yes, it is a dear old place. See! Here is something of which I am a good deal prouder than of the bullet-marks I showed you just now. This harness was worn by an ancestor of mine at Flodden Field. He led a hundred archers of Birch to the battle, and, according to tradition, their cloth-yard shafts did dire execution among the Scots on that famous day. There is a fine description of the battle in ‘Marmion.’ Perhaps you may have heard of it — by Scott, you know, who wrote ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel.’ ”

“Oh, yes,” said Robin. “I know ‘Marmion;’ ” and, with great fire and animation, he repeated the well-known lines, descriptive of Flodden fight.

“Who is this declaiming Scott?” said Mrs. Dene, who had entered the hall unperceived, as Robin, remembering where he was, paused in some confusion. “I was not aware you were a reader of poetry, and could recite it so well, Mr. Nelson.”

“He has read a good deal, I think,” observed Colonel Dene, regarding him thoughtfully. “Would you like to look round the library until luncheon is ready, Nelson?”

[236]

Robin answered in the affirmative, and as Mrs. Dene led Miriam off in one direction, the colonel led him off in another.

The library was a spacious room, famished in oak, and with deeply embayed windows, between which hung a few choice paintings, while the inner walls were covered with books from floor to ceiling, and from end to end.

“We have a vast number of old works, as you see,” remarked the colonel “Nobody reads them now. But I think we have also the best of modern and contemporary authors. Here are Scott’s poems, for instance. Have you read any of his novels? There is a new one just out, ‘The Bride of Lammermoor’ — to my thinking, one of the finest tragedies in the language.”

“No, sir, I have never had the opportunity. I cannot afford to buy books. ‘Marmion’ was lent to me.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Would you like to take one of these with you? They are splendid stories, and I am sure would entertain you. We have them all. The Waverley novels too —”

“How are you getting on with the Ruberrys?” asked Colonel Dene, after Robin had accepted the offer and tendered his thanks. “It must be horrible, living in that apprentice house. At least, I have heard so.”

“I don’t live there now, sir. I have been promoted.”

“To what?”

Robin told him.

“I am very glad. Yet, still — Miss Ruberry seems to be a very nice young woman. Is she as good as she looks?”

“As good as she looks! Yes — quite,” stammered Robin, surprised, as well he might be, by the suddenness and irrelevancy of the question. “Quite as good — and better.”

“Better than she looks! She must be very good, then. I suppose people like her?”

“Yes, sir. Everybody likes Miss Ruberry. She has persuaded her uncle to establish an infirmary in connection with the apprentice house. She looks after it herself, and goes a good deal among the tenants. It is thought she would do much more if Mr. Robert would let her. But, as it is, she has made great changes, and since she came home, the place is altogether brighter and better.”

“Well, from all I have heard, great changes were required at Factory Hollow, as folks call it. How is that poor devil we locked up going on?”

“Blincoe! He has grown a good deal, and begins to look some-

[237]

thing like a man. I don’t think, though, that his imprisonment did him much good.”

“How so?”

“It seems to have made him more sullen and revengeful, and he sometimes says things which make me fear that, occasion serving, he may try to revenge himself. They say he set Lowdham Mills on fire — the place he was at before he came to Birch Dene.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I hope he won’t do anything of that sort here; he is not likely to get off with imprisonment if he does. Fire-raising is a capital offence, and he would not get much mercy. Why should he hanker so after revenge. Has he been ill-used?”

“Terribly. Worse than a negro slave.”

“Well, these factory masters, like everybody else, must reap as they have sown. You are young, Nelson. Let me impress on you this lesson: As you sow now, so will you reap. No man can do wrong — ay, or shrink from doing right — without paying the penalty. Even an honest error of judgment may cause widespread misery. Have you warned your employers of Blincoe’s threats?”

“They hardly amount to threats. And it would be of no use speaking to Mr. Robert. He despises the hands too much to fear them. And he has been threatened so often, without anything coming of it, that he would give no heed — perhaps not even hear me. Besides, I don’t like to report expressions that I have accidentally overheard. The only effect would be to get Blincoe punished, and so make him more revengeful than ever.”

“Well, perhaps you are right. But couldn’t you speak to Mr. Ruberry?”

“Mr. Ruberry leaves the management nearly altogether to his brother. He would simply refer me to him, and I should probably be set down as a busybody. And Blincoe has really said very little that can be laid hold of. I judge more from his character and his antecedents than his words. I may be quite wrong.”

“Let us hope you are. You were speaking of Mr. Ruberry. Do you know anything of his late wife — who she was, or where she came from?”

“Nothing whatever, sir. I dare say Miss Ruberry could tell you.”

“I dare say she could” — dryly. “Have you heard anything more of the gentleman you were telling me about — I forget his name — who persuaded you to become an apprentice?”

[238]

“Moses Weevil. No; but I should very much like to have a word with him. What lies he and that beadle did tell me!”

“He must have wanted to get rid of you very badly.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I begin to think so. All the same, I cannot tell why. Solomon thought Mr. Bartlett had made a will in my favor, and that Weevil had destroyed it. But in that case why should he want to get me out of the way? I had no claim either on him or on the estate.”

“Mr. Bartlett wasn’t akin to you, then?”

“Not the least; though if I had been really his son, he could not have treated me more kindly. He did more for me than my father. Not that I blame my father; it is no fault of his.”

“How then? — But there goes the luncheon-bell. We must continue our talk afterwards. I should like to know more of Mr. Bartlett and yourself — if I may.”

After the apprentice house and Jim Rabbits’ cottage, it was a strange experience for Robin to find himself sitting next to Miriam in that grand old dining-room, as assiduously waited on by a butler so intensely solemn and respectable that he could hardly help calling him “Sir,” and a tall footman with powdered hair, as if he had been a young lord instead of a nameless waif. Miriam was as bright and cheerful as usual, and she and Mrs. Dene did the principal part of the talking. The host, though he said little, was quietly observant. Robin said even less, and seemed more thoughtful than befitted the occasion — perhaps because his recent conversation with Colonel Dene had roused painful memories.

When luncheon was over, the colonel suggested a walk round the grounds and a visit to the stables — a proposal in which Miriam and Robin gladly concurred; and Mrs. Dene, who lost no opportunity of exhibiting her son and heir, sent for the boy that he might accompany them.

The gardens were as old-fashioned as the house — straight walks, rectangular grass-plots, shrubs cut into the shapes of birds and beasts, with here and there a mossy fountain and a fish-pond full of fat carp. The conservatories and vine-houses greatly delighted Miriam, and an agreeable hour was spent in inspecting the horticultural treasures they contained.

“Now for the stables,” said Colonel Dene; and he was leading the way thither when a servant came to inform him that Mr. Alport, from Manchester, had just arrived, and desired to see him on business.

[239]

“If it is business, you had better go at once, Eustace,” observed Mrs. Dene. “I can show our guests round the stables, and we will follow you presently.”

“Yes, perhaps it were better so. I do not like to keep people waiting, and if Mr. Alport has not gone when you return. Nelson would perhaps like to go into the library and look at the books until I can join him.”

The stables were in excellent order, and the horses well-bred and in high condition. Robin admired them as much as Miriam had admired the conservatories; and “Master Dene,” as his mother, when speaking to “inferiors,” always called her son, insisted on being placed astride his pony, which was little bigger than a Newfoundland mastiff.

“He is young to begin riding, but I want him to be a consummate horseman. Every gentleman should ride well” — (strong emphasis on “gentleman”). Do you ride, Mr. Nelson?” asked Mrs. Dene.

“I have a faint recollection of riding either a pony or a donkey when I was a small boy, and when factory masters begin to provide their apprentices with saddle-horses, I shall probably have a chance of riding again,” laughed Robin.

“That is not very likely, I fear; but I thought, perhaps — Would you mind helping Master Dene to dismount from his pony, Mr. Nelson? Thank you. Now I think we have seen pretty nearly everything, and if you have no objection, we will retrace our steps. Are you tired. Miss Ruberry?”

“Not in the least. I never tire of walking in a garden — your grounds are so very beautiful; and I could look at the house forever. I have enjoyed my visit vastly, thanks to your kindness, Mrs. Dene. Haven’t you, Nelson?”

“I don’t think I ever enjoyed anything so much. Master Dene is very fortunate in being heir to so fine a property.”

“You are quite right, he is” — (looking fondly at the boy). “All the same, I hope it will be a long time before he comes into possession. My dear husband is still in the prime of life. Yet we cannot live forever, and it is pleasant to think that the property is not likely to pass into the hands of strangers — that the son will succeed the father.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Here we are at the Hall. There is the library, Mr. Nelson. I have no doubt Colonel Dene will soon have done with Mr. Alport. This way, if you please, Miss Ruberry.”

After making the tour of the library, and examining with professional interest some of the older books, he sought the copy of

[240]

“The Bride of Lammermoor,” of which Colonel Dene had spoken, and seating himself in a big arm-chair, began to read the first volume of that incomparable novel. But hardly had he opened the book when he gave a sort of gasp, looked up with an expression of intense bewilderment, and then, springing from his chair, walked hurriedly round the room.

“At last, at last!” he murmured. “I have found my name — I have found my name! Never, please Heaven, to forget it more! It is almost the same as that in the book. How strange! I will look again.”

And with that he sat down a second time, and, still holding the volume in his hand, became so absorbed in thought that he heard neither the opening of the door nor the footsteps of his host.

“You seem interested, Nelson. Deep in a book — eh? What is it?” asked Colonel Dene.

“ ‘The Bride of Lammermoor,’ sir,” said Robin, with a start of surprise.

“I knew you would like it. It is a splendid dramatic story, but the denouement is tragical. I confess I don’t much like tragedies, though if novels be true to life, they cannot always end happily. And it is well to show how cruel a strong-willed, overbearing woman can be, even to her own child. Is your mother still alive. Nelson?”

“No, sir. My mother died long ago.”

“And your father?”

“I only just remember him, sir,” answered Robin, evasively; for he felt that if he continued to answer the colonel’s questions he would end in telling him all, and he shrank from letting this gentleman, who was so kind to him, know that he was the son of a woman who had been convicted of a capital felony.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“You are very unfortunate to be cast on the world at so early an age without a parent’s care. I have always a deep sympathy for young men situated as you are. I never saw my own mother after I was thirteen. How old are you?”

“Exactly the same age as the century.”

“So you were born in 1800 — twenty years ago?”

“Yes, sir.”

And then the colonel, either perceiving that the young fellow answered his questions reluctantly, or not liking to be inquisitive, took up a newspaper and left him to read in peace — or rather to think, as, albeit his eyes were on the book, his thoughts were far away.

[241]

After a while there came a knock at the door, and a servant, quietly entering, informed his master that coffee was served in the morning room.

“Come, let us join the ladies,” said the colonel, rising from his chair. “Drinking a cup of coffee in the afternoon is a habit I contracted in the West Indies, where it was once my ill-fortune to spend several years.”

“Who is Mr. Alport, Eustace, and what does he want?” asked Mrs. Dene, as she handed her husband a cup of coffee.

“He is the chief constable’s secretary, or something of the sort, and he wants the local justices to suppress or proclaim — I don’t know what is the correct legal term — a reform meeting which the Radicals are proposing to hold shortly in this neighborhood.”

“And what answer did you give him?”

“None. I told him that I should like to make further inquiries before consenting to any such proceeding. Order must be maintained, of course; but I do not gather that any breach of the peace is apprehended. Alport says there will be seditious speeches, and urges that prevention is better than cure.”

“And don’t you think it is?”

“As a general principle, certainly. But I have only Alport’s word for it that the speeches would be seditious; and who is to define sedition! It were better, in my

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

opinion, to let the meeting take place, and then, if any of the speakers do spout sedition, prosecute them. For my part, I confess that I rather sympathize with these reformers. The country is in a very unsatisfactory condition, and the government seems to have no remedy but repression — if it be a remedy. A soldier on active service has no business to take a prominent part in politics, even if he could, and I have been campaigning the greater part of my life; but now that I have a free hand —”

“You would surely not openly take sides with these Radicals, Eustace!” interposed Mrs. Dene, with an alarmed look.

“I am not at all sure that I shall not. At any rate, I will have no hand in suppressing their meetings — so long as they keep the peace. Do you know a man of the name of Romford, Nelson?”

“Yes, sir; he is a silk weaver. It was he who lent me ‘Marmion.’ ”

“He has literary tastes, then?”

“Yes; he writes poetry, and is extremely well-read.”

“And speaks at Radical meetings?”

[242]

“I believe so; but I think he is a man of very moderate views, and he takes even greater interest in books than in politics.”

“I am afraid, though, that won’t prevent him from getting into trouble. His very moderation makes against him. The police think it is put on as a blind, and suspect him of holding secret relations with the physical force people; and Alport more than hinted that if Mr. Romford does not mind what he is about, he is very likely to be arrested. As you know the man, it might be a kindness to put him on his guard.”

Robin was about to say that he certainly would put Romford on his guard, when a footman appeared and announced that Miss Ruberry’s carriage was at the door, and as both Miriam and himself feared to outstay their welcome, they hastened to take their leave. Before they went away, Mrs. Dene expressed the hope that she would soon have the pleasure of seeing Miriam again; and the colonel, after reminding Robin not to forget “The Bride of Lammermoor,” told him to come to the Hall whenever he liked, and borrow from the library any book he might fancy.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Nothing is more unfair,” he said, “than to monopolize books. They are so costly that only the well-to-do can afford to buy them, and it is the duty of those who have to lend to those who have not.”

And so this memorable visit came to an end, but not quite in the way which Mr. Ruberry had planned; for Robin, contrary to his master’s expectations and oblivious of his injunctions, followed Miriam into the chaise and took the seat opposite her.

“You here?” she exclaimed, with a look of surprise.

“I beg your pardon — I had no idea — I mean I did not intend — I wasn’t thinking. Shall I get out and go on the box?” he said, with bated breath.

“Of course you must get out — and at once. But, no, not now. We are off, and it would look so strange to stop the carriage in the avenue. Wait till we have passed the lodge gates.”

“Yes. I will wait till we have passed the lodge gates,” said Robin, humbly.

“Miriam — I beg your pardon — I mean Miss Ruberry.”

“You may call me Miriam — when nobody is by. I am still your sister.”

“You are!” — joyfully. “Then why do you always refuse to see me and keep out of my way?”

“I cannot tell you. It is not my wish; it is my duty. I cannot see you at Oaken Cleugh any more.”

[243]

“But do tell me why, Miriam. Otherwise I shall think the fault lies with me — that I have offended you, or you have heard something to my detriment.”

“Not at all. Did I not say that I am still your sister? And now, don’t ask me any more questions. If you do I shall not answer.”

“So! I was right, then, in thinking I wasn’t wanted at Oaken Cleugh.”

“That is asking — I never said so — but perhaps. You forget, I think, that though Oaken Cleugh is my home it is not my house. Let that suffice” — peremptorily.

After this a spell of silence, which Robin was the first to break.

“Miriam!” he said, softly, as they passed the lodge gates.

“If you ask any more —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I am not going to ask. I’m going to tell you something — something that will surprise you.”

“Yes, Robin. What is it?” — eagerly.

“I know my name.”

“You know your name! How?”

“I found one so like it in this book — ‘The Bride of Lammermoor’ — that the very moment I set eyes on it I remembered my own.”

“And that is —?”

“Ravensmere. My name is Ravensmere, Miriam.”

“Ravensmere! Why, that was Colonel Dene’s name before he came into the property. It is one of his names still.”

“But — but — it seems impossible. How do you know? Who told you?” exclaimed Robin, excitedly. “Oh, no, I cannot believe it.”

“Mrs. Dene told me. We were talking about the old Denes, and she said her husband, though descended from them on his mother’s side, was really a Ravensmere. His full name is William Eustace Ravensmere Dene. Oh, Robin! — the carriage! It is turning over! We shall be killed! Help! Oh!”

A violent swaying of the chaise — an exclamation of dismay from Gib — a rattle of iron hoofs on the splash-board — and a shriek from Miriam as she is thrown against Robin, who, by way of shielding her from harm, folds her in a tight embrace.

[244]

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SENSIBLE LASS.

IT was not a very big smash, and no great harm was done. Robin received on his hat and partly on his head a piece of broken glass, which, but for his promptitude in protecting Miriam as he did, might have cut her face and hurt her seriously. With some

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

difficulty he opened the door, and, after scrambling out, extricated his companion — as the carriage was still wobbling about, a somewhat delicate operation.

“Oh, Robin, I am so thankful you were with me!” exclaimed Miriam, fervently. “What should I have done?”

Two wheels of the chaise were in the ditch — two in the air. Gib, with nose badly barked, and clothes covered with mud, was at the horses’ heads trying to pacify Captain, who plunged violently, and showed a strong disposition to kick himself loose.

“Why, Gib, you are drunk!” said Robin, regarding him closely.

“Well, I wor a bit on a while sin’, that’s true; but this do has gradely sobered me. It’s aw along o’ that eighteen pence as yo’ gan me; I supped it welly aw at th’ Hare and Hounds. But it worn’t my fault — not a bit. I couldn’t ha’ driven moor careful if th’ chaise had been a hearse and yo’ two corpses wi’ brass plates on th’ lids. It wor that black jackass, th’ same as Captain shied at as we wor coming. And it had milk-kits on its back this time, and th’ Owd Lad doesn’t hate holy water moor than Captain hates a black jackass wi’ them fangling things on its back. He cannot abide ’em.”

“Never mind the black jackass,” said Robin, sharply. “What is to be done? That is the question.”

“Will yo’ unyoke th’ bosses while I howd ’em? There’s no use trying to poo th’ chaise out; th’ tackle isn’t strong enough. Whoa, Captain! Steady, Smiler, my lad! That’s it. We mun have some strength and a plank or two to get them hind wheels out o’ th’ dyke bottom. Th’ best thing as yo’ and th’ young missis can do is to go home by th’ pad gate (footpath) as fast as yo’ can, and send some o’ th’ chaps here, while I bide wi’ th’ hosses.”

[245]

“Come, Miriam, let us go at once,” said Robin. “We can do it in twenty minutes by the fields.”

“Don’t forget to tell th’ mayster as th’ hosses is no waur, and it wor aw along o’ that theer black jackass, curse it!” shouted Gib, as they set off.

“I am afraid my father will be very angry,” said Miriam.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That is very likely, I think. He told me to stop on the box with Gib, and see that he drove carefully coming back, and instead of that I got inside with you. But really I was so full of what I had just learned, and wanted so much to tell you —”

“It was very well you did come inside. If you hadn’t, I am sure I should have been badly hurt. The glass that fell on your hat would have fallen on my face, and perhaps blinded me. Oh, Robin, your head is cut! It is bleeding terribly. Let me tie this handkerchief round it.”

“I don’t think it is very much — only skin deep,” said Robin, carelessly; but he made no objection to the handkerchief.

“What shall we say to my father?” asked Miriam, when the operation, which perhaps took more time than was absolutely necessary, came to an end.

“I’ll take the blame, say that it was all my fault — that I quite forgot myself, in fact; and when you wanted me to get out I refused.”

“Oh, Robin, that wouldn’t be true! It was just the other way about. You wanted to get out, and I wouldn’t let you. Besides, I won’t let you take all the blame. I shall say that I wanted you to stay inside with me for company till we passed the lodge gates, and that if you had not done so I should have been very badly hurt; that it was really quite providential — and it was.”

“Do you think that is an explanation which will satisfy your father?”

“I do. He will be so delighted that I am safe, that he will never think of finding fault with you.”

“And if he does, I don’t think I shall care much, now that I know my own name, my father’s.”

“Your father’s!”

“Yes. For if my name is Ravensmere, so must be my father’s.”

“And Ravensmere was Colonel Dene’s name. Do you think — can it be possible —?”

“The same thought has occurred to you, then? Yes, Miriam, I believe that Colonel Dene is my father.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Then you would be — Oh, Robin, I cannot realize it! He is the lord of the manor. It seems impossible. Are you sure?”

“It isn’t possible to be sure — yet. But I believe so; although there are several things that I cannot understand. His name was William Ravensmere — so was my father’s. Whether he was also called “Eustace” I don’t know; he may have been. My father was a soldier — so is Colonel Dene; and they must be about the same age. The colonel mentioned to-day that he was a long time in the West Indies. My father was also a long time in the West Indies.”

“There cannot be a doubt of it, Robin; it must be so.”

“Wait a moment. I said there were some things I did not understand. My father was in the Marines — the colonel belongs to a line regiment; and I did not gather, from what your father said the last time I was at your house, that he was ever married before — that when he married the present Mrs. Dene he was a widower. Did you ever hear anything of the sort?”

“No; and I scarcely could have done, seeing how much I have been from home.”

“That is true. All the same I should like to find out. If he has been twice married, my belief would become certainty. But then —”

Here the young fellow hesitated, and his countenance became troubled.

“You were saying, Robin —”

“A very unpleasant thought crossed my mind, Miriam. How could my father marry a second time while ignorant of my mother’s fate? For anything he knew she might still be living, and if any inquiry had been made, I should surely have heard. No, it must be some other Ravensmere — perhaps a cousin of the Colonel’s.”

“Why not tell him your story, and ask him the question?”

“Because — I have thought over and over again how I should act when I found my father. How I should act, what I should say, and what he would say. I used to think that it would be very straightforward and simple — that he would recognize me as easily as I should recognize him. But lately I have thought differently — perhaps because I have gained in experience, and seen more of the world and its ways. And, as you see, the colonel and I have not recognized each other. Then, again, how am I to

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

prove my statement? Wouldn't it look very strange if, the day after hearing that his Dame used to be Ravensmere, I should go to him and say, 'My

[247]

name is also Ravensmere, and I am your son.' Anybody could say his name was Ravensmere; and I have read stories about false claimants. I read one not long ago."

"But surely the colonel would be glad to find his long-lost son, and he could make inquiry as to the truth of your statements."

"Is it so sure that he would be glad to find his long-lost son?" said Robin, sadly. "I have always thought that my father would be as glad to find me as I should be to find him; and when the thought has occasionally occurred to me that he had possibly no wish to hear anything more either of his wife or his son, I have said to myself, 'It is impossible. My father is an officer and a gentleman.' But if Colonel Dene be my father, he must have married a second wife without making sure that the first was dead; and I am afraid he would not be very pleased to know that I am alive."

"But perhaps he did make sure."

"He could not well have made sure without hearing that his son was alive, which would be a worse sign still."

"So it would. What will you do, then, Robin?"

"Well, the first thing is to find out whether the colonel has been married before."

"That is easily managed. I can ask my father in such a way that he will not guess my motive; and if he does not know, I will ask Mrs. Sirricold. She is a great gossip, and knows everything about everybody."

"The rector's wife?"

"Yes; but it seems to me that you should ask the advice of some experienced person."

"I should be very glad; but who is there? Your father and uncle —"

"They wouldn't do at all. I think my father would believe you — at any rate, until he had a talk with my uncle. But he couldn't keep your secret an hour, and my uncle —"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Wouldn’t believe a word I said. And as for Jim Rabbits — Stay, I have it! Romford is the man.”

“What! The Radical weaver, whom my uncle so much detests!”

“The same. But your uncle’s detestation is no proof that the weaver is not a good fellow. Romford comes occasionally to Rabbits’ on the quiet, so as not to get Jim into trouble with your uncle. He is very shrewd, and I think I might safely trust him.”

“But wouldn’t you do better to consult some man of education, or a lawyer?”

[248]

“Romford is a man of education — though for the most part he has educated himself, I fancy. He is very well-read, spends all his spare money in books, and has seen a good deal of the world — been at sea, and tramped all over England. A lawyer might be better. But how could I consult a lawyer? There are only two at Toppleton — one of whom acts for the firm, the other for Colonel Dene.”

“It must be Romford, then. When will you see him?”

“As soon as possible. When will you let me know the result of your inquiry?”

“Also as soon as possible. But how shall I communicate with you? Let me see — I have to be at the hospital about eleven on Saturday morning. Could you contrive to be there at the same time?”

“Easily. But —”

“I know what you are going to say. We shall not be alone. But listen. I shall bring a book with me, and I shall say, quite loud: ‘Here, Nelson, is a very nice book, which you might read to the apprentices.’ Then, when you are by yourself, you will open the book, and between the leaves you will find a note.”

“Capital!” exclaimed Robin, gleefully. “What a splendid idea! And when I return the book I will put into it another note, telling you what Romford advises, and how I am going on.”

“I shall be very glad. But you must not give the book to Phoebe. The note might drop out.”

“No, it won’t. I’ll put the note between two of the leaves, and then gum the edges together.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Still, it would be as well —”

“Of course I shall give the book into your hands if I can see you, and, failing that, put it into the bookcase myself; and if you would tell me beforehand in what other book you would put your answer, I could borrow it— don’t you see?”

“If an answer should be needful. Well, I’ll think about it, and let you know when I write. No, I don’t think it would be wrong. My father did not forbid me to write to you, and if it turns out that you are a Ravensmere, I dare say he will forgive me” — smiling. “Oh, Robin, I never thought of that before. If you are the colonel’s son, you will be the heir, won’t you?”

“I never thought of it before, either. Shall I?” said Robin, dubiously.

“Of course you will. The eldest is always the heir, and you

[249]

are the eldest. And I know somebody who won’t like it — Mrs. Dene. She is so much set up in her boy, and so proud of his being the heir.”

“Poor little fellow! I should be sorry to put his nose out of joint.”

“But you cannot help it; it is not your fault that you are the first-born.”

“You are counting my chickens before they are hatched. Suppose my father refuses to acknowledge me?”

“Oh, but he must. Isn’t that Binfield farmhouse? How slowly we must have walked! I had no idea. Let us hurry on, or it will be dark before we get home.”

Meanwhile Mr. Ruberry was awaiting the return of his daughter in a condition of pleasurable expectancy. He liked the idea of her driving home from her visit to the Hall in a state carriage, and was exceedingly curious to know “how she had gone on.” During the day he could hardly talk about anything else, until Robert shut him up by disrespectfully comparing him to a clucking hen that had just laid a big egg, and expressing a hope that his egg would not “turn out to be addled.”

When Mr. Ruberry went home (much earlier than usual), he inquired pompously whether his daughter had returned from the Hall (though he knew very well she had not), and about the time of her expected arrival he went into the garden, and

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

paced about where he might enjoy the sight of the carriage coming up the avenue, Miriam inside, Robin and Gib on the box.

“It would never have done to let that lad ride inside,” he said to himself — “never have done at all. It wouldn’t have looked respectable; and though Miriam’s a sensible lass, and I don’t think there’s owt in what Robert says — he’s always so suspicious — and she behaved so well when I spoke to her about Nelson coming up to th’ house, there’s no telling, and it’s always best to be on th’ safe side. ‘A stitch in time saves nine,’ as my mother used to say. And with her inside and him outside, they are as wide asunder as if they weren’t in th’ same parish; and they wouldn’t be thrown together much at th’ Hall — there’s too many of ’em for that. Hello! Who can them two be coming up th’ road? It looks like — Bithmon! it is — Miriam and Nelson, and him with a clout round his head! What the devil is up now, I wonder?”

And with that Mr. Ruberry hurried down the avenue to meet the returning wanderers.

[250]

“What’s to do now?” he exclaimed. “Why are you walking? What’s become of Gib and th’ carriage? I sent him off to fetch you back nearly two hours since.”

“We left the carriage in a ditch, close to the milestone this side of Dene Hall lodge gates,” said Miriam, calmly, as if leaving your carriage in a ditch bottom was the most ordinary of occurrences. And Robin thought that in thus acting she showed great tact. It was far better than getting excited and making a fuss.

“Why — how — what the devil did you do that for?” asked Mr. Ruberry, not at all calmly, and growing very red in the face.

“We have had an accident, father; nothing serious — though Nelson has got his head rather badly cut. The horses are none the worse, and I don’t think the carriage has taken much harm. I will tell you all about it” — which she did both cleverly and ingenuously; for, though she kept nothing back, she made everything appear to the best, and concluded with mentioning Gib’s requisition for planks and “strength.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Ruberry, albeit somewhat appeased, seemed far from satisfied.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Didn’t I tell you to stop on the box and see as Gib drove careful?” he asked Robin, sternly.

“You did, sir; but when the footman at the Hall held the chaise-door open after Mi — ss Ruberry got in — evidently expecting me to follow — I did so, quite forgetful of your injunction. I am very sorry; but I was only inside a very short time.”

“And he was going to get out after we passed the lodge gates,” added Miriam. “He would have got out before, but I thought Mr. and Mrs. Dene would think it looked strange; and it was very well he did not. If I had been by myself my face would have been cut all to pieces. You should thank Nelson instead of blaming him, father.”

“Thank him! What will you say next, I wonder?” exclaimed Mr. Ruberry, looking very much surprised. “If he had done as I told him, and looked after Gib, there would have been no lumber (catastrophe). It’s all his fault, that’s what it is. It’s nowt else.”

“How can you say so, father? Didn’t I tell you that Captain shied at a black donkey with two milk-tins on its back? How could Nelson have prevented that, wherever he had been? Could you have prevented it, father?”

“Well, happen not,” returned Mr. Ruberry, rather weakly succumbing to this *argumentum ad hominem*. “If it had been owt

[251]

else it would have been different. But Captain never could stand a black jackass —”

“And this was a very black one, father. Gib says it was the blackest he ever saw.”

“And the horses are no worse?”

“Not a bit! There’s nobody hurt but Nelson. But don’t you think it would be well to send some men to raise the carriage at once? It will soon be quite dark.”

“You are right, lass. I’ll take Brent and two more chaps, and see the job done myself, and drive the horses home. Gib isn’t to be trusted. I shouldn’t wonder a bit if we found him at th’ Hare and Hounds.”

“You had better go into the house and have a wash, Nelson,” said Miriam, “your face is streaked with blood, and get some plaster for your head.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

An hour later, as Mr. Ruberry drove towards Oaken Cleugh, he met Robin going home.

“Drat the fellow!” he muttered. “He has been a bonnie time getting his head patched. I should have seen him off th’ premises before I started; but Miriam’s a sensible lass. I’m sure she’s to be trusted, whatever Robert says.”

CHAPTER XL.

WILL ROMFORD.

A FEW mornings after the visit to the Hall and the upsetting of the carriage, Robin was in the engine-house at Birch Dene. He liked to see the engine started, sometimes even started it himself, which he considered rather a feat; for the engine, though regarded as a wonderful production, was a very complicated piece of mechanism, and “setting it on” and getting the crank safely “over the centre” required very nice management.

Robert Ruberry was also present.

“Now, Jim, it’s about time,” he said, after looking at his watch.

It was before the time; but when Old Bob did not gain ten minutes or more at the beginning of the day, and as many at the close, he felt worse at ease with himself than if he had omitted going to church on the previous Sunday, or missed saying his prayers the night before.

[252]

Jim put down the oil-can with which he had been oiling the bearings, and, standing by the cylinder, took the handle of the throttle-valve in one hand, and that of the “exhaust” in the other.

“Hold on! For Heaven’s sake, hold on!” shouted Robin, at the same time pushing up Jim’s hand, which was in the very act of opening the valve.

“Why, what’s to do?”

“Look at those wheels.”

A bar of iron had been placed between the main driving-wheels in such a way as, but for Robin’s sharpness of vision and presence of mind, would almost certainly have caused a disastrous breakdown.

“By gum, that’s a corker!” exclaimed Jim, as he removed the bar.

“What ill-contrived devil can have done this? By Heaven, if I find him out, he shall swing for it!” said Old Bob, fiercely. “I dare say it’s one of the apprentices. I thought no good would come of so much pampering — hospitals, reading, and such-like. But now, not a word of this to anybody. We must hold our tongues and keep our eyes open. Them as has tried this once will try it again. Our game is to catch ’em, not to flay (frighten) ’em. You have saved us from a great loss. Nelson. It was well done, and I shall not forget it. Set on, Jim, or else they’ll think as there’s summat wrong.”

Mr. Robert said no more, but his stern, preoccupied look showed that he was thinking how he could best detect the culprit, and guard against a repetition of the danger. But on the following day there occurred an accident which gave him something else to think about, and could in no wise be ascribed to malevolence. One of the boiler-plates blew out, and entailed a stoppage of several days.

Robin profited by this unexpected holiday to pay his proposed visit to Romford, as well to warn the weaver of the peril that threatened him as to ask his advice, in accordance with the suggestion made by Miriam, from whom he had received a letter which ran thus:

“TO MR. RUPERT NELSON.

“Dear Brother” — I have asked my father the question you know of. It seemed greatly to surprise him. He said that he could not think how I had got such an idea into my head. Had Colonel Dene been previously married, my father would surely have known, and he has not the least doubt that Mrs. Dene is his first and only wife. I have also spoken to Mrs. Sirricold, and though she

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

said much more than my father, it was to the same effect. She seems to know a great deal about the Ravensmeres. Though not wealthy, they are of ancient lineage and highly connected. Colonel Dene served at one time in the Marines, and was nearly forty when he married. This seems very strange, and you would do well, I think, to consult with Romford before doing anything further.

“Your friend and well-wisher,

M. R.

“P.S. — I should be glad to hear, so soon as convenient, what Romford advises and how you propose to act. I much regret that I am unable to give you more help.”

Robin read this letter with a sense of disappointment; it seemed so cold and formal — not at all like a letter from an affectionate sister. The postscript, however, consoled him somewhat. It showed, he thought, that he still had Miriam’s sympathy, and that her belief in his story was unshaken. Nevertheless, he could not disguise from himself that she was right in thinking the news she had heard very strange. If Colonel Dene was his father he must have been married to his mother; yet those who ought to know said that he had been married only once. On the other hand, now he had learned that the colonel was at one time in the Marines, the conclusion that he was really his father seemed almost irresistible. It was, in truth, “very strange.” Robin could not see his way at all, and he went on his visit to the weaver with a perturbed and anxious mind.

Romford lived some two miles across the fields, in a white, one-storied cottage, with diamond-shaped panes, a bit of garden in front, bounded by a hedgerow, and entered by a little green gate. The garden was evidently an object of loving care, but, the time being winter and the day dull, it wore a somewhat dreary and desolate look.

As Robin opens the gate, he hears the monotonous cliketty-clack, cliketty-clack, of a pair of hand-looms. With superfluous politeness (considering the custom of the country-side), he knocks at the door — which is furnished with a sloping weather-board, to prevent the ingress of wind and rain — knocks several times; but, perceiving that his knocks are lost in the rattle of the looms, he lifts the latch and steps into the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“living-room.” The biggest thing in it is a four-post bedstead, the next a chest of drawers, and next to that a case-clock. There are, further, a one-legged mahogany table, a dresser, a hanging bookcase, a few rush-bottomed chairs, and, before the fire, in a rocking-chair, sits a golden-haired little girl fast asleep, holding on her lap a small kitten.

[254]

It was a charming picture, and, after pausing a moment to gaze on it, Robin stepped to the open doorway of the “shop” where the weaver and his wife were toiling away as if for bare life. Presently, as Romford stopped to change shuttles, he caught sight of his visitor.

“Hello, Mr. Nelson!” he exclaimed. “Is that you?”

“I have brought back the ‘Marmion’ you were good enough to lend me,” answered Robin. “I have read it with great pleasure, but I fear I have kept it an unconscionably long time.”

“Oh, that’s nowt. You could ha’ kept it longer if you’d ha’ liked. I’m fain it’s pleased you. I knew it would. Willn’t you sit down a bit?”

Whereupon Romford rose from his loom, and shook hands with his guest. The weaver, as he stood up in his check shirt, open at the throat, and his fustian breeches loose at the knees, looked every inch a man; for he was long-limbed and broad-shouldered, more than six feet in height, and had a genial, good-humored face, yet shrewd and resolute withal.

“Sit you down, I pray you now, and let us have a bit of a camp.”

“Thank you,” said Robin, acting on the invitation; “but you are busy. You must not let me take you from your work.”

“You willn’t do that. I wor boun’ to give o’er. I’ve been hard at it sin’ afore dayleet, and am fain of an excuse to lake a bit. We hand-loom weavers are like the beggar in the song — when we are tired we can sit us down and rest; and we are neither under overlookers nor tied to a bell, thank Heaven. Come, Susan; stop thy noise, and draw us a stoup of ale. I dare say he’ll find thy brew welly as good as Jim Rabbits’.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

(The weaver, as a rule, spoke broad Lancashire, considering it far more expressive than ordinary English, into which, nevertheless, he occasionally lapsed, either out of compliment to his visitor, or to show that he could “talk grammar” as well as anybody — as indeed he could.)

Mrs. Romford, a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired young woman, laid down her picking stick and went into the buttery to execute her husband’s order.

“You have seen my wife,” he continued. “This is our only child” — (pointing to the little lass in the rocking-chair). “We call her Susie, to distinguish her from her mother, whose name is Susan. Our abode is not palatial, as you see. This is both living-room and bedchamber. Save the shop and the buttery, we have no

[255]

others. However, we are contented with our lot, Susan and I; and that, I take it, is better than being rich beyond the dreams of avarice — to quote a saying of the great lexicographer. Here comes th’ wife with a jug of foaming ale. Let me pledge you in a mug of home-brewed, Mr. Nelson! Naa, what thinken yo’, isn’t Susan’s tap as good as Jim Rabbits’?”

Robin protested (with truth, for he was very thirsty) that it was the best brew he had ever tasted.

“Ay, my Susan can brew and bake wi’ onybody. But it isn’t much soft bread as we getten here — mostly oatcake and porridge, and furnitty and a bit o’ bacon and garden stuff, when there is ony. Not as we couldn’t afford better fare, just now; but there’s no telling how soon work may be slack ageean, and I spend a sight o’ brass i’ books. Th’ wife’s olus flighting me for it, and I’m olus repenting — and helping to pave hell. How is it as you’ve getten off so soon to-day! Has Robert Ruberry gan yo’ a holiday? Oh, a boiler-plate has brasted, has it? That’ll be two or three days of a job, I reckon. Well, as yo’re at a loose end, and th’ weyving’ll wait, what sayen yo’ to a walk on th’ moors? I want to stretch my legs a bit. They’re stiff wi’ sitting and treddling.”

“With pleasure,” said Robin. It was exactly what he wanted.

“Aw reyt. Tak’ a book twothry minutes while I wash and don mysel’. Which will yo’ have? My favorite poet, my favorite novelist, or my favorite politician?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That is like asking me to buy a pig in a poke. Condescend to particulars, and I will give you an answer.”

“That is easily done: Burns, Fielding, and Cobbett.”

“Thank you. I’ll take a volume of Fielding.”

“Here’s ‘Tom Jones!’ It is a rare book. I’ve read it many a time. Fielding gives us both humor and human nature; and novels as hasna gotten tone or t’other is summat like a mon as has nayther brains nor guts. Fot my shoon, Susan; I’m going into th’ buttery to wesh mysel’.”

Ten minutes later Romford emerged from the buttery with combed locks and well-washed face, and clad in a costume not unlike that which, a few years ago, was affected by well-to-do Irish peasants — a long-tailed coat, bright-coloured waistcoat, corduroy breeches, and a tall, weather-beaten beaver.

“We’s be back to’ard six or seven o’clock, Susan,” he said, as he took a thick stick from behind the door. “We’s be back to’ard six or seven o’clock, and as Mr. Nelson is going to tak’ pot-luck

[256]

wi’ us, thou’d best mak’ them pig-trotters ready. We’s be as hungry as neet-hunters at breakfast time when we gotten back. Come on! We’ll go down th’ loin and strike across th’ moors, and have a gradely good raand.”

“I like those moors,” went on the weaver, as they strode at a great pace down the fenceless lane. “They are wild and lonesome, it is true, and in winter time drear and wild; but the air as blows o’er ’em is fresh and keen, the view is hindered neither by hedgerows nor gardens, and the sense of being free to wander where I will makes me feel as glad and joyous as a skylayrock.”

“I hope you will keep your freedom,” said Robin, seeing his opportunity; “and one of my objects in coming here to-day is to warn you that it is in some danger.

“My freedom in danger! What mean you?” exclaimed Romford, stopping short, and turning rightabout face.

Robin repeated what he had heard from Colonel Dene.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I’m much obliged to Colonel Dene,” said the weaver, resuming his walk, “and if you see him again, say as I said so, and as I shall not forget his kindness. But tell him, at th’ same time, as Bill Romford will stand to his guns.”

“You mean you won’t go away?”

“I do. Why should I? I have only exercised that right of free speech which is, or should be, th’ privilege of every Englishman. I am a reformer, not a revolutionist. I have always discountenanced violence. I belong to no secret society, and I am as loyal as th’ head constable himself. All I ask for, all as I ever asked for, is such a reform of Parliament as will mak’ it a truly representative assembly. That obtained, all the rest — a short-time Act, repeal of th’ Corn Laws, reduction of expenditure — will follow. Them’s my principles. Nelson, and I’m nayther going to shut my mouth nor cut my stick. What would be th’ use? I couldn’t addle owt onywhere else, and I’m not going to cadge for my living. Let ’em tak’ me if they like, and I dare say they will. I can bide i’ prison if onybody else can, and they will not stop reform by shutting me up. A mon as is not ready to suffer for his principles doesn’t deserve to have ony. Th’ wife can addle porridge for hersel’ and Susie wi’ the odd loom. I’se not loave ’em till I’m forced, and I shall happen not be forced just yet. There’s not going to be a meeting i’ these parts nayther this week nor next. We’re going to howd one next Sunday ‘over the border,’ at th’ top o’ Blackstone Edge, wheer the Manchester head constable cannot mell (meddle wi’) us.”

[257]

“But won’t lie hear of it?”

“Ay, after it’s o’er; and gradely mad he’ll be. But we mean to have a meeting at Birch Dene one o’ these days, and then he’ll be madder than ever, rank owd tyrant as he is. You willn’t miss conveying to Colonel Dene my sense of his kindness. Where do you say you saw him?”

“At his own house.”

“At his own house! What wor yo’ doing theer — if it’s a fair question?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I made his acquaintance quite accidentally, when I first came to Birch Dene. He seemed to take an interest in so much of my story as I told him, and the other day he asked me up to the Hall.”

“The kind-hearted gentleman! He is kind-hearted, too, from all accounts. I’m not surprised as he took an interest in you. Mony a one has wondered what browt yo’ these parts, and I’m one on ’em.”

“That means you would like to know. Well, I will tell you; but you must do something for me in return.”

“To be sure I will, if I can. What is it?”

“Give me your advice. I’m in great perplexity, and I want the advice of somebody older and more experienced than myself. Will you?”

“Ay, will I. I’m as ready as onybody else to give what costs me nowt. Say your say, and I’ll tell you my mind. Two yeds is better than one, if there’s owt in the second.”

Whereupon Robin told his story from the beginning, keeping nothing back save his intimacy with Miriam, and concluded by asking Romford whether he thought it would be expedient to make himself known to Colonel Dene.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE HUSH SHOP.

“WELL,” said the weaver, when Robin (who was becoming quite an adept at narration) had finished his story, “tak’ it aw in aw, its about the quarest yarn as ever I yerd. Let’s walk on quiet, twothry minutes, while I unravel it a bit. It’s a case as requires consideration. Tell me now, Nelson, have you any sort of proof that you are what you say you are — tha your name is Ravensmere? Not

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

as I have the least doubt of your good faith. There's genuine sincerity in your een, and the ring of truth in your voice, to say nowt of th' fact that you can have no interest in humbugging me. But we live in a sceptical age, and a scrap o' papper goes a long way."

"I have nothing whatever to show, Romford. My mother had a letter, which I dare say, in case of need, could be produced; but my name — the name of Ravensmere — is not mentioned in it. I must be believed on my word, or not at all."

"I believe every word you have said, Nelson, and, what's more, I feel welly sure as Colonel Dene is your father."

"But if he has only been married once, how can he be?"

"How can they know as he has been married but once? And there's another point — I don't want to hurt your feelings, and you mustn't tak' amiss what I'm going to say. You have asked my advice, and I'm bound to speak plain. The colonel may have been wed but once, and be your father all th' same."

"You — you surely don't mean —" gasped Robin, as the terrible significance of Romford's words flashed on his mind.

"I mean nowt else. It isn't a nice thing to say; but don't you think it's quite possible as your father and mother were never wed at all?"

"No, no; it is not possible. I cannot believe it — I will not believe it," exclaimed the young fellow, passionately. "My mother always spoke of my father as her husband — as a brave officer and a noble gentleman. But if it be as you say, he is a scoundrel, and I owe him naught but hate."

"Nay, nay — I wouldn't say that. Because a man has sinned once — ay, or a hundred times, that doesn't make him a scoundrel. Who is there that's reached middle-age as hasn't done things as he'd give years of his life to undo? Doesn't th' Owd Book say as there's more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-and-nine just men? So long as a mon doesn't deliberately prefer evil to good, I don't think he should be called a scoundrel; and, so far as we know, Colonel Dene is owt but a scoundrel. Mind, I don't say it is so; but, as you've asked me to sit in the seat of judgment, it's a side of the question which it's my duty to consider. But there's one thing clear. Your father — if Colonel Dene be your father — has some strong motive for keeping his marriage with your mother secret. When a man hushes up the most important event of his life, you may depend on it there's summat behind."

[259]

“What would you advise me to do, then?” said Robin, faintly, and in a tone of deep discouragement.

“Get to know the truth as soon as you can. Go to Colonel Dene, tell him your name and all as has happened to you.”

“But if it should be as you say, I would rather not go near Colonel Dene. I owe him neither duty nor affection —”

“Stop, stop, my lad — not quite so fast! I did not say as it was so. I nobbut said it might be so, just to prepare you for th’ worst. And you’re like to go to him. Nobody else can tell you who you are. The truth, however unpleasant, is easier to bear than doubt and suspense. You get used to th’ one, never to th’ t’other.”

“But will he tell me th’ truth?”

“Well, I don’t think Colonel Dene will deny his own son; and if he isn’t your fayther, he’s th’ most likely mon to tell you who is. If there be another William Ravensmere of th’ same age who served in th’ Marines at th’ same time as he did, he’s sure to know. Ay, tell him by aw means. You’ll not be content now till you know th’ worst. And what if him and your mother worn’t wed? It wouldn’t be your fault.”

“Oh, but you don’t know how I have thought of my father — how I have exalted him in my mind!” cried Robin, piteously. “I could have loved him so much. I want so much to love him. I have nobody else; but if he deceived my mother — you have no idea how good she was, Romford, and how she loved him — if he deceived my mother, I should hate and despise him, and I would never bear his name — never.”

“Come, come — “there’s no call to tak’ on i’ that way,” said Romford, soothingly. “Let us not meet trouble hoaf way, whatever we do. If I’d ha’ had any idea as you’d tak’ it so rough, I wouldn’t ha’ said nowt. And I’m happen wrong. Bithmon! when I come to give it moor thowt, I’m cocksure I’m wrong.”

But this well-meant attempt at consolation came too late. The iron had entered Robin’s soul; he answered at random, and they walked silently on, each absorbed in his own thoughts, heedless alike of the deepening twilight and the ominous mist which, for the last hour, had veiled the Yorkshire hills, and was now creeping over the moor.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

Romford was the first to speak.

“Hello! Howd on!” he exclaimed, as the sun disappeared behind an opaque mass of ragged cloud, which loomed on the horizon like an impassable wall. “Howd on! It’ll be as dark as a dungeon

[260]

in five or ten minutes. I know my way middling well, but when th’ sun goes out and a fog comes on, these moors are dangerous. They’re full o’ bog-holes, and, according to some folks, haunted by boggarts. Come on. Let’s hark back by th’ nearest road, and put th’ best foot foremost while we can see what we’re doing.”

As he spoke the weaver increased his pace to a run, Robin keeping abreast with him; and they went on thus until the gloaming was swallowed up in darkness and mist, and they were compelled to reduce their pace to a cautious walk.

“This is confoundedly awkward,” exclaimed Romford, as he felt for the path with his feet. “It wor gradely goamless on us to walk on with our een shut and get lost i’ this fashion. If we can make th’ White Gate or th’ Owd Moorcock Inn we shall do. But we are as like as not to be rambling hereabouts till th’ mist clears off and th’ moon comes aat, or we can catch a glimpse o’ th’ north star. But there’s no use stonning still. Let’s potter on; we’s e get somewheer, somehow.”

The words were hardly uttered when both Robin and himself floundered into a hole.

“There! Didn’t I tell you so?” he laughed, as he scrambled out. “We’re no waur this time; but if we don’t keep a better look aat there’ll ayther be broken bones or a couple of handsome corpses for the crowner’s jury to sit on.”

After this they went on, creeping, groping, blundering, and stumbling, for an hour or more, falling over molehills, running foul of trees, barking their shins against stone walls, yet making so little progress withal that, as Romford put it, there was every likelihood of their having to lie out all night.

“If we could nobbut see a leet,” he groaned, after coming a particularly bad cropper over a tree-root — “if we could nobbut see a leet, we’d mak’ for it, whereever it wor. Bithmon! I believe I yerd summat. Didn’t yo’?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I am sure I did — voices — people talking. I can hear them now. There they are again. I will shout,” said Robin.

“No, no! Durned shaat! Let’s hearken a bit fost,” answered the weaver, in a whisper. “They’re happen neet-hunters or tramps, or waur? There’s quare characters upo’ this moor sometimes. Let’s creep to’ard ’em, and hearken afore we speyk.”

The wisdom of this proposal was evident, so the two went for’ward cautiously until they were near enough to hear what was being said.

[261]

“Wheer hav’ we gotten to?” one of the invisibles was saying.

“I’ll be hanged if I know,” exclaimed another; “but we shouldn’t be far fro’ Red Nell’s. We’ve a lantern, and if we could nobbut get a leet I could find th’ pad in a minute. Has ony on yo’ a flint and steel?”

“No, but I’ll tell thee what: if onybody has a hoily rag, or owt o’ that soort, I could happen mak’ a bit of a blaze wi’ flashing my pistol.”

“Flash away, then. I’ve gotten a bit of owd Ruberry’s waste i’ my pocket. If a spark falls on it, it’ll blaze like hell. Here it is!”

“Howd on a minute. Let me draw th’ charge fost, or I’se happen be blowing some o’ yer yeds off.”

“Ay, keep thy powder for Owd Bob; thou may blow his yed off if thou likes.”

“I mean to, one o’ these neets, and if I don’t, somebody else will, and it’ll be a damned sight better than he desarves, th’ owd tyrant.”

“Ay, will it. He desarves his shins punching, and then boiling wick in one of his own boilers.”

“He’s most terrible mad cause o’ that plate brasting, but there’ll be waur brasts afore long, if he doesn’t mind what he’s doing.”

“Ay, we’ll brun th’ factory o’er his yed one o’ these neets. It’s aw along o’ factories, and new-fangled machinery, and sich like, as poor folk is so ill off. But there’ll be a revolution in Lunnon afore long, and then we’se get our reyts.”

“Naa, then, wheer’s th’ lantern? Theer! it’s sweeling. Leet th’ candle afore it goes aat.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Crouch down under th’ wall, or they’ll be seeing us,” whispered Romford. “Now they’ve set off; we mun keep th’ leet i’ view and follow ’em. It looks as if there wor some quare work going on. Who are they, I wonder?”

“Some of our hands.”

“One or two happen, but not aw. That mon wi’ th’ pistol isn’t one, I’ll be bound. Come on, let’s follow ’em up; but don’t talk, and mak’ no more noise than yo’ can help.”

They followed as stealthily as Red Indians on the war-path, always keeping the lantern in view, until they perceived, afar off, another light, which grew more distinct as they went on, and evidently proceeded from a building, the shadowy outline of which it dimly revealed.

“They’ve gone in,” said Romford, as the lantern disappeared.

[262]

“We’ll go in too, but we mun wait a bit fost. It’s Red Nell’s. Let’s go forrud and have a peep through th’ window.”

It was as strange an interior as could well be imagined. A long, low room, with bare rafters and whitewashed walls; a fire of logs and peat, shooting lurid tongues of flame up a wide-throated chimney; men sitting and lying about, some on up-ended barrels, others on trusses of straw; a party of card-players, round a table made of an old door supported on trestles; in one corner several casks on stillages; in another a pair of double-barrelled guns propped against the wall; near them a brace of hares and five or six birds, the spoils of illicit chase, and a couple of sleeping dogs. Among the men were two or three who, as Romford whispered, looked like night-hunters, and several colliers, whose flannel garments and black faces showed that they had come straight from the pit.

On the only chair in the room sat a big, gaunt woman, with tousled red hair and a still redder face, smoking a short black pipe.

“That’s Red Nell,” said Romford. “Come away; if we look any moor they’ll happen be seeing us, and then there’d be the devil to pay.”

“A strange sort of inn, isn’t it?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It isn’t an inn; it is a hush shop — a place where they retail bad spirits without license, a cheap neet-haas for tramps and vagabonds, wheer gambling and aw soorts o’ manks is carried on, and a mon can get fuddled for about fourpence and dead drunk for a shilling. Let’s go in; I don’t think they’ll hurt us. I want to find out who them chaps is as is going to shoot Bob Ruberry. They’re making a most terrible din.”

“Good-neet to you aw!” said Romford, as he opened the door.

The clamor stilled instantly. The gamblers ceased their playing and hid their cards, and Red Nell sprang from her chair.

“Who are yo’, and what wanten yo’!” she shouted.

“We are just two wanderers as has lost our way on th’ moor, and we want nowt but a bite and a sup.”

“It’s a lie! You are gaugers. They are gaugers, lads, come to spy —”

Several of the men sprang to their feet and “went for” the intruders. The gamblers, in their hurry, overturned the table, sending the two bottles that served as candlesticks crashing on the floor, and the hounds, barking loudly, joined in the fray.

“That’s it! Kill ’em. Throttle ’em! Hide ’em! Punch ’em till they cannot stan’!” screamed Red Nell; and it looked very

[263]

much as if there were going to be battle, murder, and sudden death, for the night-hunters had seized their guns, and all, with threatening gestured, were crowding round the newcomers.

“Hold on, chaps!” said Romford, good-humoredly, as he pushed the foremost back. “You were ne’er more mista’en i’ your lives. We are nayther gaugers nor blackfaces (spies). Is therer nobody here as knows Will Romford?”

“Ay is there; but th’ hoyle is so dark we couldn’t mak’ yo’ out afore yo’ spoke. It’s aw reyt, lads; Bill Romford’ll tell no tales. Let him sit down, and give him summat to sup.”

“But what are they doing here at this time o’ neet?” demanded Red Nell, suspiciously.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That is soon told. We geet lost on th’ moor, and made for th’ fost leet as we seed, and coom in to wet wer whistles and ax somebody to put us i’ th’ road home.”

“And who is this young spark?” (pointing to Robin.)

“One of Ruberry’s ’prentices,” answered another fellow. “They’ve made him a bit of a mayster lately; but I don’t think as he’ll split. He’s weel thowt on by th’ hands.”

“Can yo’ keep a still tongue, young mon?” asked the woman, sternly.

“You may trust me,” answered Robin, quietly.

“Ay, you may trust him,” added the weaver; “I’ll answer for Nelson.”

“Come up to th’ fire. You can sit down upo’ them barrels. What shall I draw for you?”

Romford asked for two mugs of ale and some oat-cake, whereupon the drinkers resumed their interrupted conversation, the gamblers their playing, and all went on as if nothing had happened. Two or three fellows lay fast asleep in the straw, and in a small room adjoining the house part of the hush shop were several others, who, judging by the din they made, were both drinking deeply and talking largely. Robin recognized two or three of the Birch Dene hands, one of whom was Black Jack, his quondam opponent. He fancied, too, that among the sleepers in the straw was Blincoe, but in the dim light of the place he could not make sure, and neither Romford nor himself was able to identify the people whose portentous conversation they had overheard on the moor.

Of all the company, one man only was neither eating, drinking, smoking, nor sleeping. He sat apart, and seemed so lonesome and melancholy that Robin invited him to join them — which the man

[264]

did, with evident pleasure, and gladly accepted an offer of cake and ale.

“To tell th’ truth,” he said, “I have but twopence on me — just enough for my neet’s lodgings; and what’s waur, I’m on the wrong side o’ my dinner.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“That’s bad! No wonder you don’t look up to th’ mark,” said the weaver. “Knock some o’ this hard bread into yo’; and when you’ve supped that ale you shall have another mug. You’re out o’ work, I reckon?”

“Well, work is most uncommon scarce. But I’m not a factory hand nor yet a weaver. My name is Dooley — Dr. Dooley. I dare say you’ve yerd tell on me. I come fro’ Frog Fold.”

“So I have. You’re a yerb doctor?”

“Ay, what they call a quack. But I’m reckoned to be a good hand with a lancet and a pair of forceps for aw that. I go about selling simples, and drawing teeth and bleeding folks. But as I said just now, work is scarce. Nobody seems to be badly, or to want my physic. It is wrong time o’ th’ year for bleeding, and I haven’t drawn a tooth for a month or more. Ay, things is gradely bad wi’ me; and th’ worst of it is as I’ve left a wife and two little childer clemming at home, and I’m like to go back to ’em as empty as I set off.”

“I’m sorry for that. It’s hard to hear of little childer clemming. Here, tak’ this sixpence, doctor. I’m a poor mon mysel’, or I’d mak’ it more.”

“And here are two shillings,” added Robin, compassionately. “It is all I have in my pocket, I’m sorry to say; but if it will be of any use to you —”

“Thank you kindly — thank you kindly, both on you,” murmured the quack, as tears of gratitude sprang to his eyes. “It’ll be a bite and a sup for th’ little ’uns when I get home. And if so be as I can do ayther on you a good torn, I will. If ever you want letting blood or a tooth drawing, I’ll do it for nowt. You know my name — Dr. Dooley, fro’ Frog Fold. I come here to-night partly because it’s chep, partly on th’ chance o’ picking up sixpence by bleeding somebody. A chap sometimes drinks hissels’ into a fit, and carding oft ends in a fight — By gum! it looks like summat o’ th’ sort now.”

One of the gamblers had thrown his cards on the table, and was charging his opponent with cheating.

“I’ thou says I chet, I’ll wring thy neck for thee,” said the other, fiercely.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It’ll tak’ two like thee to wring my neck, thou rat-catching thief; and then you willn’t do it And for two pins I’d give thee a damned good hiding now.”

“I wish thou would, thou neet-hunting devil; I want some sore bones. I’ll feyt thee ony time, ony wheer, and ony end up.”

“I’m ready. I’ll tak’ thee ‘while thou art in the humor,’ as the song says.”

“Let’s have it out now,” answered his opponent, quietly, yet with resolute mien.

The onlookers were wild with excitement and delight.

“A feyt! a feyt!” they shouted. “Doggy and Ratten’s going to feyt! Let’s go out into th’ croft and see fair play!”

Doggy was the poacher. Ratten was so called because he had once been a rat-catcher.

Torches were procured, lanterns lighted, and all sallied forth into a paddock behind the house — the scene of many a previous encounter. A ring was speedily formed, torch-bearers and lantern-holders to the front, and the two men, divested of their shirts, and wearing only breeches, boots, and stockings, stepped into the arena. They were pretty evenly matched, almost the same height and age, and if Ratten had a slight advantage in weight, the balance was perhaps more than redressed by Doggy’s greater agility and superior condition.

“If I wor a betting man,” said Romford, “I’d back th’ night-hunter. He’s in better fettle than t’other.”

Many did back him, but Ratten had also his friends, and nobody seemed disposed to offer odds. The betting was even.

The combatants did not “square” up to each other in the ordinary prize-fighting fashion. With outstretched arms and bended backs they stood for a moment glaring at each other, then commenced moving slowly round, watching for an opportunity to close. This went on several minutes, and the spectators, who had so far observed the most intense silence, began to show signs of impatience. At length Doggy, thinking he saw his chance, rushed in, gave his opponent a tremendous kick below the knee, and locked him in a tight embrace. But Ratten stood his ground bravely, and the grip he gave the poacher seemed like to crush in his ribs. After a fierce bout of tugging, straining, and kicking, both fell heavily on the turf, Doggy undermost. Yet he kept his

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

hold until Ratten, removing one of his hands, seized his man by the windpipe, and throttled him till his eyes nearly started from his head.

[266]

But when almost, as it seemed, at the last gasp, Doggy contrived, by a convulsive effort, to free himself.

Both men were on their legs at the same moment, and, without any preliminary dodging or “dogging,” flew at each other like wild beasts, plying fists and feet with might and main. The blows on their shins sounded like the breaking of sticks, and their stockings were dyed with blood. Then they closed a second time, and after a desperate struggle, in which they went the entire round of the ring, Ratten was hurled so violently to the ground that the blood gushed from his ears and nostrils, and he lay to all appearance dead.

“My God, I’ve killed him!” exclaimed the night-hunter, kneeling beside his fallen foe. “I’ve killed him! Speyk, Kit! I bore him no malice. It wor a fair feyt. We wor olus good friends afore to-neet”

And the rough fellow, who had fought so pluckily and borne so much punishment without flinching, burst into tears.

“Let me look at him — let me look at him!” exclaimed a voice, which Robin recognized as that of the herb-doctor. “I’m Dr. Dooley, fro’ Frog Fold. I’ll bring him round i’ twothry minutes. He’s nobbut ’stonished a bit.”

“For God’s sake do, if you con!” cried Doggy, earnestly., “Him and me wor olus good friends afore to-neet. He has a dacent wife and three little childer at home. It would break her heart, and I should have to run my country if he wor to dee.”

“Get out o’ th’ road,” said Dooley, pushing aside the people who were crowding round. “Fot a can o’ watter, one on you, and a torf or two to put under his yed.”

Then, kneeling beside the wounded warrior, he whipped out a lancet, and dexterously cut a vein in Ratten’s arm, and a jet of warm red blood spurted into the face of the still blubbering Doggy.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Didn’t I tell you so?” exclaimed the quack doctor, triumphantly. “He’s as weak as a snig. Now a sup o’ watter on his face, and then two torfs under his yed.”

Ratten sighed and opened his eyes; then, shuddering, closed them.

“God help me!” he murmured. “Have I wakened up i’ hell?”

The question was natural. The lurid glare of the torches, the sooty visages of the colliers, the unwashed and generally ill-favored countenances of the others, Dooley with his gory lancet. Doggy with his bloodstained and tear-bedewed face — all these made up

[267]

a scene that might well affright the soul of the half-conscious rat-catcher, and lead him to believe, for a moment, that it was more of Hades than of earth.

“No, no, owd mon, thou art noan dead by a long way,” said Doggy, soothingly. “What made thee think thou wor i’ hell?”

“Because thou looks so much like a devil.”

This sally was naturally followed by a roar of laughter, and shortly afterwards Ratten, being raised up, was able to walk into the house.

The next proceeding was to reward Dr. Dooley. Doggy gave him sixpence — all the money he had not gambled away — and a brace of pheasants; and a collection was made which brought him two or three shillings more.

“I’m gradely set up. I haven’t had such a day this winter,” he said, gleefully, as, lantern in hand, the “doctor” piloted Robin and the weaver through the fields. “Th’ pheasants — I shall sell ’em, of course — th’ pheasants and this bit o’ brass will keep th’ pot boiling at our house till welly Christmas. You’ve browt me luck, and I shall not forget it. If ever you want a doctor, you know where I live. Dr. Dooley, Frog Fold. Here you are! That’s the road. Turn to your left and keep straight on, and you’ll get to th’ far end afore ten o’clock. Good-neet, and thank you.”

“Good-neet,” said Romford, taking the man’s proffered hand. “But, before we part, I’m going to ax you to do me a favor.”

“Ax away — one good torn deserves another. I’m Dr. Dooley, fro’ Frog Fold, and I’ve gotten a pair o’ forceps i’ my pocket, likewise a lancet.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“It’s not that. I don’t want bleeding just now, and I haven’t an unsound tooth i’ my yed. I’m feared there’s mischief brewing, and I want yo’ to find out who’s at th’ bottom on’t.”

“Mischief! What sort o’ mischief?”

“Murder, fire-raising, and machinery-breaking.”

“Owt else?”

“Well, happen some stealing and sich-like. There generally is when th’ devil’s let loose, and one thing’s sure: it’ll end in a good deal o’ hanging, unless we can put a stopper on it. Now, look here, Dr. Dooley! There’s them at Red Nell’s as knows all about it, and there’s one mon there as is at th’ bottom on it, and th’ top too — unless I’m gradely ill mista’en. He carries a pistol in his pocket, and to th’ best o’ my belief, he doesn’t belong to these parts. We heard ’em talking as we coom o’er th’ moor; but we didn’t see

[268]

’em, and they didn’t see us. You’re going to stop at Red Nell’s aw neet, and if you keep your een and your ears oppen, you may leppen (light) o’ summat as will giv’ us a clue. If you do, it will be worth your while to let us know — either me or this young mon. My name’s Romford — I’m middling weel known — and I live at Moor Cottage. His is Nelson, and he lives wi’ Jim Rabbits, th’ spinning-mayster at Ruberry’s factory. It will be worth your while, and you’ll do a good thing at th’ same time; ’cause if there’s ony lumber, poor folks is sure to suffer, while them as eggs ’em on will, ten to one, get off scot free.”

“That is gospel truth. Well, I’ll do my best. One good turn deserves another. If I hear owt, I’ll let one on you know. Not as I’ve much against machinery-breaking. It’s machinery, and sich-like, as is ruining th’ country. But murder and fire-raising! Them’s the very devil. Ay, I’ll let you know; and if there’s any tooth-drawing or blood-letting wanted, you’ll not forget Dr. Dooley, fro’ Frog Fold, as he’s reckoned a handy chap with th’ lancet and forceps. Good-neet to you once moor. We’s meet again.”

“Come on, Nelson!” said Romford. “We’ve an hour’s hard walking before us, them pig-trotters will be tired o’ waiting, and I’m base hungry. Red Nell’s oat-cake isn’t

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

filling, and her ale is summat like what Bob Wensley's wife brewed when hoo had no maut and couldn't afford to buy hops."

CHAPTER XLII.

A CONFESSION.

WHILE Robin and the weaver were wandering over the moor, Colonel Dene sat in his room at Dene Hall. Several papers and a miniature lay before him on his desk, but his pen was idle, his head rested on one of his hands, and he seemed absorbed in thought — so absorbed that he heard neither the opening of the door nor the footsteps of his wife as she crossed the softly-carpeted floor.

"Pardon me for interrupting you," she says, laying her hand gently on his shoulder, "but Walter (the head groom) says that he fears Willie's pony is vicious; it kicked several times yesterday, and Walter has heard of a Shetland that would just suit the child. But I should like to have your opinion, so I have told him to send one of the men for it, and when the creature comes — What have

[269]

you here?" (taking up the miniature which her husband was furtively pushing under a sheet of paper). "A young woman! Who — what? I never! Here is an inscription: 'Sophie, to her dear Will!' Sophie, to her dear Will! Ah, I remember! They used to call you Will at home. But who is Sophie? You never had a sister Sophie. Whose likeness is this, Eustace? I want to know."

Mrs. Dene's voice, as well as her manner, showed the emotions that were struggling in her mind — surprise, suspicion, incipient jealousy.

"I want to know," she repeated, seeing that her husband did not answer. "Did the young woman, of whom this is the likeness — did she give you this miniature?"

"She did. But it is long ago, and she is dead."

"She was very dear to you, I suppose?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“She was,” said Colonel Dene, with a troubled look.

“And you said nothing to me of this before! I deserved better of you, Eustace. I have never loved but you — never had a thought that you might not share. And yet you have secrets from me? Oh, Eustace, it is cruel!”

“You surely don’t think, Edith, that a man of the world reaches forty without having had affairs of the heart, and when once a man is married they are best buried in oblivion.”

“Ah! But is it buried in oblivion? If you had forgotten this woman, if you loved me half as well as I love you, I should not find you adoring her miniature years after her death. Are you sure she is dead?”

“Quite sure.”

“Oh, Eustace, this was no common affair of the heart! Tell me, now, what was this girl to you — sweetheart or mistress?”

Colonel Dene rose from his chair, and took both his wife’s hands in his.

“Edith, I implore you,” he said, earnestly, “let this subject drop. It is better for your peace of mind and mine, and for our mutual happiness, that it should. Like most men, I have had fancies and flirtations, but in all my life I have loved but two women. One is not; the other, dearest, is yourself” (kissing her).

“Why, then, were you looking at— that woman’s miniature?”

“You are surely not jealous of a miniature, my Edith? Well, I will tell you. It struck me that there was an extraordinary resemblance between — this face and Miriam Ruberry’s. Don’t you see it?”

[270]

“No; I cannot say that I do” (examining the miniature). “At any rate, it is very slight.”

“That is because you never saw the original.”

“Who was she, Eustace? Cannot you trust me? I must know! Talk about peace of mind! I shall not have a minute’s peace until I do. What were your relations to her? You haven’t answered me.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Are you in earnest, Edith? Will you not accept my assurance, and let the subject drop?”

“I cannot if I would. I should be able to think of nothing else. It is better for us both that you make a clean breast of it. I shall then believe what I should otherwise doubt — that you really love me; for love implies confidence, does it not!”

“Very well. I will, as you say, make a clean breast of it,” returned the colonel, gravely. “And I confess now that it would have been better had I done so at the outset. But I acted, as I thought, for the best; and— don’t you remember once saying that you would never marry a widower. The original of that portrait, Edith, was my wife.”

“Your wife! Your wife! And yet you never told me. It was ill done, Eustace — it was ill done. What if I did say that I would never marry a widower? I would have married you had you been twice a widower. But this deception — oh, it is more than I can bear!” and Mrs. Dene fell a-weeping and wringing her hands as if her heart would break.

“I admit it. I should have told you,” said Colonel Dene, looking deeply distressed. “I ask your forgiveness for not telling you; and when you know all, I think you will both pardon and pity me. Will you hear me?”

“Go on,” murmured the lady, with averted face.

“In 1798, when I was a subaltern in the Marines, I spent several months with my company at Port-of-Spain. It was there I met Sophie Mendoza. She was both beautiful and good, and I fell over head and ears in love with her; and, though she had not a penny for her fortune, and I only an allowance of two hundred pounds a year from my father, we married. If Sophie had had a father or a mother we should probably have acted less rashly. But she lived with an old maiden aunt, who was too glad to get her niece off her hands to throw any obstacle in the way of her marriage. When the regiment went home Sophie accompanied us, and before the ship reached Portsmouth she became a mother.”

[271]

“Oh, heavens! There was a child, then! But not a boy, Eustace — not a boy?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Yes, a boy. I know what you are thinking about. But the boy will never trouble you, Edith; he is with his mother, poor little man! We called him Rupert, for I did not want to give him a family name; but we always spoke of him as Robin. I did not tell my father of my marriage; he would have been wild with rage, and might have stopped my allowance. I took lodgings for Sophie and her child in a pretty village on the coast. I spared her one hundred and twenty pounds a year out of my allowance, on which, supplemented with an occasional lift from my prize money, she contrived to live — I hope not uncomfortably. Whenever I had opportunity — which, being nearly always on foreign service, was not often — I went to see her.

“And so the years wore on, until I was again ordered to the West Indies. Before my departure I spent a happy fortnight with Sophie and Robin. I have never seen them since. After I had been on the station a twelvemonth I fell ill of a fever, and when I partially recovered, was invalided and sent home in an armed transport, bound for the Thames. The month before I left I wrote to Sophie to meet me in London. But ‘Man proposes and God disposes.’ When half-way across the Bay of Biscay we were chased by a French frigate, double our size; and after a desperate engagement, in which I was severely wounded, we had to strike our flag. We were taken to Brest, and I was sent as a prisoner of war to a central prison in the interior of France. Months passed before I got better of my wound, and more than a year before I was exchanged. I will not attempt to describe the agony of that terrible time — agony of body and anguish of mind, for Sophie was entirely dependent on me. She had little more money than would maintain her for a few weeks in London, and I knew not what would become of her and the boy.

“When I was released I hurried to Lulworth. Nothing had been heard of her since her departure, but through the carrier, who had taken some of her luggage to London, I obtained the address of her lodgings. I went thither, of course, but only to learn that when her resources were exhausted she and her child were turned into the street.

“I spent a whole month in seeking a clue to their fate. I consulted the police, I went everywhere, and at length I found — Two days after she had been thrust by her heartless landlady into the

streets, two bodies — the body of a woman and the body of a little boy — were taken out of the Thames, below London Bridge, and from the description given of them, there could be no doubt that they were those of my wife and her child. In a fit of desperation — homeless and hopeless — Sophie had taken her life and his. In any circumstances, so terrible a tragedy would have been sufficiently heartrending; but my grief for their untimely end was intensified by the pangs of remorse. Had I openly avowed my marriage the catastrophe could not have happened, for my father and my friends, however much they might have blamed my imprudence, would at least have taken charge of the boy, and saved Sophie from suicide and despair. God alone knows how much I suffered, and I suffered in silence, for not even to my dearest friend did I reveal the cause of my sorrow. So soon as my health permitted, I exchanged into a line regiment, and joined the army in Spain, there, if possible, to find forgetfulness in death. But it was not to be. I seemed to bear a charmed life, and, beyond one or two trifling wounds, I passed through every danger unscathed. Meanwhile Time, the healer, was slowly blunting the sharpness of my grief. Five years afterwards I met you, and forgot my misfortune in the hope of a new happiness. Were I to say that I never think of Sophie, you would not believe me, yet you and Willie are all in all to me, Edith. My old love for her has served rather to intensify than diminish my love for you.

“Now that you know all, you may guess why, in addition to the other reasons I have mentioned, I desired to bury in my own heart the one secret of my life. But I did wrong. I should have told you all, even at the risk of giving you pain and losing your love. It was a weakness, just as it was a weakness to conceal my marriage with Sophie, for fear of offending my father and losing my allowance — a weakness and a mistake, one of those mistakes which in certain circumstances may have worse results than a crime. I have freely confessed; can you as freely forgive me, Edith?”

For a few minutes Mrs. Dene was silent; but after a short, though, as her countenance showed, a fierce struggle, her good angel triumphed — for the time.

“Oh yes, Eustace; and, more than that, I pity you. How you must have suffered! You are right. Let this terrible episode of your life be buried in oblivion. I will not deny that I would rather have been your first love; but as my boy and I are all in all to you, and there is nobody to come between us, and I have the

[273]

best husband in the world, I am content. I might be jealous of the living; it were wicked to be jealous of the dead. And now no more of this; we will never mention it again. Let us talk about something else. What was it? Oh, dear Willie and his pony. He must really have another.”

“By all means, if you think so.”

“And when this one comes that Walter has heard of, you will look at it and give me your opinion?”

“Of course I will. All the same, you cannot tell, merely by looking at it, whether a pony is quiet and safe. We must have it on trial for a day or two.”

“A good idea. It would never do to have another kicker. I will let you know when it comes — the pony, I mean, not the idea. And now I will leave you to finish your correspondence.”

“She might be jealous of the living, but it were wicked to be jealous of the dead,” murmured Colonel Dene, when he was left to himself. “And yet I fear that, deep down in her heart, Edith is jealous of the dead; for, though she pitied me, she had not a word of pity for Sophie and that poor boy. I said truly, I love Edith, but I shall never forget Sophie — never. My first love, so gentle and self-sacrificing; never a word of reproach for the seclusion in which I kept her. Even in her extremity she did not apply to my people, poor girl. And Robin! I can still see him as I last saw him, when his weeping mother held him up to kiss his hand as the coach was driving away. Is he really dead? There were discrepancies in that description, and unless Sophie had been really out of her mind she could not — no, she could not — have taken his life before taking her own. The suspicion has long haunted my mind, and especially since I met this Nelson, that he still lives. The same age, and that white lock! And there is something in the lad’s appearance and story that strangely attracts me. But no; it is impossible. Robin knew who I was — my rank and name, and he was quite old enough and sharp enough to put somebody on the right track, if not to find me himself. Then the name! Yes, it is impossible — utterly impossible. If he lived he would have found me or I him, long, long ago.”

[274]

CHAPTER XLIII.

PERPLEXITIES.

In addition to his other perplexities, Robin had now to decide how he should communicate to his employers the particulars of his adventure on the moor, or so much thereof as it concerned them to know. It would not be expedient, he thought, to bring in the name of the radical weaver; and after his promise to Red Nell to “keep a still tongue,” he could not mention his visit to the hush shop, much less whom he had seen there; for if Robert Ruberry knew, or even suspected, that any of the hands frequented the place, they would be in his black books, and, in all probability, incur the pain of dismissal. It was not only that Red Nell’s had an evil reputation; the hands were expected to do their drinking at the Hare and Hounds, which well-accustomed inn was the property of the firm, and those of them who went elsewhere were sure to incur their masters’ displeasure. For those reasons Robin limited his communication to the purport of the overheard conversation. As he expected. Old Bob tried to make light of the threats of his unknown enemies; but the angry look in his eyes, and the nervous twitching of his lips, showed that his indifference was more apparent than real.

“You did right to tell me, Nelson,” he said, coldly; “but I’m quite used to this sort of thing. I have heard of such-like language being used time out o’ mind, and I’m here yet. You know the proverb — ‘Threatened men live long!’ These fellows had a pistol among ’em, you say?”

“Yes; they flashed it to get a light for their lantern.”

“Was it loaded, do you think?”

“It must have been. They had to draw the charge before they could flash the powder.”

“And you have no idea who they were!”

“Not the least.”

“But they were our hands?”

“Some of them were, at any rate. But, whoever they were, I could not see them; it was pitch dark.”

[275]

“Why didn’t you follow ’em up?”

“I did as long as I could — until the light disappeared — and then I lost them.”

“How did you find your way home, then?” — sharply.

“Went on till I came to a house, where I found a man who put me in the way.”

“What man?”

“He said his name was Dooley — Dr. Dooley; but he does not live hereabouts.”

“No; he lives at Frog Fold. I know him — quack doctor and scamp.”

“Scamp?”

“Radical, if you like it better. They’re both as one. But couldn’t you tell any of those fellows by their voices? There’s hardly a man’s voice on th’ ground as I don’t know.”

“But there are a good many that I don’t know.”

“That’s true. Well, I don’t think it matters much. There’s talk o’ that sort going on every day, and if they think to flay me, they’re infernally mistaken.”

Whereupon Robert Ruberry, as if he wanted to have done with the subject, began to open the letters which lay on the desk before him.

“Hello!” he exclaimed, tossing one of them to Robin. “Here’s summat else! Is it from that chap as wants to shoot me, do you think?”

It was a threatening letter of the sort so abundant in Ireland. Beneath a rude drawing of a coffin in black were pen-printed in red ink these words, which sprawled in a ghastly fashion all over the paper:

“OWD NICK TO OLD BOB.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“If thou doesn’t mind what thou art doin’, and give thy spinners a rise, thou’ll be a bloody corpse afore th’ month’s out.

“OWD NICK,

“His merk [a gridiron].”

“Well, what think you?” repeated Robert Ruberry. “Is it a joke, or is it earnest?”

“A joke, I should say,” answered Robin, though he had his doubts.

“How if it’s neither?”

“It must be one or the other.”

“I’m not so sure. The writer of that letter doesn’t mean to kill

[276]

me — not he. When folks mean murder they don’t write letters beforehand. He wants to flay me, that’s all. But he has done me, the thief! He did not prepay th’ letter, and it has cost me thirteen pence. I don’t think any of the spinners has done it — there’s none of ’em as can read or write, much less draw. But it has been done in their interest, and there’s them on this ground as knows all about it.”

“Done in their interest! I see. You are only to be killed if you don’t grant an advance of wages.”

“That is it. Th’ hands want a rise. They say they are ill paid. It’s a lie; they are well paid. They want a rise, but they haven’t the courage to ask me; so they get some Radical scamp, like Romford or Dooley, to send me this letter. But they have got th’ wrong sow by th’ ear this time. They’ll find as ‘Owd Bob,’ as they call me, isn’t so easy flayed as they think.”

“It may be so. Yet, taken in connection with the attempt to smash the engine, and what I heard on the moor, this letter has certainly an ugly look. Won’t you take any precautions at all?”

“For myself, none. I’ll not give in to ’em so far; while, as for th’ factory, all I shall do will be to make th’ overlookers keep a sharper lookout, and do th’ same myself. And — ay, I’ll clap another five thousand on th’ insurance; we are a bit under the mark

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

at present. It's best to be on th' safe side — give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, you know — and if they do burn the factory down, I'll build another twice as big while they're clemming. A brand-new concern is so much better than an old 'un that I've no doubt we should be gainers in the long run. Ay, let 'em burn it. I know who would suffer most."

After delivering himself of this tirade, Robert Ruberry, without waiting for a reply, resumed the reading of his letters, to two or three of which he proceeded to write answers, handing them, as they were finished, to Robin to copy and address.

While they were thus occupied, the trampling of naked feet and a sound as of hushed voices were heard outside, followed, the next moment, by a knock at the door.

"What the deuce!" exclaimed Robert Ruberry. "Come in!"

On which the door opened and disclosed a crowd of spinners, behind whom were gathered several scores of piecers, card-room hands — male and female — and others.

Old Bob could not have looked more surprised if his visitors had been red Indians in their war-paint, or Chinamen with tails.

[277]

"Well," he said, turning round and glaring at the intruders as they trooped into the counting-house, "this caps all! I never knew owt like this! What's up? What do you want?"

"Thee speyk. Bill." — "Not I; speyk thysel'." — "Let Jim o' Jacks speyk." — "No, Pe o' Bobs; he can talk," whispered the spinners, as they pushed one another forward; but none seemed desirous to take the post of honor.

"What! Dare none of you open your mouths?" sneered Old Bob. "Come, out with it! You are the oldest spinner on the ground, Pluckett. What does this mean?"

Thus appealed to, Pluckett, a middle-aged, broad-set man, with iron-gray hair and a careworn face, stepped to the front.

"We want a rise of ten per cent, aw raand," he said.

"Ay, ten per cent, aw raand," chorused the others, whose tongues were now loosened.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Ten per cent.! Hadn’t you better ask for a hundred per cent, while you are about it? Would you like me to give you th’ factory, and all as I have besides, and spend th’ rest of my days in th’ poor-house.”

“We haven’t a living,” quoth a man in the crowd. “I work like a hoss fro’ Monday morning to Saturday neet, and I durned addle enough to keep th’ childer i’ porridge.”

“More fool you for having childer. I did not ask you to have any, did I? I’ve no childer.”

“It is a good job for th’ childer as you haven’t. You’d clem ’em to death!” cried a rough yet distinctly feminine voice.

“Who — who said that?” demanded Robert Ruberry, now almost beside himself.

“I did,” answered a big card-room lass, thrusting her way through the throng. “I said it, and you may bag me if you like. I can nobbut go to th’ poor-house, and I’s be better off theer than i’ one of your cottages. They’re no better than dog-kennels. You wouldn’t put your bosses i’ sich-like hoyles.”

“Come, no more of this! Now, I’ll you what, chaps. You want a rise of ten per cent. Well, I’ll not give you one per cent., not while your hearts beat, and if you don’t get back to your work without any more bother, by — Oh, you’ll not flay me. Stand back, I say.”

Several of the foremost spinners, stung by their master’s contemptuous language, made as if they would strike him; but Robert Ruberry stood his ground, and though Robin’s sympathies were

[278]

entirely with the hands, he could not help admiring the old man’s courage, for a single blow from a spinner’s horny fist would well-nigh have annihilated him. He more than stood his ground; he dominated them.

“Get back to your work, I say!” he repeated, stamping his foot on the floor, and quivering with passion. “And, if you are not gone in two minutes, by — I’ll stop the factory for a month, and them may find porridge for their childer as can. Turn out, will

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

you? Well, do it, then. But let me tell you one thing: if you stop out till th' day o' judgment, you'll not beat me. Back to your work this minute!"

And they went. First the women and card-room hands, sullenly and silently; then the spinners, muttering threats of vengeance.

"You see! It is as I told you," said Robert Ruberry, as the last of them withdrew. "Th' letter was written in the interest of the hands. I begin to think it was written by one of 'em, and sent to Manchester to be posted. Have you learned anybody to write besides Jim Rabbits?"

"No."

"Well, take care you don't. What business have workfolks with writing? Let me see — didn't I hear summat about Blincoe having learned to write while he was in prison?"

"Yes. I believe he had learned once before — a good many years since, and when he was in prison somebody gave him a copybook, and with a bit of practice it came back to him. At any rate, that is what he told me."

"Can it be him, do you think?"

"Why should he write such a letter? He is still an apprentice, and it can make no earthly difference to him whether wages are raised or not."

"That's true. All th' same, some of th' others may have made a spoon-handle of him. I have a good mind to ask him — but it would be no use; he'd lie; they all lie. And now, Nelson, not a word of this — the letter I mean — to anybody, not even to my brother. I don't want it to be buzzed all o'er th' place, and Ben never could keep a secret in his life. Hello! Somebody at th' door. They are surely not coming back?"

Here the door opened a second time, and Miriam, with a pale and agitated face, entered the room.

"Oh, uncle," she cried, "what has happened? The yard is full

[279]

of people, and they are saying such terrible things, cursing you and my father, and saying that you want to starve them to death."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“They were surely not rude to you, Miss Ruberry!” interposed Robin, with some heat. “If they were —”

“Not in the least. They made way for me, and one woman said, ‘God bless you!’ and something else “(blushing).

“What! Haven’t they gone to their work, then?”

“I think so. They seemed to be going. But what is it all about, uncle? What has happened?”

“They have had th’ impudence to ask for a rise of ten per cent. — nowt else — and I told them plump and plain that they shouldn’t have it while their hearts beat.”

“But some of them are so very poor. I called just now to see Trimble’s wife. She is ill in bed, her children are only half clad, and for a whole week they have had nothing to eat but porridge without milk — and not enough of that. If you could give them some advance — if not ten per cent., then five — it would be a great help and a great kindness.”

“Not it! They’d spend it all in drink, and want another rise next year. Besides, it cannot be afforded. There’s nobody I would sooner oblige than you, Miriam, but the concern must not suffer to please anybody, and to yield to insolent demands like this would be just ruination. You can see yourself that the more we do for them the more ungrateful they are, and the worse to manage. Haven’t we built that cottage hospital as you wanted, given th’ ’prentices better food and more liberty, and made most of th’ cottages weather-tight — and what’s the return we get? A demand for a ten per cent, rise! And one of th’ card-room lasses had th’ impudence to say as our cottages are no better than dog-kennels.”

“Some of them are worse, uncle. When I saw Colonel Dene’s kennels the other day, I wished that our cottages were half as comfortable.”

“Colonel Dene! Do you think we can cope with a man as has ten thousand a year, paid every six months? Besides, it would never do to make th’ cottages too comfortable; th’ hands would be stopping in ’em all day long instead of coming to their work. And this is a free country. Them as doesn’t like ’em can leave ’em. Isn’t your father coming down?”

“Not this morning. He wanted me to tell you that he has gone, at Colonel Dene’s invitation, to have a day’s shooting in the home coverts.”

[280]

“Well, I dare say we can do without him. I’m going into th’ factory to see if those fools have set to work again. Shall I see you across th’ yard?”

“Thank you, uncle. If you have done with that book I last lent you, Nelson, I shall be glad if you will let me have it back,” said Miriam, in a matter-of-fact way, but with a reproachful glance at Robin, which her uncle, who seldom missed anything, perceived, and wondered greatly what it could mean.

“Certainly,” he returned. “I will send it to-morrow, or the next day — or bring it myself.”

“Thank you. That will do very well. Good-morning.”

Robin was at no loss to understand the meaning of Miriam’s reproachful glance. Though several days had elapsed since his interview with Romford, he had not, as yet, informed her what the former advised, or what he himself proposed to do; for how could he tell her of the appalling idea which the weaver had suggested — that his father and mother were possibly — nay, probably — not man and wife? As yet, moreover, he had not decided whether he would act on his mentor’s advice. At one time he would say to himself that the mere suggestion of so hideous a possibility was dishonoring to both his parents. At another time he would reluctantly admit the possibility, with the qualification that, if it were so, his mother must have been deceived, and his father be a villain of the deepest dye, to whom he owed neither affection nor duty. And he had a haunting fear that it was so. He could not deny, even to himself, that the circumstances of the case seemed to square with Romford’s theory, yet he thought that his present suspense would be easier to bear than confirmation of so terrible a suspicion.

On the other hand, he had a strong desire to know the truth, and it was obvious that if he refrained from revealing himself to Colonel Dene, Miriam, and in all probability Romford likewise, might set him down as an impostor and his story as a fiction.

In the end, and after much perturbation of mind, he resolved to let Miriam decide for him. Seeing that he knew beforehand what she would say, this was not a very

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

logical conclusion; but he was not in a logical frame of mind, and it pleased him to think that he was making her the arbitress of his fate. So he wrote her a short note, which, bearing in mind the possibility of its being intercepted, he so expressed that it could not easily be understood by anybody else:

[281]

“My friend thinks that C. D. is my father, and advises me to speak to him. If you are of the same opinion, I will take the earliest possible opportunity of doing so.

ROBIN.”

He put the missive inside the book (a copy of “Mansfield Park”), which, after folding in brown paper, he took to Oaken Cleugh. He would have liked to see Miriam, but hearing that she was with her father and uncle, and fearing that if he asked for her it might excite suspicion, he merely requested Phoebe to give the packet to her mistress.

On the day following he received his answer (enclosed in a copy of “Belinda”). It ran thus:

“I am of the same opinion as your friend. By all means act on his advice, and let me hear from you again as soon as may be.

MIRIAM.”

CHAPTER XLIV.

FATHER AND SON.

THE die was cast then, and, albeit Robin could not shake off his misgivings, his mind was made up. He would know the truth, be the result what it might, if only to satisfy Miriam; and he felt in his heart that, though she did not know all the facts, her advice was sound. The sooner he acted on it and saw Colonel Dene the better, and as the only times when Robin was not at work until eight or nine P. M. were Saturdays (when

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

the engine stopped at four) and Sundays, it must be one of these days. He elected for the former, and on the first Saturday afternoon following the receipt of Miriam's letter set out for Dene Hall, taking with him the copy of "The Bride of Lammermoor" to return, which was the ostensible object of his visit.

He lingered long on the way, thinking how he should broach the subject: but, as none of the plans which he formed seemed satisfactory, he finally resolved to trust to the chapter of accidents and the inspiration of the moment. When he knocked at the door, shortly before six, he was so agitated that he could hardly command his voice, and it was with a sense of relief rather than of disappointment that he heard Colonel Dene was not at home. His master and mistress were out at a dinner-party, said the footman. Would Mr. Nelson leave his card? Mr. Nelson had no card, but he left a message and the book,

[282]

"Tell Colonel Dene," he said, "that Mr. Nelson has a communication to make, and will call again to-morrow afternoon."

Then he returned to his lodgings, and spent the rest of the evening in giving Jim Rabbits a lesson in arithmetic; and though Robin did not take very kindly to the occupation, it was so far useful that it served to divert for a while the current of his thoughts. But night brought a renewal of his cares; his fitful slumbers were haunted by hideous dreams, and he awoke so weary and unrefreshed that, instead of going to church, as usual, he took a long walk in the fields. The ramble and the respite did him good — calmed his mind and restored his courage; and albeit, when he knocked for the second time at the door of his father's house, his heart beat faster, he could inquire without any show of nervousness whether Colonel Dene was at home.

"Yes, sir," said the man, respectfully; "he is in the library, and will be glad to see you. Will you step this way?"

Robin followed his conductor, and was duly announced.

Colonel Dene, who had been reading, rose from his chair and gave his guest a cordial greeting.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I am glad to see you,” he said; “it is good of you to come again so soon. Sorry I was out when you called yesterday. You brought back ‘The Bride of Lammermoor.’ What do you think of it?”

Robin answered something, he hardly knew what. He was struggling with tumultuous thoughts, and trying to still the almost audible throbbings of his heart, for, now that the supreme moment of his life drew near, his old apprehensions revived in full force.

“Won’t you sit down? Or perhaps you would like to select another book? The latest editions are on the shelves next the window,” said Colonel Dene, thinking thereby to give the young fellow (whose agitation he attributed to shyness) an opportunity of recovering his composure.

“Thank you,” answered Robin, as he acted on the hint. But he had no sooner reached the window than he wheeled suddenly round, and, returning to the colonel, looked him full in the face.

“Colonel Dene,” he said, in a broken voice, “I have not come for a book. I have come to ask you a question.”

“To ask me a question! What is it, Nelson?” answered the colonel, kindly, but with a look which expressed something more than surprise.

[283]

“I think, sir, you can tell me something about my father. I— I have not seen him for more than twelve years. You called me Nelson just now. My name is not Nelson; it is Ravensmere — Rupert Ravensmere.”

Colonel Dene turned deadly pale, and, rising a second time from his chair, placed his hands on Robin’s shoulders and devoured him with his eyes.

“If your name be in truth Rupert Ravensmere,” he said, slowly, and articulating with difficulty — “if you are in truth Rupert Ravensmere, you are my boy, my long-lost boy. But if you are deceiving me, by Heaven — The truth, the truth!”

“I am in very truth Rupert Ravensmere, Colonel Dene. My mother’s maiden name was Sophie Mendoza. I was born on board the troopship *Ilford*, during a voyage from Port-of-Spain to Portsmouth, and the last time I saw my father was on the day he

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

left us at Lulworth, where we were living, on his appointment to a command on the *Vesta*, bound for the West Indies. We stayed at Lulworth until he wrote to my mother from Martinique, saying that he had been ill and was coming home, and that we were to meet him in London —”

The inspiration of the moment was serving Robin well. He was recalling without effort names and events to which for long years he had been oblivious.

“And then?” said Colonel Dene, eagerly, whose white face, damp with sweat, and trembling lips showed the intensity of his emotion. “And then — you went to London?”

“Yes, we went to London, and my father did not come, and we fell into want —”

“You fell into want, and — and — But your mother, boy — tell me about your mother! Did she suffer much? Were you — were you with her to the last?”

“I saw her die.”

“Poor Robin! Poor Sophie! And she so good and brave! The horror of it! — oh, my God, the horror of it! She must indeed have been maddened by want to abandon her child and take her own life!”

“Take her own life! My mother take her own life and abandon me! I don’t understand. You are quite wrong.”

“How? Did not the poor creature drown herself? Her body was found in the Thames.”

“Oh, no, sir; my mother did not drown herself.”

[284]

“What then, boy — what then?” asked Colonel Dene, in a barely audible voice; for the fearful thought had crossed his mind that Sophie might still be living.

“My mother died in the dock of the Old Bailey, sir.”

“No, no, no! That would be worse — worse than starvation — worse than suicide! My wife — the wife of a Ravensmere — die in the dock of the Old Bailey! Oh, my Sophie — my wife!

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

His wife! The words conjured away all Robin's mistrust, and his heart went out to his father.

"Oh, no, I cannot, will not, believe it," murmured Colonel Dene. "Say you are deceiving me, boy, and I will forgive you."

"It is only too true, my father — May I call you father?"

"May you call me father! Ah, Robin, you little know how dearly I loved you, how I sought after and sorrowed for my lost darling and her child, and, though she is not, you are restored to me. My little Rupert, how well I remember him! And now he is as tall as myself. Come nearer. Let me put my arms round you, and look more closely at your face — my eyes are dim with tears. Ah, yes, you are altered, greatly altered; but it is Robin's face still. Blind, blind that I did not see it before! And there is that white lock your mother told me about in her letters. When we first met I liked you, and you interested me. And, strangely enough, I had more than once a vague suspicion that you might be my boy. But, when I calmly reviewed the facts, I laughed at myself for entertaining so preposterous an idea, and dismissed it from my mind. How could a factory apprentice called Nelson, even though he had a white lock and was of the same age, be the child who, I had reason to believe, had been dead for years? Even now it seems impossible, and if my heart did not acknowledge — But your mother — how did it come to pass? She was surely not a prisoner! Died in the dock of the Old Bailey! Tell me all, boy. Sit here, near me, and tell me all quickly, from the time we parted at Lulworth."

Again, and, as he wrongly thought, for the last time, Rupert Ravensmere told his strange, eventful history.

For a while Colonel Dene listened in silence; but when he heard of all that his wife and son suffered in London, he became greatly excited, interrupting Robin with frequent exclamations and questions, such as:

"— Did ever anybody hear of so noble a woman? She knew where my people were, and, even though they might have blamed me, they would have helped her for my sake. And yet, rather

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

than make known my secret, she endured all this ignominy and want! And you and she were turned into the cold streets, my poor boy, and I —! But go on — what next? Quick — what next?”

“— And that wretched Jew actually gave her into custody when she would have returned the cloak! Where is he, that I may crush the breath from his vile body? Go on, go on!”

When Robin told of his mother’s imprisonment and trial, and of the last scene of all, the colonel bowed his head and wept, and his son wept with him. Then indignation gained the mastery. He rose from his chair, and, gesticulating wildly, protested that he would seek out the judge — Hardress — and denounce him as the murderer of the best woman who ever lived.

As Robin went on, the colonel calmed down somewhat, and his questions and interruptions became fewer and more coherent.

“You were quite right, Robin,” he observed, “when you said Mr. Bartlett was your second father; he did more to deserve your love than ever I did. Would it were in my power to thank him for his kindness to my desolate boy! Do you know what I thought when you told me about him, and of your treatment by Moses Weevil? I thought you were Bartlett’s son, and had been cheated out of your inheritance. It was that idea, as much as anything, which threw me off the right scent. I still think the scoundrel had some strong motive for getting rid of you. So you were persuaded to become a factory apprentice — of all things in the world!”

For several minutes after Robin had told his story. Colonel Dene remained silent, and, as it seemed, lost in deep and painful thought.

“Rupert Ravensmere,” he said, at length, looking tenderly at his son — “Rupert Ravensmere, do you know that you are the heir to Birch Dene?”

“That is as you like, sir.”

“Not at all. The estate is settled on me and my first-born son and his son after him. You are my first-born, and therefore the heir. And you shall be acknowledged as the heir, Robin; but not just yet. Are you in a hurry to assume the position, or will you wait awhile — to please me?”

“I will wait, father, as long as you wish.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Spoken like your mother’s son, dear boy!” said the colonel, warmly. “And yet I have no right to demand of you so great a

[286]

sacrifice. Rather do I owe you reparation for the wrong I did you — you and her.”

“Wrong? Oh, no, there was no wrong. If you had not fallen into the hands of the French on your voyage home, all would have been well.”

“If! But I had no right to count on all going well. In not providing for the contingency, which I ought to have foreseen, and which actually occurred, I failed in my duty. And it could have been done so easily — a letter to my father, to be forwarded to him by your mother in the event of my death or capture by the enemy. He would have been highly incensed, I dare say, but he would have done his duty. And I ought to have avowed my marriage from the beginning. I tried to persuade myself that if I did so I should lose my allowance; but it was much more fear of incurring my father’s displeasure and giving pain to my family. Fear of giving pain to those I cared for was rather a weakness of mine in those days. Yes, Robin, I owe you reparation, yet I am going to ask you to make a great sacrifice. When I openly acknowledge you, one of the first persons to be informed must necessarily be Mrs. Dene — I can hardly bring myself, as yet, to speak of her as your stepmother — I ought really to tell her before I tell anybody else; and, as she is in a delicate state of health just now, I fear the shock would be more than she could bear. She has always looked upon Willy as the heir, and her disappointment, when she knows the truth, will be great —”

“Let Willy be your heir, sir,” broke in Robin; “I ask no more than to be your son.”

“A very noble offer, my dear boy, for which I thank you with all my heart. It is more than I deserve. But you cannot help being the heir. I am only the life-tenant. If you survive me, Birch Dene must one day be yours. All I ask of you is that you wait a few months until Mrs. Dene is so far recovered that I may tell her, without risk of serious consequences, that the son whom I thought dead is still alive.”

“Do you call that a great sacrifice, father? Why, it is nothing at all! Of course I will wait, as long as you like.”

“And remain at the factory?”

“And remain at the factory.”

“Keeping the name by which you are known there, and not mentioning to a soul either who you are or what has passed between us to-day?”

[287]

Robin’s countenance fell. If he told Miriam and Romford naught of what had passed between his father and himself, they must needs discredit his story, and look upon him as an impostor.

“Have you told anybody who you are?”

“I told Romford, the Radical weaver, who I thought I was, and asked his advice — in the strictest confidence.”

“So you think he is a man who can keep a secret, then?”

“I am sure he is.”

“Romford is in evil odor with my brother justices. All the same, I have heard a good report of him, and I believe he is an honest man. I will see him, and I have no doubt he can be prevailed upon to keep his own counsel. Have you told anybody else?”

“Yes, sir, I told all I knew about myself to two persons — one of whom was Romford, the other Miriam Ruberry.”

“Miriam Ruberry! Also in confidence, I suppose? How came you to tell her, Robin?”

Robin explained that he and Miriam had struck up a sort of Platonic friendship, that he told her his story before he had any idea that Colonel Dene was his father, that it was from her he learned that the colonel’s original name was Ravensmere, and by her advice that he had consulted the weaver.

“Can she also keep a secret, do you think?”

“She has given me her word, and what Miriam promises, that will she do. She is as true as steel.”

“Do you love her, boy?”

“Do I love Miriam?” answered Robin, turning very red and looking very self-conscious. “Yes, sir — as a sister — nothing more.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Of course, nothing more,” answered the colonel, gravely, albeit the suspicion of a smile hovered about his lips. “I understand — a purely Platonic friendship! But you need not blush, Robin. To love a sweet girl like Miriam would be no reproach —”

“I assure you, sir, I never thought —” broke in Robin, impetuously.

“— Would be no reproach to any young fellow,” continued the colonel, quietly. “Rather the contrary. It would be a reproach if you did not love her — more than Platonically. Not that I suppose you have seriously entertained the idea of making her your wife. You are just a little young for that yet. But the experiences you have undergone have developed your character and made you older than your years. I was not very much older than

[288]

you are when I fell in love with your mother. However, this is not to the purpose; for, though I am your father, you need not make me your father confessor — unless you like. Be Miriam to you what she may, I want you to keep our relationship even from her, for the present.”

“But what must I do? What shall I say? What will she think of me?” demanded the young fellow, passionately. “She knew I was going to see you. She strongly advised me to see you, and if I refuse to tell her what I have heard she must think ill of me. She will either think that I have no confidence in her, or that my story is untrue. And she would keep it a profound secret, even from her father and her uncle. I am sure she would.”

“So am I; and I am equally sure she would not think ill of you or ascribe your reticence to any want of confidence in herself. Listen, Robin: as I have already explained, I am most anxious that Mrs. Dene should not know you are my son for some time to come, and that she should hear of it from nobody but myself. Now, if you were to tell Miriam, you would place her in a false position. Whenever she came here — and I hope she will come often — she would have to play a part, and be continually on her guard — might even inadvertently betray her secret; for Mrs. Dene is a woman of the world, quick at reading character and drawing conclusions. It is better, even for

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Miriam's sake, that she should remain for a while in ignorance. And if she has a regard for you — Has she?"

"I — I think so—"

"If she has a regard for you — a sisterly affection, let us say — she will give you credit for sincerity and be content to wait until such time as you can tell her all — and it will not be very long. Tell her so — tell her that your lips are sealed, and ask her to trust you, and keep to herself so much of your story as she already knows. If she be the girl I take her for, she will not hesitate."

"Very well, sir, if you think so —"

"I do think so, and you will greatly oblige me."

"If you put it in that way I cannot hesitate. I will not tell even Miriam that you are my father."

"You are very good. I should not have been at all surprised if you had refused. I thank Heaven that you are what you are, and not what you might have been. The trials which would have utterly marred a less sterling nature have made yours all the stronger. I can be proud of Sophie's child — I am proud of him. And don't

[289]

fear; your probation will not be for long; and it shall be made as tolerable as possible. I will speak to Mr. Ruberry; I will ask him to show you all the consideration in his power. I think I can do it in such a way as will not excite his suspicion."

"You had better speak to Mr. Robert, sir. He is the virtual master of the concern, and his brother's keeper."

"Mr. Robert let it be, then. But I shall have to mind my P's and Q's. He is very sharp and keen, that old man. And now, my dear boy, how are you off for money?"

"Oh, I have some laid by, and they give me five shillings a week."

"Five shillings a week! And how much have you laid by?"

"Nearly five pounds, sir."

"Nearly five pounds!" — (smiling). "Well, how much shall I allow you? You have a claim, mind. You are my heir, and by good right should be at college or in the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

army, and at my charge. Instead of that, you are keeping yourself, and I consider myself to be heavily in your debt. How much shall we say?"

"I would rather leave it to you, sir; and really I can make shift very well with what I have."

"And I would rather leave it to you. Come now — how much?"

"Well, if I must say, I think" — (hesitating) — "I think ten shillings a week would be quite ample."

"Oh, no, Robin; I cannot allow you ten shillings a week."

"I am very sorry. Five shillings, then."

"I did not mean that ten shillings was too much. You must have a hundred a year at least; and next year, when you are of age, I shall make it a thousand."

"A thousand a year!" exclaimed Robin, with a bewildered look. "What shall I do with it?"

"When you take your right position, as heir to Birch Dene, you will not find a thousand a year too much. We may look upon that as settled, then. Is there anything else? Yes, I must take down the address of that Mr. Chubb — 'Mortimer Chubb, Lincoln's Inn Fields,' I think you said. I shall not write to him. I will see him when I go to town, and if I can arrange it you shall go with me, so that we may visit together your poor mother's grave. We were talking just now about Miss Ruberry. Has it ever struck you that she is like anybody?"

"Yes, she is like my mother."

"You saw it, then! Yes, they are strangely alike. When I

[290]

first saw Miriam she quite startled me. But the resemblance must be accidental. There can be no relationship. And she seems to be a good girl, and of a sweet disposition."

"Except my mother, I have never known anybody so lovable and good."

"And you love her?"

Robin made no answer, but the flush on his face and the light in his eye showed Colonel Dene that he had guessed aright.

CHAPTER XLV.

OLD BETTY TALKS NONSENSE.

ROBIN'S predominant feeling, as he wended homeward, may be best described as elation, dashed by doubt. He had found his father — a father who was all he could desire — who realized his ideal of an officer and a gentleman, whom he could unreservedly respect and love with all his heart. He was heir to Birch Dene and ten thousand a year; and though it hardly seemed possible that it could ever be his — for Colonel Dene looked as if he might live to be a hundred, and Robin hoped he would — the position was a splendid one and surpassed his wildest expectations. He, the London waif, rescued from the streets by the kindness of a tradesman — then workhouse apprentice and Lancashire factory boy — now the son of a distinguished officer of ancient lineage, and heir to one of the finest properties in the county! It seemed like a dream. Fortune had, indeed, been very kind to him. What more could he wish?

Nevertheless, Robin was not content. He was forbidden to tell Miriam these glad tidings of great joy. He must tell her nothing of what had passed between his father and himself — and he longed to tell her all. She, his sweet counsellor, having shared in his anxiety, it was natural that she should desire to share in his triumph. And he loved her. Since his father had opened his eyes he knew that he loved her with a more than fraternal affection — more passionately than he had once loved his mother, and more devotedly than he now loved his father. He could, moreover, indulge in hopes and visions that only a few hours ago would have seemed the merest madness or the sheerest impudence. Mr. Ruberry was not the man to refuse his daughter to the heir of Birch Dene; and

[291]

who but his father had detected the true character of his love and fanned his smouldering passion into a flame?

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Yet, until that same father unsealed his lips, he must remain silent, and bury in his heart both the fact of his love and the secret of his birth. For the two went together. Rupert Ravensmere Dene might, without presumption, woo Miriam Ruberry; but if Robin Nelson, factory apprentice, dared to speak of love to his master's daughter, he would richly merit the scornful repulse which he was sure to receive. Unless Miriam loved him as he loved her — But no; it was too much to hope for. Such an idea, he felt sure, had never entered her mind; she was too modest, too unsophisticated, too religious — for the young fellow ascribed to his sweetheart every perfection under heaven, and several more. Then, again, he would have to keep from her what she was eager to know, repay her confidence with seeming distrust, and so, as he feared (his father to the contrary notwithstanding), lose her friendship and incur her displeasure.

“Altogether a very hard case!” he exclaimed aloud.

“What is a very hard case, Nelson?”

“God bless me! you here, Romford?” exclaimed Robin, as the weaver, who had overtaken him unperceived, laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. “I was thinking aloud.”

“So it seems; and a dangerous habit it is — unless you want folks to know your thoughts. What is a hard case?”

“Something I was thinking about.”

“That means something as you don't want to tell. Well, I'll ax you no questions, and then you'll happen tell me no lies. Wheer have yo' bin?”

“Isn't that a question?”

“It's nowt else. However —”

“Oh, I have no objection in the world to say where I have been. I have been to the Hall.”

“And have yo' seen th' colonel?”

“I have.”

“And how have yo' gone on?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“Not at liberty to say!”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“No. I have given my word not to reveal to anybody what has passed to-day between my — between Colonel Dene and myself. But he will see you himself, and then perhaps —”

“See me himself! The deuce he will! That’s a queer tale. Mon I go to him, or he’ll come to me?”

[292]

“That I cannot tell you; but I think it is very likely you will hear from him either to-day or to-morrow.”

“Well, I dare say I can wait that long; and, as you willn’t tell me owt, there’s no use saying no more about it. However, I’m fain I’ve letten on yo’, for, if you’ve nowt to tell me, I’ve summat to tell yo’. I’ve seen Dr. Dooley. He came to our house this afternoon, and I’ve just been setting him on his way home.”

“He has heard something, then?”

“He has. He yerd summat that neet at Red Nell’s, and he has yerd summat sin’. It confirms my worst fears. There’s mischief brewing, Nelson. The ringleader is a man called Simon Peter.”

“Simon Peter! But that cannot be his name.”

“Onyhow, it’s th’ name as he goes by, and that’s enough for our purpose. I believe it’s him wi’ th’ pistol as talked about shooting Robert Ruberry. He has gotten up a secret society, him and a lot more, and most of th’ hand-wheel spinners and calico weavers in these parts and many a mile round is in it. They think as burning a few factories would do ’em a power o’ good, and flay th’ government into granting reform, repealing th’ corn laws, and what not; and they have some wild ideas about marching to London in their thousands, and overawing Parliament! They might as well try to overawe Holcombe Hill. However, what most concerns us is as they mean to begin wi’ Ruberry’s factory. But when, is more than Dr. Dooley knows or I can tell you. It may be next week — it mayn’t be for a month or two. Now, what are we to do? I dare say government knows all about it; they have Blackfaces — that’s to say spies — everywhere. But they don’t believe in prevention being better than cure. Their plan is to let things get to a head, and then make an example — which means shooting and

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

sabring a lot o' poor, misguided, starving rioters, and then hanging and transporting th' ringleaders. This we must prevent — if we can. But I'll be dashed if I know how! You see, I'm a marked man. If I was to speak to th' head constable at Manchester, he'd want to know where I got my information, and, as I could not tell him — for it would never do to get Dooley into a hobble — he'd ten to one lock me up there and then; for, now the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended, he can do what he likes. And the magistrates hereabouts are just so many Justice Shallows — they dare not call their souls their own. Besides, they would not give me a hearing — while as for Bob Ruberry, you know what he is."

[293]

"Why not speak to Colonel Dene?" said Robin, stopping short in the path. "Why not speak to Colonel Dene? He, at least, dare call his soul his own, and he will know what should be done, if anybody does. And he wants to see you. It is not late; go to the Hall at once, and tell him what you have told me."

"Well, there's summat i' that. But do you think he'll see me?"

"Of course he will. Haven't I said that he wants to see you?"

"I wasn't thinking of him; I wor thinking o' them chaps wi' pigtails and big coaves. They look as if they could be mighty saucy to a poor mon, and I'm not quite clad in purple and fine linen," observed the weaver, casting a glance at his corduroy breeches and iron clogs.

"Never mind that. Send in your name, and say you want to see Colonel Dene on particular business, and he is sure to receive you. I don't think the footman will be saucy. If he is —"

"I'll larn him manners."

"How will you do that?"

"I'll punch his shins for him. Well, it isn't a bad idea, take it altogether. Onyhow, I'll try it on, and to-morrow neet I'll slip into Jim Rabbits' and tell you how I have fared. You willn't be flitting to Dene Hall afore then, I reckon?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

The heir to Birch Dene was so taken aback by this home thrust that he could only say, very confusedly, he had no immediate intention of changing his present quarters.

“The deuce you haven’t!” said the weaver, with a knowing laugh. “Well, I must be off. Good-neet to yo’, Mr. Ravensmere, I’m not such a foo’ as I cannot put two and two together.”

“I have not mystified Romford much, at any rate,” thought Robin, as he resumed his walk. “He has evidently about guessed the truth, and what he does not know my father will have to tell him — probably intends to tell him. Will Miriam put two and two together in the same way, I wonder? I don’t quite see why my father is so anxious to keep her in the dark. It is not as if she knew nothing. She knows my name is Ravensmere, and that the facts of the case point to the probability of Colonel Dene being my father, while his continued kindness will be a sufficient proof that my account of myself is not a fiction. However, I have promised, and I must keep my word.”

Very correct reasoning, no doubt; but it did not occur to Robin that his father was perhaps not quite as morally courageous as he was physically brave, and that, in addition to the other reason he

[294]

had assigned for wanting to keep his wife in the dark, Colonel Dene was in no hurry to make a revelation which, besides being painful to both of them, would almost certainly cause an unpleasant scene, and might not improbably imperil their domestic peace.

There are some men so constituted that they would rather charge a battery single-handed, or lead a forlorn hope, than face an aggrieved woman; and it was quite certain that when Mrs. Dene learned that her darling son had an elder brother the colonel would have to pass a very bad quarter of an hour.

Robin was too much busied with his own difficulties to give much thought either to the analysis of his father’s motives or the doings of the secret society which, according to Dr. Dooley, was plotting the destruction of Ruberry’s factory. How to inform Miriam that he had nothing to tell her was the great question which occupied his

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

mind, almost to the exclusion of everything else. By letter? The idea was conceived only to be dismissed. The risk would be too great (at least, he so persuaded himself), and in a letter, let it be as long as it might, he could not possibly say all he wanted to say. It would be far better to see her, and it perhaps counted for something that he wanted very much to see her. But when and where they were to meet, and how the interview (which must necessarily be a secret one) was to be arranged, was not quite apparent.

In the end Robin decided (and perhaps wisely) to leave this difficulty to be dealt with by Miriam. He would just write that he had something to say which could only be communicated in a private interview, and ask her to give him a rendezvous.

So the next morning he indited a short note in this sense, which he enclosed, as usual, in a book; but instead of taking it to Oaken Cleugh (and perhaps having to intrust it to Phoebe, who was as quick at drawing conclusions as Mrs. Dene), he confided the packet to Betty, with a request to give it into Miss Ruberry's own hands the first time she called at the apprentice house, which he expected would be on the following day; and, by way of insuring due attention to his instructions, he tipped the old woman a shilling.

Betty, who could put two and two together as well as most folks, gave Robin a stare of surprise; then, taking her pipe from her mouth, she spat on the coin with great deliberation.

"That's for luck, and much happiness to both on yo'," she said, with an expressive wink. "Ay, I'll give it to her reyt enough, and say nowt to nobody. Yo're a gradely lad, and a good plucked

[295]

'un; but I never thowt as yo'd have th' corridge to buckle up to Miriam."

"You are quite mistaken, Betty," stammered Robin, turning very red. "It is only a book I am returning to Miss Ruberry."

"Nobbut a book! Why durn't yo' send it back by Owd Ben or Owd Bob then, or one o' th' carters? — and why is it done up so tidy i' papper and twine? — and what

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

have yo' gan me a shilling for? Yo' never gav' me one afoor. But never fear, I'se say nowt to nobody, and I'se keep this shilling and sup it when yo're wed."

"You are talking nonsense, Betty," exclaimed Robin, turning redder than ever — "utter nonsense; and if you say anything of the sort to Miss Ruberry, I — I'll never trust you or speak to you again."

"Do you think I've no more sense? I'm owd, I know, but I'm not silly. I'se not let on to nobody, no more than if I wor dead."

CHAPTER XLVI.

LOVE AND WAR.

A DAY or two afterwards, Robin, sauntering into the apprentice house at a time when Betty had finished "siding up," found her sitting by the fireside, solacing herself with a pipe.

"It's aw reet; I gav' it her," she said, without waiting to be asked.

"You said nothing, I hope — nothing absurd, I mean?"

"Not a word. I gav' her th' book, and just winked — that wor aw."

"You what?" exclaimed Robin, aghast.

"I winked. Nowt wrong i' winking, I hope? And hoo gav' me a shilling, too" — (chuckling). "I'se have hoaf a crown, within sixpence, to sup when the time comes. Bithmon! there'll be fine doings!"

"Did Miss Ruberry say anything?" demanded the young fellow, severely, as if he desired to put a stop to Betty's rather impertinent loquacity.

"Nobbut 'Thank you, Betty. This is from Nelson, I suppose?' Hoo thinks some weel on yo', hoo does that."

"Don't talk nonsense, Betty, I beg of you — Hem! What makes you think so?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I could tell by the glint of her een and th’ blush on her cheeks when I gav’ her th’ book. Yo’ve nobbut to go in and win. I know what lasses is. I wor a lass once mysel’ — and reckoned a bonny ’un too; though to look at me now yo’ happen wouldn’t think so.”

Not being able to discern in the old woman’s wrinkled and not very clean face any traces of former beauty, and desiring to close the conversation, Robin merely observed that age made a great difference.

“It does that,” said Betty, with a hoarse gurgle, which she probably meant for a sigh. “It takes th’ gloss off everybody, let ’em be as bonny as they like; and th’ time will come, if hoo lives, when Miriam’ll be th’ marrow o’ me.”

The idea of Miriam ever being like old Betty was quite too much for Robin, and, with a muttered excuse about having work to do, he returned to the factory.

More than a week passed before he received his answer, and he was beginning to fear that he had so offended Miriam by asking for an interview that she would have nothing more to say to him, when one day, as he passed the door, Betty beckoned him in.

“Hoo left this for you, an hour sin’,” she said, giving him a small brown-paper parcel. “Put it i’ your pocket and get you gone. Dick may be back ony minute.”

Robin, nothing loath, put the parcel in his pocket and went. The parcel, of course, contained a book, and equally, of course, the book contained a letter. The letter ran thus:

“DEAR ROBIN, — I am quite at a loss to imagine what should hinder you from telling me by letter how you went on at the Hall— or at least whether the colonel is your father or not. So long as you don’t come up to the house, nobody can suspect anything. No, I won’t see you alone. My father would not like it, if he knew; and I don’t think it would be right. You must put it all in a letter. If you do not, I won’t be your sister any longer.

“Your sincere well-wisher, M. R.

“P. S. — My father has to be at the rent-dinner at Toppleton on Tuesday night,

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

and if my uncle goes to Liverpool on that day, as I think he will, you may come up after the factory stops. But don't come to the front door; come to the French window of my sitting-room — you know where it is — opposite the weeping ash — and rap gently on the glass. But if nobody answers, you must go away at once, for I am not at all sure that I shall let you in. Only that I am so anxious, for your sake, to know how you went on at the Hall, I would not see you in my father's absence for the world. Please burn this letter immediately.”

With which request, it is scarcely necessary to say, Robin did not think fit to comply. After reading and re-reading the missive

[297]

several times, he put it carefully in his pocket, with the intention of adding it to the hoard of similar treasures which he kept in his box at Jim Rabbits'. Nevertheless, he found the letter rather disappointing and decidedly embarrassing. Miriam acceded to his request for an interview solely for the purpose of gratifying her curiosity, not in the least because she had any regard for him. And when she knew that all he had to say was that he could tell her nothing, what then? Would she not — and with good reason — be very angry, bid him begone, and refuse to have aught more to do with him? Much as he wanted to see her, he began to doubt whether he had done well to ask for an interview, without hinting that his lips were sealed as to what had passed between Colonel Dene and himself.

So it came to pass that Robin went to the rendezvous with very mingled feelings, and in anything but a confident frame of mind, fearing much and hoping little, and not knowing what on earth he should say. All the same, he had his wits about him, and took every possible care to avoid observation, going by the fields instead of up the avenue, and entering the garden by a side gate. On reaching the weeping ash he paused, listening intently and peering into the darkness. When he had made sure that the coast was clear, he crept stealthily to the French window, which was overhung with greenery, and knocked softly at one of the panes.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

No answer; and, though Robin listened his best, he could hear no movement within, and, the shutters being up, he could see nothing.

After waiting a few minutes he knocked again. Still no answer. A third trial proved equally ineffectual, and he was going sorrowfully away, when a gleam of light fell on the path. Turning again, he saw that the window was slightly ajar.

“Miriam!” he whispered, eagerly.

“Yes, Robin! I — I think you may safely come in; but only for a minute, mind! Quick, lest somebody should see the light!” And with that she opened the window (without showing herself) just wide enough to admit him, and, when he was inside, shut and bolted it.

For a few seconds neither spoke a word, and it would have been hard to say which of them seemed the more embarrassed. Robin felt almost tongue-tied, and, after one timid glance, Miriam, deeply blushing, lowered her eyes before his.

“I am so glad you opened the window,” said Robin, at length. “I thought you were not within, and just going away.”

[298]

“I heard your first knock — but I was afraid — my father does not want — I mean, he is away, and I don’t think it is right — but it is only for this once, and you must not stay many minutes. Why couldn’t you write? Is Colonel Dene your father? — or were you mistaken?”

“I am very sorry,” stammered Robin. “I am very sorry, but I cannot tell you, Miriam. I have given my word not to tell anybody — for the present. But it will not be for long. As soon as I am at liberty to speak, you shall be the first to know everything.”

“Oh, Robin, why this concealment? Can you not trust me?”

“Trust you!” exclaimed Robin, wildly. “I could trust you with anything of my own — with my very life! But this secret is not my own. I have pledged myself not to reveal it for the present, even to you.”

“And you have come to tell me this?” said Miriam, who had now quite regained her composure.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Yes, I have come to tell you this. I wanted to see you, because I could not explain myself in a letter. Speaking is so different from writing. I feared you might misjudge me and fail to understand my motives for this concealment, which is more painful to me than it can be to you; for I would like to tell you, so much, Miriam.”

“Why don’t you, then?”

“Because I have given my word not to. You would not have me break my word, Miriam?”

“But I don’t understand. It would be so simple to say whether Colonel Dene is your father.”

“So it would — if I had not pledged myself to Colonel Dene to keep it secret.”

“To keep what secret?”

“What he told me, and who my father is,” rejoined Robin, in some confusion — for he had only just missed letting the cat out of the bag.

“He is not your father, then?”

“I cannot say. If I were to answer your question, I should break my word.”

“He is your father, then?”

No answer.

“Will you tell me, at least, one thing? Are you Robin Nelson or Rupert Ravensmere?”

[299]

“I am under no pledge on that score,” returned Robin, after a momentary hesitation. “Besides, I have already told you my name, and what I told you was true.”

“In that case Colonel Dene is either your father or you are the son of some relative of his?”

Again Robin remained silent.

“Why don’t you answer?”

“Because I cannot. I have no more to say.”

“You had better go, then. Indeed, I don’t know why you came — unless it was that you raised my expectation merely to have the pleasure of witnessing my disappointment. Yes, go, and don’t trouble me any more.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“If you talk in that way, Miriam, you will drive me wild,” said Robin, turning pale. “You are unkind and unjust. If you cared for me, you would trust me.”

“If you cared for me, you would trust me.”

“If I cared for you! You little know. Listen, Miriam, and I will prove that I do care for you. As I said just now, I have promised not to impart this secret to anybody. If I break the promise, which, thinking of you, I gave very reluctantly — if I break this promise I shall both lose my own self-respect and incur and deserve the displeasure of a man whom I honor and esteem above all other men. But if you say to me now, ‘Robin, break your word for my sake, and tell me all,’ I will do it.”

“You are a good, brave boy, Robin. You said just now I did not care for you. Well, I care for you too much to let you do wrong for anybody’s sake. I will wait”

“Oh, Miriam, you have made me so happy!” and, without thinking what he was doing, he clasped the girl in his arms.

“How dare you, Robin? Let me go this instant!” she exclaimed, as by a sudden movement she freed herself from his embrace. “If I had thought — oh, this is too bad! Why did you do it, Robin? — why did you do it?”

“Because I could not help it,” responded the youth, now too excited to be regardful either of prudence or propriety. “Because I could not help it, and because I love you with a love that is past telling. You are more to me than all the world, Miriam.”

“This language to me!” said the girl, drawing herself up and looking really angry. “How dare you? You are taking a mean advantage of my kindness. I could not have thought it of you, Robin. Go!”

[300]

“Not until you have forgiven me for my presumption. Yes, I was mad. But how can I help loving you, Miriam? When I came here, a poor apprentice, fatherless, motherless, and nameless, without a friend in the world, who took pity on me, who became my friend, saved me from despair, and filled my heart with courage and hope — who but you?”

“And this is my reward! Go, I say!”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

But she said it gently, almost imploringly; her manner had lost all its asperity, as her face had lost all its anger.

“Not until you have forgiven me.”

“Yes, I forgive you. But it is more than you deserve. Do go, please.”

“And you love me just a little — don’t you, Miriam? Not as I love you, but just a little?” — taking both her hands in his.

“How can you ask me? Will you go?”

“When you have answered me.”

“Just a little,” she murmured, raising for a moment her tear-filled eyes to his.

“Heaven bless you, Miriam!” exclaimed Robin, now wild with delight.

“Words cannot tell how much, how dearly I love you.”

“If you love me, you will go.”

“One kiss, then — only, one.”

“Oh, Robin, you are cruel! How can you? It — it would not be seemly. What would my father say?”

“Only one!”

This time Miriam made no answer, and Robin, taking silence for consent, gave her only one, but it was well given; and then Miriam, putting her arms round his neck, hid her burning face in his breast.

The next moment she pushed him away, murmuring:

“Oh, what have I said, what have I done? If you love me as you say, you will go at once. Suppose Phoebe were to come in, or my father or my uncle were to return!”

As she spoke she unbolted the window. Robin would have lingered a little longer, but, seeing that she was really distressed, he silently kissed her hand and went into the darkness; but the light of love in his heart made the night seem more glorious than day.

Miriam held the window ajar until she heard the last of his retreating footsteps, and then, closing it softly, she threw herself into a chair, and, covering her face with her hands, burst into tears.

“I am a wicked girl” she murmured. “I am a bad, wicked

girl. What would my Aunt Branscombe say? How soon have I forgotten her wise counsel, her lessons on seemliness of conduct and modesty of behavior, on keeping a watch over my impulses, and turning a deaf ear to the blandishments of young men! And I promised that, if ever I did marry, my husband should be a man of piety and experience, several years my senior, to whom I could look up for guidance and support, and who would lead me in the paths of godliness. And I have allowed my heart to go out to a youth only a little older than myself, and told him that I loved him, and let him kiss me! But he would not go, and I could not help it, and I love him. I do — I do — Yet surely it cannot be wrong, for Robin is good and true and brave; and my Aunt Branscombe said nothing was more sinful than to marry for money or position, and Robin has neither — Ah! I never thought of that before. If he be heir to Birch Dene — and I am almost sure he is — the colonel might refuse his consent, for the Denes are an old county family — and, if he is not, my father would be very angry. God help us both, for if I were to lose him I think I should die. But I do not think my father would be hard, and Robin is true. How nobly he refused to break his promise, though I teased and tempted him! Dear Robin!”

Miriam’s reverie lasted for the greater part of an hour, and would probably have lasted longer, had it not been interrupted, first of all by the sound of voices in the hall, and again, a few minutes later, by Phoebe, who, entering the room hurriedly and in a state of great excitement, informed her that “Mr. Robbut” had returned, and she had better come at once — “something had happened.”

“Where is he?” asked Miriam, rising from her chair.

“They have just gone into the breakfast-room.”

Thither Miriam straightway went, wondering who “they” could be. In the breakfast-room she found her uncle, Gib Riding, and — Robin! All were in a state of great disarray. Her uncle’s hat was crushed out of shape, his cloak covered with mud. Robin’s head was bleeding, he had lost his cravat, his coat was rent, and his waistcoat buttonless. Gib had no hat at all, one of his eyes was nearly closed, and his stockings were cut and stained with blood.

“Oh, uncle, what is the matter? What has happened?” exclaimed Miriam, aghast.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Nowt much, as it has turned out,” said Robert Ruberry, confusedly.

[302]

“A bit of a scrimmage, that’s all. But if it hadn’t been for Robin and Gib here, I should either have been killed or beaten within an inch of my life. I was walking home from th’ Four Lane Ends, where I got off th’ coach.”

“Walking home! Why didn’t you take a chaise?”

“A chaise would ha’ cost half a crown, and as th’ night was fine I thought I’d walk. Well, I’d got within a mile of th’ factory gates, when three chaps came up to me. I knew not where from; they seemed to spring out of th’ ground, they came that sudden. One of ’em said, as we were going th’ same road, we might as well go together. I said ‘Ay,’ if they liked. A bit after he asked if I wasn’t Robert Ruberry. ‘What is it to you who I am?’ I answered, for I didn’t like their ways. Then another said he knew devilish well I was Robert Ruberry, and they all set agate upbraiding me — called me an owd tyrant, and I don’t know what beside, and said as they were going to give me a damned good hiding. One of ’em — him as spoke first — threatened to kill me and throw my carcass into th’ dyke bottom. Then they began to hustle about, so I just planted my back against th’ wall, shouted for help, and gave one of th’ scoundrels a clinker o’er th’ toppin wi’ my stick, and defended myself as best I could. In another minute they would have been on th’ top of me, but just then Nelson came up running, followed by Gib, and knocked one of ’em down. After that I can hardly tell you what happened. For two or three minutes it was a regular up and down; but we bested ’em, the villains.”

“Ay, we did that,” put in Gib, gleefully; “and if they hadn’t cut off so sharp we’d ha’ cotched ’em. I crashed the biggest on ’em down, and punched his ribs till they fair cracked; and Robin fought like a gamecock — one down, t’other come on. They’ve gotten soor bones, whoever they are.”

“I wish I knew who they were. Not any of our hands, I think.”

“I am sure they are not,” said Robin.

“But you may be sure of one thing: it was our hands as set ’em on — because I refused to give in to ’em, I reckon. Well, they’ll get nowt by it. They shall not have a penny of a rise — not if I dee for it.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Are you hurt, uncle?” asked Miriam, rather coldly, for his vindictiveness shocked her.

“Nowt to speak on. Got knocked about a bit — that’s all. When I have had a wash I shall be all right. Gib, you can go

[303]

into th’ kitchen, and have a mug of warm ale, with a dash of rum in it, if you like.”

“If I like!” said Gib, smacking his lips. “Hot ale and rum! I’ll have a black ee any time at th’ same price. A good feyt and hot ale and rum! It’s th’ best do as I’ve had for mony a day. Good-neet to yo’ aw.”

“Nelson has come th’ worst off,” continued Old Bob. “That is rather a nasty knock he has got on his head. See to him, Miriam, while I go up-stairs. I’ll be back in two or three minutes; and if he likes he can stop and have supper with us.”

Miriam told Phoebe to bring a basin of hot water and a sponge, and herself fetched a roll of plaster.

“Oh, Robin, it was quite providential!” she said, as she tenderly bathed his wound. “How did it happen? Where were you?”

“Well, soon after I got into the road I fell in with Gib, and we were going on together, when we heard a cry of ‘Help! Murder!’ and, running to the spot, found your uncle struggling with three men.”

“And you saved his life, and he is very grateful. I can see it by his manner, though he does not say much. So am I. How I wish he would be a little more lenient with the hands! If he does not, I fear worse will befall. You must tell me if I hurt you, Robin. Oh, it is a terrible gash!”

“Hurt me! It is just the contrary. I would not mind having such a gash every day — if you might dress it for me.”

“But I should mind it very much. Think how disfigured you would be! Now for the plaster.”

When the plastering was done, Robin asked if he might have another, only one; and, albeit Miriam blushed and averted her head, she did not say him nay.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

When he was going away after supper, and rather a long time after, Robert Ruberry said, as they shook hands:

“You have done me a good turn to-night, Nelson. I shall not forget it.”

And Miriam, who chanced to be near the door as he went out, whispered:

“God bless you, Robin!”

[304]

CHAPTER XLVII.

A PRESSING INVITATION.

MEANWHILE Romford had made his promised call at Jim Rabbits’.

“You were right, Nelson,” he said. “I got to see Colonel Dene without much ado, though one o’ th’ chaps — him as wears a black coat and looks like a gentleman — would ha’ sent me away if I’d ha’ let him. Ay, he’s a kindly mon. If I had been a cock-fighting squire, wi’ a balance at my bankers, he couldn’t ha’ been civiller. He gav’ me some supper, and we had a long talk.”

“Did he say anything about me?”

“A good deal, and I think — However, that’s neither here nor there. A wise head keeps a still tongue. You’ve nobbut to be patient a bit, and you’ll get your reys, Rupert Ravensmere. There’s no fairer-minded mon i’ these parts than Colonel Dene. He has sense, too; he isn’t a goamless tupyed, like most country justices. When I towed him what we had yerd and what we feared, he grasped the subject at once, and decided there and then on the measures to be taken to prevent further trouble.”

“What are they?”

“Well, Colonel Dene is very strong on the necessity of maintaining order. He does not approve of the government policy of suspending the Habeas Corpus Act, suppressing reform meetings, and locking up folks without trial; and, though he isn’t a Jacobin, he thinks as there are many wrongs which cry loudly for redress. All th’ same, he holds that the very worst thing as poor folks can do, even in their own interest, is to

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

resort to violence, and the best way of preventing owt o' th' sort is to make it plain beforehand that the means are at hand to put it down. But that isn't all; if it wor, I'd have nowt to do wi' it, for order as is produced by repression and kept up by fear is good for nowt. Colonel Dene proposes three things. He'll go to Manchester, and try to persuade the borough-reeve and t'other magistrates, or whoever it may concern, to quarter either a company of infantry or a troop of horse-sowdgers at Birch Dene. He thinks that would put a stopper on

[305]

any idea of setting th' factory o' fire. So do I. Simon Peter will think twice afore he leads a rook o' spinners and weyvers ageean red-coats wi' that owd pistol of his. Gad! I am not quite sure as that fellow isn't a Blackface, after all. That's number one. Number two is to hold a meeting, not to petition for reform — that might not be allowed — but to devise means for the relief of the prevailing distress, or summat o' that sort. Colonel Dene will be the chairman, and start a subscription for the purpose in question. I shall back him up, and exhort folks to be patient and orderly, so will one or two other Radical working-men as doesn't believe the cause of reform will be promoted by rioting and fire-raising. Number three is to try and prevail on Robert Ruberry to be a bit easier with his hands, and give 'em a rise — if not of ten per cent., then five; for some on 'em is most fearful ill off."

"A very good plan, it seems to me. What, think you, are the chances of success?"

"Well, the colonel is a man of influence and energy, and I should have no fear of his success but for one thing."

"And that is?"

"Stupidity. You have no idea what a lot of stupidity there is in th' world. I heard a sermon t'other Sunday on the mysteries of creation. The biggest mystery as there is, to my thinking, is why God created so many foo's. I'd liefer have a knave than a foo' ony day. A knave is sometimes reformed, but bray a foo' in a mortar and he's a foo' all th' same."

"You speak bitterly, Romford."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Because I feel deeply. However, what think you?”

“Well, I have no doubt Colonel Dene will get his soldiers, and I dare say his meeting will prove a success; but I shall be very much surprised if he persuades Robert Ruberry to give an advance.”

“Ay, there’s another of your mysteries of creation!”

“Come now, Romford, you surely don’t mean to say Robert Ruberry is a fool?”

“But I do. A man as sticks to a thing for everlasting just because he has said it once, and is that bent on getting his own ends in his own way as he will hearken neither to justice nor reason, is a foo’, and nowt but a foo’.”

“All the same, I don’t think Robert Ruberry is unteachable. It may require a severe lesson, but he will learn in the end.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Nelson. Anyhow, it’s a fine thing to have a gentleman in the neighborhood like Colonel Dene,

[306]

as has a bit of sympathy for poor folk, and is willing to put his hand in his pocket, and, what’s more, giv’ himself a lot of trouble to help ’em. Whether he succeeds or fails, such an example can hardly miss doing good. However, it is time for me to be going. Will you be coming our way soon, think you?”

“Very likely. I’ll take an early opportunity.”

“Ay, do, and we’ll have a long camp. And I’ve summat for you.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll see when you come. But there’s no hurry. It willn’t be wanted just yet, I reckon — never, I hope.”

And with that the weaver went his way.

A few days later Colonel Dene called at Factory Hollow and saw Robert Ruberry, who received his distinguished visitor with great deference; for, though Old Bob sometimes laughed at his brother’s tuft-hunting propensities, he was by no means a democrat, and held rank and station (especially when they were accompanied by wealth) in high respect.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

The colonel opened the conversation with an inquiry about Nelson.

“Well, I’ve no fault to find with him,” said Robert, cautiously. “He’s sharp and diligent, and makes himself useful. In fact, between you and me, I consider him a very promising young fellow.”

“I am glad to hear it; for I thought well of him from the first, and I have now reason to believe that he is not what he seems.”

“Not what he seems! How so?”

“I think he comes of decent people.”

“Decent people?”

“Well, the expression is rather vague, I admit. I should rather say, people of position.”

“People of position! You surely don’t mean to say as he is owt akin to Lord Nelson?” asked Robert Ruberry, now beginning to be deeply interested.

“Not that I am aware of, nor do I think so,” said Colonel Dene, smiling. “Indeed, I rather doubt whether Nelson is his true name.”

“The deuce! What is it, then?”

“Well, perhaps I shall be able to tell you later on. I am making inquiries. My idea is that Nelson has been robbed of his inheritance, and sent down here to keep him out of the way.”

[307]

“You think there is money coming to him, then?”

“Very likely. But for the present this is little more than surmise. However, I have got the address of a lawyer in London who, from what I hear, is much more conversant with the facts than anybody else, and when I go thither, as I shortly expect to do, I shall make a point of seeing him.”

“How did you get to know all this, Colonel Dene?”

“I am not at liberty to say for the present; and really I know very little as yet. I am only just at the threshold of the inquiry, so to speak, and you will greatly oblige me by not mentioning anything of this, either to Nelson himself, or anybody else. It might give rise to expectations — you understand?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Perfectly. It might give rise to false hopes. Oh, I’ll say nowt to nobody, not I. I’m not a random talker — I never was. Is it a good deal?”

“Well, I rather think it is a considerable sum. But, mind, that is only my opinion.”

“So much a year?”

“Yes; so much a year.”

“Well, there always was something rather mysterious about that about that. I remember being once a good deal struck by a remark he made. Miriam was saying something about Newgate, and he said as he had been there.”

“In Newgate?”

“Ay, in Newgate. He said he had gone as a visitor. But I know I thought it very queer that a child like him — he must have been very young — that a lad like him should go as a visitor to Newgate.”

“I am sure it could not be in any other character.”

“Well, then, he must have been taken to see a prisoner. Could it be anybody akin to him as had got into trouble, do you think? If you could find that out when you go to London, it might happen furnish you with a clue.”

“So it might. I am obliged for the suggestion. I will make a note of it. And now, seeing what Nelson’s prospects may be, I should be glad — would take it as a personal favor, in fact — if you would show him all the consideration in your power.”

“Well, it does make a difference, doesn’t it? But really, Colonel Dene, I don’t see what more we can do. He gets five shillings a week and his board and lodging, and he’s doing useful work — useful

[308]

for himself, I mean. He’ll be qualified for a manager’s place in another year or two.”

“I was not meaning that at all. I am sure you do your best for him, and as for money — But your hours are rather long — they don’t leave much leisure for reading, and so forth; and if you could let him off an hour or two earlier occasionally, and allow him to come up to the Hall sometimes —”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“I’ll do that with pleasure. I’ll let him off whenever he likes, either to go up to th’ Hall or owt else. I consider myself a good deal beholden to Nelson, one way and another, and if he comes into this fortune I shall be right well pleased.”

“Thank you, Mr. Robert. And now I have another favor to ask of you, which I trust you will be able to grant.”

Whereupon Colonel Dene, as delicately as he could (for he knew that he was treading on dangerous ground), spoke of the badness of the times, the prevailing distress, and the possibility of disturbances, concluding with a hint that it might be worth the Ruberry’s while, as a preventive measure, to grant their workpeople a reasonable addition to their pay. But as he went on he could see, by the hardening of Robert Ruberry’s face, that he was foredoomed to failure.

“You mean kindly, I am sure,” said Old Bob; “but you forget that the hardness of the times hits us as hard as anybody else. A rise of five per cent. — and if we gave owt at all, we should have to give that — a rise of five per cent, would cost us a matter of a thousand a year. And them as says our hands are ill paid says what isn’t true. At any rate, we keep ’em going, and that’s what many a firm doesn’t do. And I think you will agree with me as when a man has been in business as long as I have, he should be the best judge of his own interests.”

After this there was nothing more to be said. Colonel Dene could only make his bow and retire.

“What a hard, keen old fellow he is!” was his thought, as he went away. “I hope I did not say too much about Robin. His inference about the visit to Newgate was rather startling. I should be sorry for the fact of Sophie’s imprisonment and its terrible sequel to get bruited abroad, either now or later. I must put Robin on his guard. But I don’t think Ruberry will ask him any questions. He is too discreet, and he would know that I should hear of it.”

Contrary to his expectations, Colonel Dene was no more successful

[309]

with the authorities at Manchester than he had been with Robert Ruberry. They were sceptical as to the existence of a plot for burning factories, and when they found that he

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

could not or would not give the names of his informants, hinted that he had been “humbled.” Sending troops to Birch Dene was quite out of the question; they could neither be spared nor the cost afforded. But if there should be any rioting, and the local magistrates were to make a formal requisition for a military force, it would no doubt be placed at their disposal.

“The mischief would be done then,” urged the colonel. “My object is to prevent rioting, and I am persuaded that the presence of a few red-coats at Birch Dene would have the desired effect.”

“You are quite mistaken. Colonel Dene. There’ll be no rioting — not there,” said the chief constable, with a complacent smile. “And as for burning factories down, they daren’t do it. They know too well what the consequence would be. There’s a good deal of political discontent and underhand sedition, I admit, and we are taking our measures accordingly — putting down reform meetings and arresting Jacobin ringleaders. I have my eye on two or three in your neighborhood. However, as long as they keep quiet, and I’ve no complaints, they’ll happen be let alone.”

“Who are they?”

“Nay, nay, it would never do to let the cat out o’ th’ bag,” said the constable, with a deprecatory shake of the head and a sphinx-like smile; for he had a strong suspicion that the object of his visitor, whom he regarded as a potential, if not an actual Jacobin, was to put the enemy on their guard.

So it came to pass that Colonel Dene had to content himself with carrying out only one article of his programme — the holding of a meeting to “devise measures for relieving the prevailing distress.” So far as numbers and enthusiasm were concerned, the meeting was a success. The colonel presided, made a moderate, strictly non-political speech, announced his intention of getting up a relief fund, and himself started it with a subscription of a hundred pounds. Romford, who followed him, was not equally prudent. True, he deprecated violence, avowed his disbelief in heroic remedies, counselled strict observance of the law and obedience to all constituted authorities; but this was no sooner said than he observed that the authorities in question were mostly either fools or knaves, likened them to one of the plagues of Egypt, and expressed a hope that when the people “got their rights,” they

[310]

would send to Parliament men with “heads on their shoulders and hearts in their bosoms.”

This sentiment was greeted with vociferous applause; yet, everything considered, it would perhaps have been as well had the weaver kept away, for his presence on the platform so scandalized a number of respectable people that they neither attended the meeting nor loosened their purse-strings, and Colonel Dene had the honor of being almost the sole subscriber to the fund which he had called into existence. On the other hand, he became straightway the most popular person in the neighborhood; his praises were sung far and wide, and his generosity was contrasted with the stinginess of some other folks.

To Romford the consequences were less satisfactory. On the Saturday night after the meeting he received a visit from the chief constable, who, after sarcastically observing that he had come to see whether the weaver had “a head on his shoulders,” invited him in the king’s name to step into a post-chaise which was waiting at the door, under the escort of half a dozen dragoons.

Romford, who had a high spirit and a ready wit, laughingly answered that he could not possibly refuse so pressing an invitation; and after a few words with his wife — whom, as well as little Susie, he tenderly embraced — he let himself be handcuffed to one of the chief constable’s men, and, getting into the carriage, was driven in the direction of Manchester; but as to his ultimate destination his captors could give no information.

Robin heard of this portentous incident within an hour of its occurrence, and went forthwith to see Mrs. Romford. He found the poor woman in great trouble.

“They’ve ta’en him, Mr. Nelson,” she said, weeping; “they’ve ta’en him away fro’ me. They wouldn’t give us five minutes together, and hardly let me have time to get him a twothry things to tak’ wi’ him. Never a better husband lee by a woman’s side, and nobody can say as he worn’t upright and honorable in all his dealings. Wheer have they ta’en him to? — wheer have they ta’en him to? Shall we ever see him ageean, thinkin’ yo? Susie, poor little lass, is welly heart-broken. I’ve put her to bed, but hoo

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

keeps moaning in her sleep, and crying, ‘Daddy, daddy!’ Oh, what mon I do? — what mon I do?”

Robin tried to comfort her by saying that, as her husband had broken no law, he would probably be released after a very short

[311]

detention, and in the meantime he would see that she did not want for anything.

“I worn’t thinking o’ that,” she said, drying her tears. “I can fend for mysel’ and Susie while he’s away, and if you think it willn’t be long, I’ll try to be patient. It’ll be easier for me than for him, locked up in a cowl dungeon neet and day, wi’ barred windows and an iron door, and belike not enough to eat. He gav’ me aw th’ bit o’ brass as he had in his pocket, except a shilling, and he wouldn’t ha’ kept that if I hadn’t made him. He sent his respects to you, Mr. Nelson, and said as he’d write to you as soon as he geet a chance. Do you think as they’ll let him write? It would be sich a comfort to get a line fro’ him now and then.”

Robin told Mrs. Romford, much to her satisfaction, that he felt sure her husband would both be allowed to write to her and get enough to eat, and on the following morning he went to Dene Hall, and informed his father of Romford’s arrest.

Colonel Dene was both grieved and indignant.

“I am very sorry,” he said — “the more especially as it is, in a great measure, my doing. I should not have let him speak at the meeting.”

“Do you think it is that which has caused his arrest?”

“I am sure of it. Some busybody, or perhaps a spy, has reported his remarks to the chief constable. It is a most foolish proceeding, for his arrest, besides removing a distinctly moderating influence, will, I fear, greatly exasperate the people and make things worse instead of better. Romford was quite right — though not very wise — in saying that our rulers are mostly either fools or knaves. I shall go to Manchester to-morrow, and try to find out where they have put him, and how long his imprisonment is likely to last. Tell his wife, Robin, that I will allow her a pound a week during his absence, and that, beyond his imprisonment, I do not think he will take much harm —

state prisoners being always treated with much more indulgence than ordinary criminals.”

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE LONG STRIKE.

“Have you heard the news?” asked Robert Ruberry of Rupert Ravensmere when they met at the factory the next morning.

[312]

“Of Romford’s arrest, you mean?”

“Ay, they fetched him on Saturday night. I thought I’d take the shine out of that fellow.”

“It is your doing, then?”

“Partly that, I think!” said Old Bob, complacently. “I just let the head constable know what Romford had been saying — as the government and parliament is composed of men who are mostly either knaves or fools — and if that is not sedition I’d like to know what is.”

“All the same, Mr. Robert, I think you have made a mistake. Romford always discountenanced extreme measures, and advocated submission to the law and loyalty to the throne.”

“He said so, I daresay; but he meant t’other thing; everybody knows that. Anyway, his talk made the hands discontented, and I’m right glad they have lagged him; and, unless I’m wrongly informed, they’ll be lagging some more of ’em before long.”

Robert Ruberry was not wrongly informed. Romford’s arrest was followed by half a dozen other arrests, and as many more (including Dr. Dooley) only escaped a like fate by precipitate flight. Nevertheless, these energetic measures, though they caused no little consternation and put an end to public meetings and “open and advised speaking,” served but to increase the influence of the physical-force party and of the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

secret societies, whose projects, now that one of his informants was in jail, and the other no one knew where, Robin had no means of ascertaining. For a while, however, all went on as usual; the hands, albeit sullen and suffering, made no sign, and Robert Ruberry was more than confirmed in his policy of thorough.

“Didn’t I tell you so?” he said, with the self-satisfied air of a successful man. “Did not I tell you so? Some folks wanted me to give in to ’em. But I knew better. There’s only one way with the working-classes — stand up to ’em and keep ’em low. If I had given in to our hands they would have been the masters; and set a beggar on horseback and you know where he goes to. But they are beaten, and they know it. We shall have no more bother, you’ll see.”

Robin himself began to be of the same opinion, and if Old Bob had not forgotten the proverb about the last straw his boast might have been justified and his prediction fulfilled. But, in his anxiety to cheapen production (business being really very bad), he went to Liverpool and bought a lot of cheap cotton, which worked so badly

[313]

that those of the hands who were paid by results, that is to say, the great majority of them, could not earn half the wage which they usually earned and had a right to expect, let them work as hard as they might.

When Saturday came, and the people found how little money they had to draw, a deputation of spinners was appointed to wait on Robert Ruberry and ask that they might be paid by the day until the bad cotton was used up.

His answer was short and to the point.

“No, I’ll not pay you by the day. The cotton would last forever if I did. The work is as good as you are likely to have it for a month or more. If you don’t like it, you can leave it.”

They left it. On the Monday morning not one of the outside hands “answered the bell,” and, as the factory could not be carried on with the apprentices alone, the engines had to be stopped and the gates closed.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

And then, in his anger, Robert Ruberry did a very unwise thing — took out summonses against all the adult spinners for leaving their work without notice, an offence for which the penalty at that time and for many years afterwards was a term of imprisonment. But the spinners retained for their defence a very acute lawyer, who contended that, by saying that if they did not like their work they could leave it, the managing partner had given them the alternative of dispensing with the usual notice; and, further, that there was an implied contract for the firm to provide such material as would enable their hands to earn the average rate of wages to which they had been accustomed. This was so obvious that, notwithstanding their evident desire to convict the defendants, the magistrates were compelled to decide in their favor.

The decision encouraged the hands as much as it enraged Old Bob. He declared that the cotton should rot on the ground before he would give in; and they on their part protested that they would not go back to their work unless he either found them better stuff or consented to pay them by the day until the “rubbish,” as they called it, was consumed.

So began the long strike at Birch Dene, which wrought so much evil, and for some who were concerned in it, and some who were not, ended so tragically.

A few of the men went off to seek work elsewhere; others went a-begging, and left their wives and little ones to shift for themselves; but most stayed at home, and, as there were no trades-

[314]

unions or societies to which they could appeal for aid, their sufferings were great. Miriam, terribly distressed at the turn things had taken, helped them all she could, but it was very little, and had it not been for Colonel Dene, who gave weekly largesses of meal and flour, many would have died of hunger. Miriam made several attempts to soften her uncle's heart; but the struggle in his mind between pride and self-reproach, obstinacy and regret (for he was too shrewd not to know that he had made a serious mistake), rendered him so morose as to be almost unapproachable; and for the first time in his life he was rude to his niece, telling her roughly not to meddle with matters which she did not understand. Every day he went to the factory and spent there several hours,

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

though what he found to do nobody could tell. The apprentices came and went as they liked; and Robert Ruberry gave them full leave to go altogether if it so pleased them, but, as they had enough to eat and nothing to do, none thought fit to profit by his offer.

Another consequence of the strike was a desperate quarrel between the brothers. While the dispute with the hands was in progress Benjamin did not interfere, but after the abortive trial he bitterly reproached Robert for what he had done, protesting that he was going to ruin both the business and themselves, whereupon Robert answered, fiercely, that as he, and he alone, had made their fortune, he had a right to waste it if he chose, that he should do just as he liked, and ended by offering to dissolve the partnership and pay Benjamin off there and then.

After this the brothers were not on speaking terms for many days; and the elder, being much put about, sought consolation in drink, or rather, in more drink, for he had never erred on the side of over-abstemiousness. He went nearly every day either to Manchester or Toppleton, and seldom came back sober, often, indeed, very far from sober.

All this was very hard on Miriam; it rendered her position well-nigh insupportable, and had it not been for Robin and the Denes she would have broken down utterly, both in health and spirits. Robin and she could now meet almost when they would, for her uncle never noticed them, and her father, either because he was at variance with his brother, or his understanding was dulled by drink, so far from objecting to the young fellow's visits to Oaken Cleugh, openly encouraged them.

Nevertheless, the lovers said little of their love. It was no time

[315]

for self-absorption and mutual admiration, honeyed words and soft caresses. Miriam had both the house and farm on her hands, and it was all she could do to prevent confusion and waste, as her father, even when he was at home, was seldom in a condition to attend to business and left everything to her. But Robin and she fully understood each other. He showed his devotion by giving her all the help in his power, looking after the men, seeing that her orders were executed, keeping the farm books, and sparing no effort to save her trouble and worry. Miriam, on her part, treated Robin

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

as he treated her, with that perfect confidence and frank unreserve which, in happy families, prevails between brother and sister. He was both her brother and her lover, and she was both his sister and his sweetheart, and they no more doubted each other's constancy and truth than they doubted the goodness of God or the glory of the sun. They had little time to think or speak of the future, but when they did it was always of a future which should be common to both. "Marriage" and "engagement" they never mentioned; but the little word "we," so fraught with meaning, so suggestive of hope, was continually on their lips.

Miriam did not repeat her attempt to capture Robin's secret. After she had once seen him and Colonel Dene together there was no need. For her, it had ceased to be a secret. She read the truth in their manner to each other, in casual words inadvertently spoken, and, now that her perception was quickened by love, in their voices, which, as well as the shape, color, and expression of their eyes, were singularly alike. She had, moreover, learned from Robin that the colonel regarded her with an almost paternal affection, and that their love had his full approval. This was an inexpressible comfort to the girl, and reconciled her, in a great measure, to the concealment which they were obliged to practise.

Shortly after the beginning of the strike Miriam received a note from Mrs. Dene, asking Miss Ruberry to favor her with a visit later in the day, and expressing regret that the writer's indisposition prevented her from conveying the invitation in person. Miriam went, not in state as aforetime, but alone and on foot, and, finding Mrs. Dene reclining on a sofa and looking far from well, she offered to read to her, an offer which the invalid graciously accepted, and when the time came for her guest to leave she pressed her to come as often as she could "without waiting for a formal invitation."

After this Miriam went to the Hall nearly every week, partly

[316]

because her hostess always seemed pleased to see her, partly because Robin (doubtless in view of future eventualities) had expressed a wish that she should keep on good terms with Mrs. Dene. As for the colonel, he was kindness itself, and, when Robin was not with her, he always insisted on sending her home in the carriage.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

In the meantime there had been letters from Romford, both to his wife and Robin. The day after his arrest he was taken from Manchester to London and lodged in the Fleet prison. Beyond his imprisonment, and the ignorance in which he was kept as to its probable duration, he had little to complain of, being supplied with writing materials and books (though not exactly the sort he would have wished), and he had plenty to eat and nothing to do. But prison was prison, after all; he would rather have been weaving alongside his wife, and if his detention lasted much longer it would be hard to bear; but as he had been accused of no specific offence, and none could be proved against him, he thought it very likely that he would soon be home again. He sent his respects to Colonel Dene, hoped that all was well at Birch Dene, and that the troubles which they had feared would never come to pass.

And still the strike went on. It had now lasted seven weeks, and, so far as appeared, might last another seven. The hands were as firm as ever, and nobody doubted that Robert Ruberry would rather die than give in. Contrary to general expectation, the “turn-outs” were not only showing great fortitude, but behaving with such singular moderation that most people thought that the strike would terminate (if ever it did terminate) as peacefully as it had begun, and be marked by no more untoward incidents than those which had already occurred. Robin himself had almost come to the same conclusion, albeit, knowing something of the temper of the “turn-outs,” and remembering the incident of the moor and the information obtained by Dr. Dooley, he had his doubts, when one afternoon, as he was returning from Oaken Cleugh, he observed several suspicious-looking strangers loitering in the road, and, as it might seem, reconnoitring the factory. Nearly all carried bludgeons, and among them were several of the hands, all talking earnestly, but as Robin passed them they became suddenly silent and eyed him curiously.

When he reached his lodgings Mrs. Rabbits gave him a letter. “Mary Smith (a near neighbor) browt it after yo’ sect off this Morning,” she said. “A man as hoo doesn’t know left it at their

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

house last neet and axed her to bring it here fost thing; but hoo ayther forgot or did not find time till a bit sin.”

The letter was undated, ill-spelled, and pen printed, and bore a strong family resemblance to the threatening letter which Robert Ruberry had received a few months previously. It ran as follows:

“If you want to keep a wool skin, and happen woss, yo’ll not be neer ayther Factory Hollow or Oaken Kloo, Friday neet. Venguns is mine and I will repay seth the Lord. Justiz is gooin’ to be dun on the opresors of the poor and o’ as belongs to ’em. This warnin’ is sent by one as wishes you well, and wants yo’ to keep out o’ harm’s way, so tak’ heed.”

CHAPTER XLIX.

BEFORE THE ATTACK.

WHAT was to be done?

Coupling the letter with the appearance of so many strangers in the village, and bearing in mind the threats of Simon Peter and the rest, and reading between the lines, Robin had no doubt that the factory and probably Oaken Cleugh were to be attacked that very night, and that the object of the writer (could it be Blincoe?) was to enable him to put the brothers on their guard and Miriam in a place of safety, for nobody who knew him could possibly suppose that he would sneak away and leave his friends in peril of their lives.

But the emergency was pressing and night near at hand? What was to be done?

Robin’s first thought was to run back to Oaken Cleugh, show Miriam the letter, and propose that she should go with him forthwith to Dene Hall. Yet, even if she should consent to leave her father and her uncle (and he felt sure that she would not), they might meet some of the rioters on the way, and so run into the very danger which they were trying to avoid. From their own people neither Miriam nor himself had much

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

to fear; but these strange men with bludgeons were not likely to show much consideration either to one or the other, for Miriam or himself.

There was only one feasible alternative: to go straight to Dene Hall, and lay the matter before Colonel Dene. By taking the nearest cuts Robin could get thither in less time than it would take him to run to Oaken Cleugh, saddle a horse, and go by the road.

[318]

“Where’s Jim?” he asked Mrs. Rabbits, as he put the letter in his pocket.

The spinning-master was in charge of the factory and “looked round” every day.

“At the factory. They are ‘blowing through,’ I think, and ‘stopping drops.’ It rained a deal last neet. He’ll be coming to his bagging (tea) i’ twothry minutes, I expect.”

“Well, tell him to lock the gates, and see that nobody gets inside. There are some fellows about whose looks I don’t like. I fear they are after no good.”

“Hadn’t you better go and tell him yersel’?”

“I have not the time. I’m going out again, and have no idea when I shall be back; but tell Jim if anything happens, to send word to Oaken Cleugh at once.”

The next moment Robin was on his way to Dene Hall. As he crossed the road he observed, not without a feeling of alarm, that, even during the few minutes he had been in the house, the number of strangers had appreciably increased. More were coming, and, judging from their muddy clogs, travel-stained garments, and hungry looks, they had travelled far and eaten little.

Robin turned into the fields at once, and, so soon as he was out of sight, for he did not want his object to be suspected, set off at a run.

Half an hour later he was in his father’s room at Dene Hall.

“God bless me, Robin! What is the matter!” exclaimed Colonel Dene, for his son was bespattered with mud from head to foot, and breathless with exertion and excitement.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Will you please read this letter, sir?” gasped Robin, handing him the anonymous missive.

“You think it is genuine?” asked the colonel, after he had read it.

“I do. The writer, whoever he may be, could have no interest in deceiving me, and there is already a crowd of desperate-looking men about the factory and Oaken Cleugh gates, and more are coming.”

“At any rate, it is best to assume that the letter is genuine and act accordingly. There will be an attack on the factory, you think?”

“The house too. I think they mean to bum them both down, and kill Mr. Robert, perhaps Mr. Ruberry.”

“So bad as that! Where are they — the two Ruberrys, I mean?”

[319]

“At home. Mr. Robert came as I left, and Mr. Ruberry has been confined to the house the last two days with an attack of gout.”

“We must act at once, then, and energetically. And we shall have to depend on ourselves. There is no time to send to Manchester for troops. They would be here about this time to-morrow. Have they any arms at Oaken Cleugh?”

“A shot-gun or two, and a brace of horse-pistols.”

“Shot-guns will do. I have three or four here, and my duelling-pistols, and the game-keepers have their fowling-pieces, and there is Harker” (ringing the bell). “We shall be able to make up a force of six or seven, I think.”

“Pollit” (to the footman, who just then entered the room), “I want the break round at once; and tell James to run for the gamekeepers. They must bring their guns and come immediately — no matter what they are doing; and send Harker here. Quick, if you please! There is not a moment to lose.”

Whereupon the footman, whom these orders seemed greatly to surprise, went off at a run.

We cannot defend both the factory and the house. If we divide our forces we shall be beaten in detail, and the only thing in danger at the factory is property.”

“And it is well insured.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“And if it were not the county would have to make good the damage. But that is a mere detail. Though Robert Ruberry were to lose a few thousands, I don’t think anybody would grieve much. This trouble is all of his making. However, I should not like him to be murdered; and we must see that no harm befalls Miriam and her father.”

“Yes, sir,” said Robin, reddening. “But would it not be best to bring them all here in the break? These people have nothing against you. They will not attack the Hall.”

“Perhaps not; though were Robert Ruberry here I should not feel very sure about it! But, whether or no, the risk would be too great. If the rioters were to block the road — and if they have any wit at all it is exactly what they will do — if they were to block the road we should be almost helpless. We men might possibly fight our way through the mob, but how about the women? For you may depend upon it that the maids won’t want to be left. Behind walls, however, we shall be able to make a good defence, even against a thousand rioters. I don’t think many of them are armed. Ah, here comes Harker.”

[320]

Harker was an old soldier and Colonel Dene’s body-servant, a bronzed and grizzly veteran, minus an eye and a few fingers, all lost in action, yet as straight as a ramrod and hardly less vigorous than on the day when he first smelt powder.

“We are likely to have some more fighting, Harker,” said his master. “Are you game for another campaign?”

“Yes, sir; for a dozen — under you. Is it agen the French?”

“No, some rioters, who are expected to attack Oaken Cleugh.”

“Only them!” exclaimed Harker, with a disappointed look.

“Well, as there may be several hundreds of them, and we shall only master six or seven, the odds against as will be quite heavy enough. Are my guns and pistols all in order?”

“All, sir. So is my old musket.”

“Good! That makes three double-barrelled guns and a musket, one apiece for us three, and one over. Is there anybody at Oaken Cleugh who can shoot, Robin?”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Yes, Sir. Gib Riding. He has served in the militia. So, of course, can Mr. Ruberry — he is *hors de combat*, though — but there is Mr. Robert. I don’t know whether he is much of a shot, but he’ll fight.”

“Yes; Robert Ruberry is of a fighting sort. That will make seven, won’t it? We three, the two gamekeepers, Gib Riding, and Mr. Robert.”

“Yes, sir; seven.”

“And all well armed. I think we shall be quite a catch for the mob. One volley, or at most two, ought to be enough — if it comes to that, and I sincerely hope it will not. I shall try both remonstrance and threats before proceeding to extremities. All the same, we must be prepared for the worst; so bring out the arms, Harker, and we will take with us all the ammunition there is in the house.”

“Yes, Colonel Dene, but we have no ball cartridge.”

“Never mind. Buckshot and slugs will be better than bullets for our purpose. We don’t want to kill any of the poor devils. Why, the break is round already. As soon as the gamekeepers come we must make a start. I can only give you ten minutes, Harker.”

“That’s exactly three more than I want, colonel,” answered the old soldier, as he turned on his heel and marched quickly out of the room.

During the interval Colonel Dene made a hurried visit to his wife’s sitting-room to tell her what had happened and what he proposed

[321]

to do. When he came back, after (considering the circumstances) rather a long absence, and looking, as Robin thought, unusually grave, the two gamekeepers were at the front door, the arms and ammunition were safely stowed away in the break, and all was ready for a start.

“She does not want me to go,” he whispered to his son. “Thinks there is danger, and I left her in tears. But I told her that I was still a soldier; and, though I felt sure the danger existed only in her imagination, I must respond to the call of duty, though it might cost me my life.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

He did not tell Robin that, before it came to this, there had been a most painful scene, that his wife had thrown her arms round his neck and entreated him, weeping, not to leave her, and that he had been literally compelled to tear himself away.

As they passed the lodge-gates Colonel Dene informed his companions that he did not intend to take the break beyond the crossroads, about a mile farther on. There they would strike across the fields, and so reach their destination unperceived, thereby avoiding any risk of the carriage being stopped by the rioters.

This plan was successfully carried out. Half an hour later, and a few minutes after sunset, they were at the door of Mr. Ruberry's house.

When Miriam saw Robin and Colonel Dene she uttered a cry of joy.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I am so glad you have come! I was nearly at my wit's end. How kind of you to come, Colonel Dene! Who told you? Robin! I thought so. Thank you, Robin, oh, so much! But what shall we do? Jim Rabbits says there are hundreds of people down at the factory, battering in the big gates. They are going to set it on fire, he says, and then they will come here. Listen! Don't you hear their shouts? What shall we do. Colonel Dene?"

"Defend ourselves and you. That is what we have come for. There are five of us, all well armed, and, with the help of Gib Riding and your uncle —"

"But my uncle is not here!"

"Not here! Where is he, then?"

"When he heard the factory was in danger nothing would keep him back. I did my best to prevent him; but you know how headstrong he is."

"Why," said Robin, "I thought the fate of the factory was a

[322]

matter of indifference to him. I once heard him say that it was well insured, and he did not care whether they burned it down or not."

"He said so, I dare say; but I don't think he meant it; very likely did not really believe that anything so dreadful could possibly happen. At any rate, I never saw him so wildly excited in my life as when he heard what was going on."

"They will kill him."

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Oh, I hope not. Surely, Robin, they will not be so cruel! Besides, he disguised himself, put on an old fustian suit, and blackened his face and hands with coal-dust. I should not have known him myself. He looked just like one of those men who go about with the coal-carts.”

“All the same, I shall be very much surprised if he escapes being recognized,” said the colonel. “But the wilful man must have his way. It is quite out of our power to seek him, much less to help him. Did he go alone, Miss Ruberry?”

“No; Jim Rabbits, the spinning-master, is with him. In fact, it was Jim who proposed the disguise.”

“Well, he may, perhaps, come to no harm, after all. Let us hope so. But time is running on, and we have none to spare. Will you tell your maids to put up the shutters. Miss Ruberry? I know the front of the house. What is the rear like? Lead the way, Robin, and we will make an inspection.”

At the back was a large yard, surrounded by a high brick wall.

“They won’t easily get over that,” continued the colonel. “How about the door? Pretty stout, but a little staying and pinning would make it all the stouter. Those clothes-props are just the thing. See to it, Harker, you and the keepers, and then come to me.”

His next inquiry was about Mr. Ruberry.

“He is in his bed-room, but not in bed, I think,” said Robin.

“Is the room to the front or the back?”

“The back.”

“So much the better. We shall have to occupy the front rooms. May we see them, Miss Ruberry? We will disarrange the furniture no more than is absolutely necessary. But a few mattresses would be useful.”

“Pray do whatever you think necessary, Colonel Dene. Never mind about the furniture,” said Miriam, bravely. “I have spoken to my father, and he asks me to thank you on his behalf, and say how sorry he is that he cannot take part in the defence of his

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

own house. Ah, and I forgot to tell you that, before my uncle went out, he sent a man on horseback to Manchester to ask for soldiers.”

“If they would come quickly they would save us some trouble. The mere sight of a few red-coats would be more effective than all our powder and shot. Here are Harker and the keepers. Come, men, I want you. Put the chairs and things out of the way. You have tools. Harker? Out with the window-frames, and then we shall have no broken glass flying about.”

Presently came Gib Riding, with exciting news. The mob had burst in the gates and set fire to the factory, beginning with the “old warehouse” — in which Robin and Blincoe had once spent a night together.

“It’ll be aw in a blaze directly,” said Gib. “It is now! See how red it is above th’ trees, yon! That’ll be th’ warehouse. It’s just full o’ cotton and oil and tallow, and such like, and when it gets fair howd —! See yo’, but —!”

Out of the hollow where lay the factory were shooting myriads of sparks, followed by great tongues of flame, which flared up like fire-banners in the starless night.

“Th’ owd barracks makes a rare bonfire, doesn’t it?” continued Gib, admiringly, as if the fact were something to be proud of. “Aw th’ welkin’s fair in a blaze. But it’ll cheat me if somebody does not get hanged for it. It’ll go hard wi’ Mester Robbut if they gettin howd on him. They’re coming up here, and they swear as if we don’t give him up they’ll brun th’ house down and all as is in it.”

“Have they any arms?” asked Colonel Dene.

“Not to speyk on — beside their sticks. I seed some spikes, but I don’t think as there’s more than twenty or thirty guns and pistols and such like among th’ whole lot.”

“It is as I expected. We are more than a match for them. And now, men, to your posts! The front windows, which we have barricaded with mattresses, command the approach to the house. To each window one man! Harker at the middle window. Mr. Nelson and Gib in this room to the right, the keepers in the room to the left. Load your guns, and be ready to kneel behind the mattresses when I give the word. But on no account must a single shot be fired without my order. I shall stand here, between the two doors, so that all may hear me. You have sharp eyes, Robin. Step out of the front door and reconnoitre. You won’t be able to see

[324]

very far, perhaps, but you can listen. Put your ear to the ground. Don't go far, and return the moment you hear anything to report."

CHAPTER L.

A BAD NIGHT'S WORK.

ROBIN explored the garden and the avenue with all the stealth of an Indian on the war-path, listening intently and looking well about him; and when his eyes had become accustomed to the obscurity he could distinguish objects at some distance. But no living ones were to be seen, and very little was to be heard, all the farm-servants being down at the factory or watching the fire from some coign of vantage.

So Robin ventured farther, keeping always in the shadow of the trees, until he reached the high-road, a point from which he could command a full view of the burning factory. The oil-saturated floors and timbers were all aglow; flames were curling out of the windows and lapping over the roof. The minor buildings, and, as it seemed, the apprentice house, were also blazing; Factory Hollow looked like a veritable fiery furnace or the crater of an active volcano. By putting his ear to the ground Robin was able to hear the hoarse shouts of the rioters and the screams and cries of the spectators. After a while the din appeared to come nearer, and he thought he could distinguish the tramping of many feet.

"They are coming; I must go," he said to himself, and rose from the ground.

At the same moment there appeared before him, as if it had also risen from the ground, a strange, wild figure, hatless, coatless, with blackened face, and carrying a half-extinguished, yet still glowing torch.

"Nelson!" exclaimed the creature.

"Blincoe! I am very sorry — you are not surely one of the rioters?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Well, it was me as fired the old warehouse, where Old Bob had me locked up, and the ’prentice house, if that is what you mean.”

“But do you know, Blincoe, that, if this is proved against you, they’ll hang you?”

“Never mind, I’ve lived a dog’s life; what matters it if I die a dog’s death? And after we’ve thrown Old Bob into his blazing

[325]

factory they may hang me twice over if they like. But neither of us has time to lose. I’m glad I found you. Run to Oaken Cleugh as hard as you can, and get everybody out o’ the house as you care for. They’ll be safe at Dene Hall. There’s a lot goin’ across the fields already to set the haystacks afire, and if Old Bob isn’t found or ’livered up the house will be set afire too, and they’ll kill Ben instead of his brother. But I’ve nowt against Ben, so save him if you can. Run now!”

Robin required no second bidding. Without asking another question he went off at once, and did not stop until he brought up at the front door. Miriam, who was on the watch, opened it.

“Thank Heaven, you are safe!” she whispered. “What a time you have been! We feared something had happened, and were all very anxious. Have you heard anything?”

“Yes; come up-stairs, and you will hear, when I tell my — Colonel Dene. But first let us bolt the door and put on the chain.”

“So they are going to fire the haystacks!” said the colonel, when Robin had made his report and answered a few questions. All the better for us; we shall be able to see them; and as the wind is south, none of the sparks will come over this way. These people are more desperate than I expected, probably because they feel as if they were fighting with ropes round their necks. Six double-barrelled guns and a musket; that will make thirteen shots for the first volley. Listen, men! When I give the word to fire — and I fear it will come to that — take careful aim and fire low. Then reload as quickly as you can, and prepare for a second volley — if a second should be necessary. Are the hatchets and pikes ready, Harker, in case we have to repel an assault?”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Yes, colonel, and so is my bayonet.”

“That’s right. And now we can only wait the issue of events, and pray that even at the last moment the shedding of blood may be averted.

After this there followed a rather long spell of silence, all listening the while with strained attention.

Harker, who was looking out of a window, was the first to speak.

“They are coming,” he said. “I can see something move in the avenue, like a great black wave. There! Don’t you hear their voices?”

“And see, they have fired the thatch of the big haystack,” cried Miriam, who was standing behind Robin.

[326]

“Yes, a few minutes will decide whether it has to be peace or war,” said the colonel. “Had you not better join your father, Miss Ruberry?”

Miriam would have preferred to stay until the issue was decided; but duty bade her go; and after a whispered, “May God bless you and guard you from harm,” in Robin’s ear, she went.

Meanwhile Harker’s great black wave was surging up the avenue. In a few minutes it had overflowed into the garden, and, by the murky light of the burning rick, the little garrison of Oaken Cleugh saw below them a mass of upturned faces, gaunt and ghost-like, glaring fiercely at the house.

For a while the rioters hesitated, as if they did not quite know what to make of the complete stillness and darkness of the house.

Then, after a whispered consultation, several of the men made towards the front door.

“Halt! Another step, and we fire!” shouted the colonel.

His own regiment could not have obeyed the order more promptly.

“What do you want?”

“We want Robert Ruberry,” said one of the men, whom, from his voice, Robin judged to be Simon Peter. “We want Robert Ruberry. Give him up, and we will go away quietly.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“We cannot. He is not here.”

“Where is he, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you let us come in and see for ourselves?”

“No!”

“We shall have to come in in spite of you, then. We’ve got a baulk here as’ll crack that door down in about ten minutes. You’d better consider, now, afore it’s too late. Let us in ’thout any bother, and we’ll not hurt a hair of your yeds. But if you force us to break in you’ll have to tak’ th’ consequences. You shall have five minutes to consider; not a second moor. Have you that baulk ready, lads?”

“Ay, have we.”

“Bring it forrud, then.”

The rioters opened their ranks, and half a score men came to the front, carrying a heavy log of timber, which had been fashioned into a rude battering-ram.

“Clap it down till the time’s up,” said Simon Peter, “and then pitch in.”

[327]

Colonel Dene stepped up to the middle window, and drew aside the temporary breastwork, so that he might be seen by all.

“Before we join battle, my friends — because, if you persist in your determination, it will be a battle — I would like to have a few words with you,” said he, in a loud, clear voice. “I dare say there are some among you who know me?”

“Ay, we do that, Colonel Dene. Yo’re not a factory mayster, and yo’re olus good to poor folk.”

“Well, I have tried to be, and I want to be good to you now, if you will let me. Take my advice and hie you home. You have done enough mischief for one night. I know that things are bad with you, and I shall only be too glad to help you to the utmost of my power. I know, too, that hungry men with starving children at home are not likely to be in a mood to listen to reason. But destroying property cannot help you in the least — to say nothing of the risk you run of being transported or hanged. Don’t make bad work worse by committing murder or forcing me to shoot some of you. For I am here to

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

defend this house and its inmates, and I shall do my duty; though I would rather face a hundred French soldiers single-handed than be compelled to fire on my own countrymen. You see this gun; it is double-barrelled; there are six men by my side, all with their fingers on the trigger, and I assure you, on the honor of an old soldier, that if you come a step nearer, or try to use that battering-ram, we shall shoot. Now, for God's sake hie you home, before it is too late. Troops have been sent for and may be here any minute."

This appeal would probably have been successful, for the speech made a decided impression, and the rioters were evidently wavering, when a nameless somebody in the crowd (as was afterwards said, with no evil intent) fired a random shot at the house.

That random shot was Colonel Dene's death warrant.

"I am hit, Harker," he said, putting his hand to his side and staggering against the wall.

"Fire!" shouted Harker, savagely, and the word was hardly spoken when the nine barrels, which seemed to go off of themselves, were fired into the thick of the throng.

The effect was magical. With a yell of terror and surprise the rioters gave back, then made off as wildly as if they had been a routed army pursued by a relentless foe — even falling over one another in their eagerness to escape — and when the sound of hoofs was heard in the avenue the panic increased tenfold. "Th' hoss

[328]

soldiers is coming," was the cry, and every man ran as if for his life; some one way, some another, over hedge and ditch, through bush and brake.

A few minutes after they had come they were gone. But in those few minutes terrible evil had been wrought. Several of the rioters were stretched bleeding on the lawn, and on a bed up-stairs lay Colonel Dene, pale and almost unconscious. By his side were Miriam and Robin, she wiping the dew of death from his brows, he holding his father's hand; the others looking, silently and sadly on.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Go for a doctor, some of you!” said Robin. “You, Harker! Gib will saddle a horse for you. Saddle two horses; let him fetch one doctor, you another. The wounded rioters will want attention. Let the keepers bring them into the house. Go! I will stay with the colonel.”

“Robin! my son,” murmured the stricken man.

“Yes, my father.”

“Water!”

“Give him brandy and water, Mr. Nelson; plenty of brandy,” said the old soldier. “Keep up his strength till I get a doctor here, which please God shall not be more than half an hour.”

The stimulant was given, and Colonel Dene revived a little.

“You two!” he said, in an almost inaudible voice. “I fear I am dying, my children.”

“No, no, no, my father!” cried Robin. “You are badly wounded, but not that. God would not be so cruel.”

“I — I am bleeding internally — It is death — My dear boy, who was so long lost — Sophie’s son. Kiss me, Rupert Ravensmere. Miriam too. May God bless you both — I will tell Sophie. Listen, Robin! You are my heir — in my cabinet — papers — look — Sophie and little Robin — I shall see them — when I get home —”

Colonel Dene closed his eyes and sank back on his pillow; yet, though he lingered a little longer, he had spoken his last word.

“He is gone, Robin,” whispered Miriam, when she saw that all was over.

Robin, still holding his dead father’s hand, put his arm round Miriam, and, kneeling by the bed-side, wept bitterly, and in a very agony of grief, while she, almost stricken dumb by this overwhelming calamity, silently prayed that her lover might have strength given him to submit to the Divine will.

“To lose him so soon! To find him only to lose him! And such a father!” sobbed the lad. “It cannot be true. Tell me,

[329]

Miriam, that it cannot be true. Speak to me, my father, one word, only one word.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“My poor Robin! It is hard, hard for us both. For I loved him, and my heart is breaking for you, dear. But it is God’s will. He knows what is best —”

“But I wanted to keep him longer, Miriam. I wanted to keep him till he was old, till I could feel that I really had a father, and he could know how I loved him. We were so little together, Miriam, only a few times, and he was so gentle and good — That you should die thus, my poor father! — And is it not heartrending that this brave officer and noble gentleman, who fought through so many campaigns and survived so many dangers by sea and land, should perish in a miserable riot, and at the hands of men whom he desired only to benefit. If he had been less pitiful he would not have died.”

“Christ also perished at the hands of men whom he desired only to benefit; and death is always heartrending — for the living. But your father as truly died in the performance of his duty as if he had fallen at the head of his regiment, on the field of battle. What end could be nobler? May the lives and deaths of all we love be like his!”

“Amen!” said Robin, fervently. “You are right, Miriam. The very first time I saw him, he said that we were sometimes called upon to risk our lives in the cause of duty and honor. Oh, yes, he was a father to be proud of. It is very hard, but I will try — it is a privilege to have known him only for so short a time — and you are left to me — Hark! what is that?”

“The trampling of troops — the neighing of horses — the ring of steel! Can the soldiers be here already? Yes, it must be, and now I think of it, Gib returned at the very moment — it was the galloping of his horse that frightened them so.”

“Oh, God I if they had come only half an hour sooner!” groaned Robin.

Here Phoebe, pale and trembling with excitement, burst into the room.

“The horse-soldiers are coming up the avenue, Miss Miriam!” she cried. “One of the wounded rioters seems to be dying, and Jim Rabbits wants to see you and Nelson in the kitchen, I think it is something about your uncle.”

[330]

**The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)
A RACE FOR LIFE.**

MEANWHILE it had fared ill with Robert Ruberry.

It was as Miriam said. Although he pretended to Robin — and possibly tried to persuade himself — that the burning of the factory would be rather a satisfaction to him than otherwise, he felt very differently when it came to the point. He had built it, made his fortune by it, all but lived in it, and for well-nigh thirty years let it occupy his thoughts almost to the exclusion of everything else. Its impending destruction, and the fact that he had been virtually worsted in the struggle with his workpeople, filled him with rage and dismay. He had never doubted for a moment that if he remained firm and “stuck to his guns” the hands would ask “on their bended knees” to be taken back. Instead of that they were going to burn the place, and with it the bad cotton which had caused all the trouble, and which he had sworn they should use.

The first thing he did on hearing of the gathering of the rioters in Factory Hollow was to send a mounted messenger to Manchester with an urgent request for a military force, the next to disguise himself and go down to the factory with Jim Rabbits. They were just in time to “assist” (in the French sense of the word) at the forcing of the big gates, a proceeding which so incensed Robert that it was all the spinning-master could do to restrain him from committing some imprudence that would reveal his identity.

“If you don’t howd yore noise and keep quiet, they’ll be finding you out,” Rabbits was continually whispering, “and if they do, I wouldn’t give a brass farthing for your life. They’d punch yer yed off.” And considering the frequent demands for information as to Old Bob’s whereabouts, and the energy with which many of the rioters were consigning his soul to a place of torment, Rabbits was probably right.

After a while the two got separated in a sudden rush of the crowd, and Robert Ruberry was left to take care of himself; and as by this time the threats and execrations of which he was the object, and the resolute bearing of the rioters, had begun to fright-

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

en him somewhat, he ceased his mutterings and exclamations and watched the work of destruction in sullen silence, taking mental note of the principal actors therein with a view to ulterior proceedings.

“It’ll be my turn next,” he thought; “and if I don’t make some of these scoundrels swing for this job my name isn’t Robert Ruberry.”

So far he had escaped recognition. Spectators and rioters were alike too much occupied to notice him, and none seemed to suspect that he was other than he seemed. But when the main building burst into flames, rendering every object within a radius of several hundred yards as visible as by day, he heard an exclamation which made the blood run cold in his veins; for, though Robert Ruberry was far from being a coward, he valued his life, and had no particular desire either to be torn in pieces or kicked to death.

“That owd cart-driver looks uncommon like Bob Ruberry,” said a young fellow near him.

“Not him,” said another. “Th’ owd beggar’s a damned sight too fause to be here just now. They say as he has ayther hidden hissels’ up at th’ house or gone off to Manchester.”

And then Robert Ruberry did a foolish thing. Instead of standing his ground, or going into the thick of the crowd, where he might have escaped observation, he crept away, a proceeding which naturally drew attention and roused suspicion. The young fellow who had first spoken expressed the opinion that the supposed carter really was Old Bob after all, and suggested that they should “follow him up and have a gradely look at him.” This proposal was eagerly accepted, and a score or more of the rioters set off in hot pursuit.

By this time the runaway had got a fair start; but as the way to Oaken Cleugh was blocked by the mob, he was obliged to turn in the opposite direction. When he saw that he was being followed, he increased his pace to a run, thereby confirming the suspicions of his pursuers, who redoubled their efforts to overtake him. But, albeit no longer young, the hunted man was sound in wind, limb, and eyesight, and in fair condition, and, spurred by fear, he went at a speed that would have done no discredit to a professional athlete. It was nevertheless evident that, being pitted against much younger men, he could not hope to escape by speed alone, and, as he passed an open gate, he slipped furtively into a field. This

[332]

gained him a few minutes' respite, his pursuers overrunning the line several hundred yards; but, quickly discovering their mistake, they harked back and resumed the chase, for, though the fugitive was half-way across the field, he could still be viewed.

After this the chase became slower, rather "a good hunting run" than the "fast thing" it had been at first. The burning factory no longer lighted the pursuers on their way, and, as the quarry occasionally disappeared behind a fence or sank into a hollow, they were often at fault. More than once he threw them out by a double, and had he been able to keep up the speed with which he started they would probably have lost sight of him and been compelled to give up the chase. But the pace had told; he was getting terribly distressed, breathing in gasps, and reeling as he ran.

At length the hunters and the hunted were in the same field. A few minutes and he would be in their grasp, and for the first time in his life Robert Ruberry tasted the bitterness of death. Yet on he went, and with a mighty effort clambered over a high, furze-covered bank and dropped, utterly spent, into a deep ditch on the other side. Though quite out of breath, and unable to go on, he had just strength enough to crawl twenty or thirty yards lower down and cower under a bush. A moment later the pursuers had surmounted the obstacle, and, thinking that their man was still ahead, they went on at full speed.

But Robert Ruberry knew that they would soon be back, and when he had recovered his wind he resumed his journey down the ditch bottom, and, sometimes bent double, sometimes on his hands and knees, followed it until he reached an old lane. In the lane was a cottage with a light in the window, and thither the fugitive hurried and entered without knocking.

Before a bright coal fire a woman sat spinning, and on a miniature rocking-chair by her side sat a pretty little girl. At the sight of a man without hat, with a black face, damp with perspiration, bloodshot eyes, torn clothes, and bleeding hands, they naturally set up a scream.

"Hush! for God's sake, hush! and hide me somewhere," said the intruder, hoarsely. "I am in danger of my life."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“But who are yo’, and what’s to do? It seems as I should know yo’ —”

“I am Robert Ruberry.”

“Robert Ruberry! Nay, sure — ly!”

[333]

“I am Robert Ruberry. They have burned the factory down, and a lot of ’em are after me to kill me. Hide me somewhere, woman, and I’ll pay you whatever you like. Quick!”

“Nay, Robert Ruberry, I’ll tak’ no money from you, I wouldn’t soil my hands wi’ it. Yo’re no friend of mine; they say as you got my dear lad sent to prison. If yo’ did, God forgive yo’; but he’d never forgive me, nor Will nayther, if I refused to help yo’ in yore need.”

“Thank you! You are Romford’s wife? But where will you put me? Quick! They may be here any moment.”

“Well, yo’ mustn’t stop here. I have not a place where I could hide a kittling, much less a grown mon. But if yo’ll get into th’ owd elm-tree, at th’ end o’ th’ house theer, I’ll defy ’em to find yo’. Come on, and I’ll gie yo’ a leg up.”

Robert Ruberry followed the wife of the man whom he had so much hated and injured, and with her help managed to reach the lowest branch of the elm-tree. The further ascent was little more difficult than going up a ladder.

“Get up as high as yo’ can,” she whispered, “and when th’ coast is clear I’ll come and tell yo’.”

Then she went back to the house and quietly resumed her spinning.

Five minutes later the door opened a second time, and in came three or four men, who looked almost as wild and excited as her previous visitor.

“Have yo’ seen onybody gooin’ by?” demanded one of them.

“How could I see onybody gooin’ by and me sitting here spinning, I should like to know?”

“Have yo’ yerd onybody gooin’ by?”

“No. What’s to do? What are yo’ after?”

“We are after Bob Ruberry.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“Yo’ are after no good, then.”

We know that. He’s a gradely bad ’un, and if we catch him, we’ll punch his yed off.”

“I hope you will not catch him, then. It’s bad wark, punching folks’ yeds off, let ’em be who they will.”

“Can he be here, thinken yo’?” asked one of the men, peering into the weaving-shop.

“Oh, yo’ can look,” said Mrs. Romford, sarcastically. “Look under th’ bed, up th’ luer (chimney), onywhere yo’ like; yo’re quite welcome.”

[334]

“He cannot be far off,” observed another. “He was welly done. I thowt he’d never ha’ gotten o’er that last cop (bank). He’s happen in th’ dyke bottom aw th’ while! Let’s go back and look. Thee stand in the loin, Tommy, and if the owd beggar comes this way, knock him down and jump on him.”

On this they all went off, and Mrs. Romford once more resumed her spinning. Now and then she would go to the door, look out, and listen; then return to her work with an expression of satisfaction. When Robert Ruberry had been up the tree about an hour, she laid the table and spread the cloth, then went to the buttery and fetched a loaf of wheaten bread, a mug of beer, and a bacon collop, which, after cooking on the coals, she put on a hot plate.

This done, she looked out again, took a turn down the lane, and, feeling quite sure that the coast was effectually clear, went to the foot of the elm-tree and told Robert Ruberry that he might safely come down. He came down very slowly, for he was stiff and cold, and it was as much as he could do to walk into the house.

“There!” she said, pointing to her husband’s arm-chair. “Sit yo’ down, and get summat to eat. You look as if yo’ wanted it. There’s a bacon collop, and there’s home-brewed ale, and there’s a loaf o’ soft bread and a pat o’ fresh butter.”

Robert Ruberry looked at the woman wonderingly, with brimming eyes.

“You have saved my life, you refuse my money, and now you are giving me of your best,” he said.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Yo’ mean that soft bread? I get it for Susie; she likes a soft bread butter-cake; but I couldn’t afford it if it was not for th’ pound a week as Colonel Dene ’lows me while my lad’s away.”

“Ay, he has helped you; but I never did. I was your husband’s enemy. You are quite right; I was the means of his being sent to jail; I wrote to the chief constable, yet you give me of your best!”

“Well, I never could bear malice,” said Mrs. Romford, simply. “Th’ owd Book says if thy enemy thirst give him to drink, and I’m thankful as I’ve been instrumental in saving your life, and when my husband knows he’ll be thankful too. He wants nowt but what’s reyt. Yo’re a hard un, but the Lord’ll happen put it into yore heart to see different, and to have a bit more feeling for poor folk. But get yore supper, I pray yo’ now; I’m sure yo’ look welly fit to drop.”

[335]

Robert Ruberry bent his head and ate in silence, for there was that in his heart which made speech difficult.

When he had finished, Mrs. Romford took him into the buttery and brought him water to wash his face and hands. Then, perceiving that he wanted to go, she produced an old hat and a much-mended cloak.

“They aren’t much to look at, nayther on ’em,” she observed, apologetically; “but you could not go ’thout hat, and th’ cloak’ll keep yo’ warm, if it does nowt else. But wait a bit till I run down th’ loin and mak’ sure as there’s none o’ them chaps about as wants to punch yore yed off. Susie will keep yo’ company,”

When she returned, Susie was sitting on Old Bob’s knee. Mrs. Romford seemed pleased.

“Eh, Mr. Robert, if yo’d had a little lass o’ yore own like her yo’d ha’ been a different mon!” she exclaimed.

“And a wife like you! Romford is a fortunate man.”

“He happen doesn’t think so “(smiling). “All the same, I’d liefer have him than yo’ by a good deal. Here, let me help yo’ on with th’ cloak. And tak’ this stick; and

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

if onybody meets yo' — But all's quiet outside, and I mak' no doubt yo'll get safe home. Good-neet to yo'."

"Good-night! You have done me a great service, Susan Romford, greater than you know of, and you'll not find me ungrateful."

Instead of finding Oaken Cleugh all dark and silent, as, considering the lateness of the hour, he had expected, there were still lights in the windows; shadows were flitting about inside, and before the door a dismounted dragoon strode to and fro. On seeing a suspicious-looking stranger, with a battered hat and a thick stick, the soldier demanded sternly who he was and what he wanted.

"I am Robert Ruberry."

"It's all right; you can go in. You'll excuse me, sir; but you look so uncommon like one of them rioters that I was just going to arrest you."

The first person he encountered inside was Phoebe.

"Oh, Mr. Robert, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed. "Why, we thought you was killed. They have gone to look for you."

"Who has gone?"

"Nelson and Jim Rabbits and two of the soldiers."

"What are the soldiers doing here?"

[336]

"Why, don't you know?" And then she told him of the attack on the house and the death of Colonel Dene.

"Colonel Dene dead! This is terrible news, Phoebe. But why did these people attack the house? What did they want?"

"They said they wanted you, and if you was given up to them they would go away quiet; and little Blincoe, he lies a-dying in the parlor. Miss Miriam is with him."

The girl added that, although eight or nine of the rioters had been hit, no one, save Blincoe, was seriously hurt; their wounds had been dressed, and they were under arrest in one of the outhouses, which had been converted into a temporary hospital.

Robert Ruberry took off his hat and cloak and went into the parlor.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Blincoe lay on a sofa; his head was bandaged, one of his arms had been amputated, and he had evidently not long to live.

Miriam sat near him.

“You, uncle?” she said, coldly. “They did not kill you, then?”

“No, I escaped with my life, but hardly.”

“There are others who have not escaped with their lives. You must have heard about poor Colonel Dene. And this poor lad — draw a little back, the sight of you might excite him — he was rambling just now. The worst is, he is so unrepentant. I have tried, in vain, to bring him to a sense of his condition; but he seems to glory in what he has done.”

“I do glory in it,” murmured Blincoe; “it was me as set th’ old warehouse o’ fire, and if I could ha’ burnt Old Bob at th’ same time I would ha’ done it. But I had nowt agen anybody but him. I warned Nelson, and wrote him a letter. Nelson’s a good sort; so are you, Miss Ruberry — if they were all like you and him!”

“Oh, my poor boy, try to think about something else,” said Miriam, pitifully. “Turn your thoughts to Jesus. He is full of compassion for those who believe in him and trust him — and you are very ill.”

“I know what you mean; you mean I am going to die. Well, I don’t think I can be worse off than I have been, wherever I go. And it’s better than being hanged. If I could only see my mother, and I happen shall, I happen shall — if God be as good as you say he is —” He tried to say something more, but his voice sank into an inaudible whisper, and a little later he passed quietly away.

Robert Ruberry wept.

[337]

“Miriam,” he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion, “I am answerable before God for these two deaths.”

Miriam looked sorely troubled; but she made no answer, for she felt that what her uncle said was true.

“What is done cannot be undone,” he continued; “but in the time to come I’ll try to do different. My eyes have been opened. May God forgive me!”

CHAPTER LII.

A TIMELY OFFER.

IT was the day before the inquest. The soldiers were gone, but Birch Dene swarmed with constables; many arrests had been made, and the entire country-side was under a reign of terror, for it was rumored that all who could be proved to have taken part in the burning of the factory and the attack on Mr. Ruberry's house would be tried for their lives.

"What will you do now, Robin?" asked Miriam, as they walked up the road from Factory Hollow, where they had been surveying the ruins and trying to comfort some of the women whose husbands were either in custody or "keeping out of the way."

"About myself, do you mean?"

"Yes; about asserting your claim. You are the lord of the manor and the rightful owner of Birch Dene."

"Most certainly I intend to assert my claim. But would it not be better to wait until after the inquest and the funeral?"

"I don't think so. It would look like an after-thought, and your motives might be misconstrued. So long as your father lived and desired you to keep your relationship secret you had no alternative. But perhaps you consider your promise still binding?"

"In the altered circumstances, not at all. It is a matter for my own discretion. And it can make no difference to Mrs. Dene now. She must know sooner or later. How is she?"

"Much better."

"But the baby is dead?"

"Yes, it lived only a few minutes. You know it was arranged that I should break the news to her, but I was too late; one of the servants had blurted it out to her, and she refused to see me."

"But why?"

[338]

“Partly because she was very ill, and it seems that she has taken a violent dislike to us all.”

“All! You, too?”

“Yes; to every one of us. She says that if Colonel Dene had never known us, and, above all, if you had not gone to him on that fatal night, he would be still alive.”

“That is true, and if I could have foreseen — But no, I don’t think I acted wrongly. She might as well blame me for being his son, or him for being kind and brave; for had he been cowardly or selfish, he would not have risked his life as he did. And is not my loss as great as hers? Perhaps when she knows that the same stroke that bereft her of a husband bereft me of a father she will be more just.”

“I am not so sure about that, Robin. She is very much built up in little Willy; and when she learns that he is not the heir, and that you are, what then?”

“Poor boy! I would not hurt a hair of his head. Is he not my father’s son? And I should be very sorry to have Mrs. Dene’s ill will. But my duty is clear. I must vindicate my mother’s memory at whatever cost.”

“And take your true name. It was your father’s desire, and it is a duty which you owe to yourself. And the sooner and the more publicly the truth is made known the better, in my opinion. You would not like to attend Colonel Dene’s funeral otherwise than as his son, would you?”

“You are quite right, Miriam. I had not thought of that. My head has been in such a whirl that I could hardly think consecutively about anything. But how soon shall I go about it? My father is dead, and I have no proofs.”

“Yes, you have. I can prove that Colonel Dene acknowledged you as his son and heir in my presence. Surely that is enough?”

“It ought to be; and proof of my father’s and mother’s marriage can be obtained from Port-of-Spain, and my birth was duly entered in the log-book of the *Ilford*: I know all the dates and particulars. My father and I had several conversations on the subject — and didn’t he say something about papers in his cabinet?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Certainly he did. But I don’t think that in her present temper Mrs. Dene would let you enter the house, much less examine the cabinet. You must consult somebody, Robin.”

“Whom can I consult?”

[339]

“I’ll tell you what. Let us speak to my uncle. He is a man of business and very shrewd.”

“Your uncle?”

“I know what is in your mind. But he has greatly altered. Don’t you see it?”

“He looks older.”

“He does. But I wasn’t thinking so much about his looks as his manner. It is quite different. He is gentler and kinder. The events of the last few days seem to have wrought a complete change in his nature. He says he won’t be a party to prosecuting the rioters; that they are more to be pitied than blamed, and he is going to Manchester this afternoon to see if he cannot prevail on the head constable to obtain Romford’s release from prison. I don’t think you can do better than consult him, Robin.”

“Let us see him, then, and if possible before he goes to Manchester. Is he at home?”

“I believe so, and if not we can easily find him.”

He was at home, and, without any beating about the bush, Robin laid the matter before him.

“It is a strange story,” said Robert Ruberry, after he had listened to the end and asked Robin and Miriam a few questions; “a very strange story, but I have not the least doubt as it’s true. I never knew either of you tell a lie, and unless both of you are ready to perjure yourselves, Colonel Dene owned Nelson — Rupert Ravensmere, that is — as his son and heir. Besides, the colonel said summat to me as confirms it, and though I could not quite make out what he was driving at then, I can now. It wasn’t just because you were a bit of a scholar that he set so much store by you and wanted me to let yo’ go to th’ Hall whenever you liked. Ay, it’s true, every word of it, I do believe. But how to get other folks to believe and make good your claim is a horse of another color.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Would not my testimony be sufficient, uncle?” asked Miriam, eagerly. “I am ready to take oath that I heard poor Colonel Dene say that Robin was his son, and the marriage can be proved, and his birth on board that ship —”

“That’s all very fine, lass. It may be easy enough to prove as Colonel Dene was married in th’ West Indies, and had a son born to him as he called Rupert. Th’ difficulty will be to prove as Robin, here, and that son are one and the same. He’s never been called nowt but Nelson since his mother died, and it was only

[340]

t’other day as he knew his own name. That’ll be rayther a big pill for Mrs. Dene and th’ trustees to swallow, while, as for Miriam’s testimony — Now, I’m going to ask you a plain question, and I trust you’ll give me a straightforward answer. You two are as thick as ingle weavers. Is there owt between you? I don’t put the question out of idle curiosity. But I cannot advise you right unless I know all the facts: and it might make a difference. Is there?”

The lovers exchanged glances.

“I think I know what you mean, sir,” said Robin. “Miriam is very dear to me, and —”

“You are very dear to her. I thought so. Well, I’ve nowt agen it, and shall not have; whether Nelson proves his claim or not, but in one way it is rather unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate! How so, sir? You admit that I am Colonel Dene’s son, and surely —”

“Not quite so fast, my lad, not quite so fast. Wait till I have said my say out. If them as is concerned for Mrs. Dene and her son gets to know — and the question is like enough to be asked — they’ll say as Miriam is an interested witness and her testimony of no account.”

“As if Miriam would perjure herself for a thousand Birch Denes!” exclaimed Robin, indignantly.

“Nay, nay; there’s no occasion for you to fly up. I only said as they would say so. When some folks go to law, they will say owt and take every mean advantage as they can.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“In that case I would rather not go to law.”

“I did not say everybody, I said some folks; and it isn’t safe to assume as Mrs. Dene and the trustees will not do likewise. But this is a case for a lawyer, and when I go to Manchester I’ll see Glazebrook, and talk it over with him.”

“I am greatly obliged —”

“No, no,” interrupted Robert Ruberry. “I mean as you have no occasion to be obliged. It’s t’other way about. I consider myself to be deeply in your debt.”

“In my debt, sir! How so?”

“Because I have been the means of depriving you of a father. Not as I expected owt o’ th’ sort. But I was that bent on having my way I would neither hearken to good advice nor the promptings of my own conscience. If right were done it’s me as should have been killed, not him. But right isn’t always done in this world, by a good deal, for which some of us have reason to be truly thankful.

[341]

Ay, there’s no denying it, Nelson — Ravensmere, that is — I have been the means of depriving you of a father. I cannot supply his place, but I can and will see you through this business. You shall have your rights, lad, if it costs me ten thousand pounds.

Miriam’s face brightened with pleasure, and she was beginning to express her thanks, and Robin, whom this unexpected announcement had almost stricken dumb, was following suit, when the old man stopped them.

“If you want to do me a kindness, don’t thank me,” he said. “I don’t deserve it. The only favor I ask is that you will accept my help. It will make me feel a bit easier in my mind; I am glad of the opportunity.”

“And the hands, uncle?” said Miriam, significantly.

“You mean that I am in their debt, too. I don’t deny it, and I must make it up to ’em as I best can. To the families of those as has gone off or got taken up I shall make such an allowance as will keep ’em alive, and a bit more. I cannot start th’ factory, because it is burned down. But we are going to begin building another as fast as we can, and what with knocking th’ old walls down and shifting rubbish, and one thing and

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

another, I dare say we shall be able to find regular work at fair wages for every able-bodied man about th' place."

"Oh, uncle! You make me so glad and thankful!" murmured Miriam. "Thank Heaven! Good may come out of this evil, after all."

"Let us hope so. But the misfortune is as the evil is done, and the good is all to come. And now, Nelson — Ravensmere, that is — while I think of it, let me advise you to write to that London lawyer — Chubb, don't you call him? — and tell him what has happened. You say he has papers, and that Bartlett told you to apply to him in case of need. He should be able to help us. Write to him now, and I'll take the letter with me and post it at Manchester. Be as sharp as you can. I have a lot to do. I've the head constable to see, machinery to order, and Glazebrook to talk to, and it'll ten to one take a long while. He has a long head, but I think his tongue is longer."

Robin made all the haste he could, and by the time Mr. Robert was ready to start the letter for Mr. Chubb was ready for the post.

[342]

CHAPTER LIII.

MR. GLAZEBROOK.

MR. GLAZEBROOK (of the firm of Glazebrook, Glasshouse, & Golightly) was a lawyer of the old school, slim as to his person, and past middle age. He wore a black coat with broad lappets, black breeches, and black silk stockings. His white hair was brushed away from a high, square forehead and tied behind in a queue; he had dark eyes and a refined, intelligent face, and his manner was quiet and dignified.

Mr. Glazebrook paid marked attention to his client's statement, interrupting him only to make clear some point which he had not fully understood.

"Well, what do you think about it all?" asked Robert Ruberry, when his tale was ended.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

Mr. Glazebrook raised his eyebrows, and, with his jewelled fingers, took a thoughtful pinch of snuff from a golden box.

“You have confidence in this youth, I suppose; you think he is truthful?”

“I am sure he is; I have watched him closely, and I never knew him to tell a lie or do owt as was not straightforward. The best proof as I can give of my confidence in his story is as I am ready to back him up to the tune of ten thousand pounds.”

“I am glad to hear you say so, my dear sir, for this story is very improbable, and the inducement to lie very considerable.”

“But assuming that it’s true?”

“Then I say, *coedit questio*. But allow me to observe that it is a very great assumption, and how are we to get other people to accept it, I should like to know?”

“You don’t think we have a case, then?”

“Don’t draw hasty conclusions, my dear sir. I did not say so; but it is my way always to look first at the weak points of a case; the strong ones can take care of themselves. It is likely enough that Colonel Ravensmere Dene, then a young man, married a young woman in the West Indies, and concealed the marriage from his friends; that a child was born on board the ship which conveyed

[343]

them to England, and that he hid them both away in a Hampshire or Devonshire village. Such things have happened over and over again, and the marriage and the birth, if they really took place, can easily be proved. Moreover, it is likely enough that Mr. Ravensmere requested his wife to meet him in London, and failed — against his will — to keep the appointment. But now comes in the element of doubt and uncertainty. Mr. Ravensmere returns from the wars, seeks his wife and child, and, after making a thorough investigation, is so convinced they are dead that he marries again. Meanwhile, a woman, who refuses to give her name, is convicted of felony and dies in the dock of the Old Bailey, leaving a child who forgets his name, and only remembers it a few weeks or months ago, when he is brought in contact with Colonel Dene. According to your theory this woman was the first Mrs. Ravensmere; and the child is her son, and heir to Birch Dene. But how are we to prove all this, prove to the satisfaction of a

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

court of justice that the woman who refused to give her name was Mr. Ravensmere's lawful wife, and the youth called Nelson his legitimate son?"

"By Colonel Dene's acknowledgment and his acts." "Acts may be differently construed, while, as for his alleged acknowledgment, Miss Ruberry is, unfortunately, the only independent witness, and it might be plausibly urged that, being *in articulo mortis* at the time, he did not know what he was saying, or that she misunderstood his meaning. All the same, I freely admit that if Colonel Dene had attached his signature to a deed duly attested, in which the young man was clearly identified and fully acknowledged, it would go a long way — a very long way — towards convincing a jury. But even then it might be urged —"

"What?"

"That he was mistaken."

"Not he; Colonel Dene was not a fool, to be imposed upon by the first raw lad as claimed to be his son. And Robin could tell him of things that nobody knew of but them two. But never mind that; how is it to be — fight or give in?"

"How can you ask so absurd a question, my dear sir? I am never eager for litigation when a client has everything to lose and nothing to gain by an action. I say compromise or retire, lest worse befall you."

"So that is your advice, Mr. Glazebrook?" said Robert Ruberry, with evident chagrin; "you advise me to take no steps whatever

[344]

to make good Rupert Ravensmere's claim, for I am as fully convinced he is Colonel Dene's son as I am of my own identity?"

"Did I not warn you against drawing hasty conclusions, my dear sir?" said the lawyer, as he helped himself to another pinch of snuff. "It is just the other way about with our young pretender. He has everything to gain, and nothing to lose. Therefore, I say fight, fight to the last ditch — the more especially as you are good enough to provide the sinews of war."

"Now you speak!" said Robert Ruberry, with a gratified smile. "But what think you of his chances?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Until I have thoroughly explored the case and pieced together the facts, which will require a little time, you must kindly permit me to reserve my judgment. And I think we had better not begin operations until after the funeral and the reading of the will. How do we know that it does not contain some mention of our young pretender, or that documents may not be forthcoming which will materially aid us in establishing his claim? Colonel Dene, as a man of the world, and knowing the uncertainty of life, would surely not leave the identification of his son to chance; and, if I understand rightly, he made some mention of papers.”

“I never thought of that before. You think, then, that we had better say nowt at all till after the funeral?”

“No; I said we had better not begin active operations till after the funeral. If our young friend would like to give out that he claims to be the heir I see no harm in it, but rather good. And, by the by, I should be pleased to see Mr. Rupert Ravensmere Dene — as, I presume, he proposes to call himself— on an early day, if it would quite suit his convenience to favor me with a visit.”

“Of course you must see him. He shall come the day after the funeral, and he’ll happen have news for you. Anyway, he can tell you a good deal more than I can.”

“Naturally. But I should also be pleased to see him on purely personal grounds. A young gentleman of so varied experience can hardly fail to be entertaining company, and I am curious to make his acquaintance. You must go! Well, take care of yourself, my dear sir — on your way home, I mean. These are terrible times, Mr. Ruberry, terrible times. I fear that we are on the eve of a sanguinary insurrection, a general uprising of the lower classes. The magistrates here have expressed the same opinion in a strongly worded memorial, which they have just addressed to the Home Secretary. They decline to be answerable for the peace of the district, unless

[345]

more troops are placed at their disposal. Yes, terrible times, and the future of the country is very dark. You will not forget that it is expedient for me to see our young friend as soon as may be. Good-day to you, and a safe journey home.”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

From the lawyer Robert Ruberry went to the chief constable. But he found that it was not nearly so easy to get a man out of prison as to get him in. The service rendered by Susan Romford did not seem to the chief constable a sufficient reason for releasing her husband.

“Besides,” he said, “I have nowt to do with it. I have no more power to release him than you have. It’s a case for the government, and while these riots are going on, the very last thing as they’ll think of will be to enlarge political prisoners. Instead of that they are going to be more strict with ’em, and not let ’em communicate with their friends as freely as they have done, and shift ’em from prison to prison, so as to prevent any attempt at rescue. And Romford is a dangerous character. You said so yourself; I can hold out no hope whatever, Mr. Ruberry.”

“But how long do you think they will detain him?”

“Till the country is quieter, and happen a bit longer.” This was final, for though the chief constable might not be able to order Romford’s release, the government were sure to be guided by his opinion as to its expediency; and Robert Ruberry went away sorrowful, his mind more than ever a prey to vain regrets, and burdened with the sense of obligations which he was unable to acquit.

CHAPTER LIV.

ANOTHER FORTUNE.

WHEN Robin (who had been subpoenaed as Robert Nelson) appeared at the inquest and was told to “take the book,” he made a preliminary objection.

“I am quite willing to be sworn,” he said, “but my name is neither Robert nor Nelson.”

“What is it, then?” asked the coroner.

“Rupert Ravensmere Dene.”

“Dear me! This is very awkward. How could such a mistake arise, I wonder? Were you in any way related to the deceased gentleman, may I ask?”

[346]

“I am his son.”

“God bless me! But sorely that is impossible. You don’t mean his legitimate son — his son and heir?”

“Yes, sir, I do. But allow me to remind you that I am here to give evidence, not to answer questions about myself —” he was going to say, when he was interrupted by exclamations of surprise and incredulity from the jurymen — most of whom were Birch Hall tenants.

“It’s quite true,” observed Robert Ruberry, when quiet was restored. “I know all about it. Colonel Dene would have acknowledged him openly if he had lived a while longer; but now that he is dead there is no reason for Nelson — Ravensmere, that is — to sail under false colors any longer.”

“I am glad to hear you say so— in one sense,” returned the coroner, “for I was beginning to think that the young gentleman had lost his senses — but this is no business of mine. I shall enter his name as Rupert Ravensmere Dene, commonly called Robert Nelson.”

“Rupert,” corrected Robin.

“Rupert, then. And now let us proceed;”

The jury, instructed by the coroner, had no difficulty in arriving at a verdict. In the case of Colonel Dene they gave it as wilful murder against the rioters in custody who had taken part in the attack on Oaken Cleugh and “other persons unknown,” and the killing of Blincoe was declared to be “justifiable homicide.”

But for the moment, at least, the popular mind was far less occupied with the result of the inquest and the fate of the rioters than Robin’s claim to be the heir. The stories told about him, and the theories by which it was attempted to account for his having remained so long unknown, were stranger than the facts themselves.

These tales bred others, until the number of them became quite bewildering. The moorland farmers did not know what to make of it at all, and, beyond the safe remark that it was “a gradely queer do,” declined to express an opinion; but the factory folk believed in Robin thoroughly, and warmly espoused his cause — many of them, indeed, finding confirmation strong of his story in his striking likeness to the late

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

Colonel Dene, albeit, like everybody else, they had failed to detect it in the latter's lifetime.

Robin, it need hardly be said, was not invited to the funeral; but he met the procession at the church-gate, attended the service in the church, and followed his father's body to the grave. None

[347]

of the mourners or notabilities who were present addressed him, yet he was the observed of all observers, and the subject of much whispered comment; some, like the factory folks, thinking that they could find in his features a decided resemblance to those of the man whose son he claimed to be.

On the following day Robin went to Manchester to see Mr. Glazebrook, taking with him a letter which he had just received from Mr. Chubb. The gist of it was that the writer felt all the more pleased to hear from Rupert, as he had latterly been trying to find out what had become of him, in order to make a communication arising out of the affairs of the late Mr. Bartlett, and to take his instructions thereanent. But as he should have occasion to make a journey to the north of England in the course of a few days, he would travel by way of Manchester and make the communication in question when they met. Mr. Chubb was unaffectedly glad to hear that Mr. Ravensmere Dene had remembered his name and found his father (though, alas! to lose him so soon), and that he was heir to a great estate. His surprise, however, was not so great as it might have been had he not felt convinced from the first that he came of a highly respectable family. When Mr. Chubb came to Manchester he would bring with him all his notes bearing on the case, and he concluded by naming the day on which he expected to arrive, and asking Robin to meet him at the White Bear.

This letter Robin showed to Mr. Glazebrook, with whom he had a long interview, in the course of which the old lawyer questioned and cross-questioned him almost as keenly as if he had been examining a hostile witness, making the while a multiplicity of notes.

“So far, good, Mr. Ravensmere Dene,” he said, at length, after refreshing himself with a pinch of snuff. “I think I now know as much about the case as you can

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

tell me, and I am free to confess that though, when Mr. Robert Ruberry laid the matter before me the other day, I deemed our chances of success exceedingly remote, your statement is so clear and coherent that I begin to think we may possibly establish your claim after all. I may say, too, now that I have had the honor of making your acquaintance and the advantage of hearing your story from your own lips, I am as fully persuaded of your truthfulness and honor as Mr. Robert Ruberry himself.”

Robin bowed.

“I believe everything you have told me, but we cannot expect the Dene trustees to give up possession of the estate on your mere

[348]

assurance that you are Colonel Dene’s son by a previous marriage. Even your father’s assurance to this effect, were he to give it, would not justify them in doing so.”

“What is the use of going on, then?” asked Robin, with a look of intense disappointment; “what proof can be stronger than my father’s acknowledgment made in the presence of Miss Ruberry and myself? I think that Harker, his body servant, also heard him call me his son.”

“Did he, indeed? I must make a note of that. I will tell you why his mere assurance would not be sufficient. He might be mistaken or deceived. Cases of mistaken identity are as plentiful as blackberries. But his verbal or written acknowledgment, supported by a few facts and corroborated by a chain of circumstantial evidence, would render our position impregnable. This is what we must look for, and I hope Mr. Chubb will be able to add a few links to our chain, which, as yet, is far from complete. When he comes to Manchester you must bring him hither. Meanwhile, I shall take the first steps.”

“But is there any necessity for immediate action? I should be very sorry to do anything to annoy Mrs. Dene. She must be in great trouble, and her little boy is my half-brother, you know.”

“Don’t alarm yourself on that score, my dear sir; I am the last man in the world willingly to annoy a lady. I am only going to fire off a blank cartridge, in the shape of a very courteous letter to Mr. Pomeroy, the family solicitor — with which the

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

trustees will have to deal. Mrs. Dene will no doubt be made acquainted with the contents, but, as she has already heard that you claim to be the heir, she cannot be much affected thereby. In this letter I shall merely notify Mr. Pomeroy that you are the late Colonel Dene's son, and therefore heir to the settled estates, request permission to lay before him a statement of the case and particulars of the evidence with which I have been furnished, and beg of him to inform me, so soon as may be, what course the trustees propose to adopt."

"Do you think he will answer it?"

"Certainly, if only as a matter of professional etiquette. But what sort of an answer it will be is another question. Much will depend on the papers which your father mentioned as being in his cabinet."

"And suppose the answer is evasive, or otherwise unsatisfactory, what then?"

"Then I think we should have to take out a writ of ejectment."

[349]

"That would mean a trial, I suppose?"

"Sooner or later. But I should not try to bring matters to an issue for the present. Our case, as yet, is by no means strong, and we shall lose nothing by being deliberate."

A few days later Robin and Robert Ruberry met Mr. Chubb at the White Bear. He had arrived the night before, after a journey of twenty hours.

"You are altered," he said, as he and Robin shook hands, "but I should have known you; could have picked you out of a crowd, in fact. But how you got down to Lancashire is a mystery. Moses Weevil managed to spirit you away very cleverly. But, with your consent, we will make the rascal disgorge."

"Disgorge what?"

"The property left by Mr. Bartlett to you and Solomon Slow."

"But there was no will."

"Yes, there was, and I have it now in my possession. As you no doubt remember, I was very ill when poor old Bartlett died, and for several months afterwards quite unfit for business. They sent me to Bath, and when I returned to town I was

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

surprised beyond measure to find that Weevil had swept everything off, and that you had disappeared. As I knew that Bartlett had made a will, I concluded that his nephew had got hold of the document and destroyed it, but having not the slightest shred of proof to go on, I could, of course, do nothing. Neither could I find out what had become of you. Moses protested, with tears in his eyes, that he had an ardent desire to keep you and cherish you, but that you had not only repaid his would-be kindness with base ingratitude, but run away with some of his money in your pocket.”

“The old rascal!”

“Of course I did not believe him. I applied to Solomon Slow, but neither did he know whither you had gone; he seemed hurt that you should have left without saying good-bye.”

“I called at his house, but he was not at home, and I could not wait.”

“All a part of Weevil’s plot, I have no doubt. However, he is most beautifully hoist with his own petard. But I am anticipating. He was extremely deferential in his manner, not to say fawning, and, for some reason best known to himself, actually made me a present of the oaken desk which used to stand in Bartlett’s room. I accepted it, because I was glad to have a memento of my old friend, and had it sent to my house, where it remained unused and

[350]

little observed until one day some two months ago, when my wife suggested that it should be overhauled, the drawers taken out, and thoroughly cleaned. I agreed, of course, and all the more readily as I wanted to use it. Well, what do you think they found?”

“The will?”

“Yes, the will.”

“In a secret drawer?”

“There is no such thing in the desk. No, it had been accidentally pushed over the end of one of the drawers, and so remained hidden. It is very small, written on a single sheet of Bath post.”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“As likely as not Weevil did it himself, when he was looking among poor Mr. Bartlett’s papers the night he died.”

“I have not the slightest doubt he did. You should have seen the old rascal’s face when I told him. It was as good as a play.”

“You have told him, then?”

“Of course; I am one of the executors. Mr. Yockleton is the other. But you will want to know the particulars. Bartlett directed that his business should be carried on by Solomon Slow, with your help, until you came of age. After that, if you were so disposed, you and he could enter into partnership. Meanwhile Slow was to take half the profits, the balance to accumulate for your benefit. In the event of your not agreeing about the partnership, the business was to be sold. Out of the proceeds Slow was to receive five hundred pounds, the remainder, after payment of fifty pounds apiece to his executors and a like sum to the Old Fogies’ Club and legal and other expenses, to go to you. You are the residuary legatee, in fact.”

“And how much might the remainder be, do you think, Mr. Chubb?” asked Robert Ruberry.

“I cannot exactly say. Weevil disposed of Bartlett’s business and converted all the assets into cash, and if he were to give an account I should not believe him. The rascal could not tell the truth if he tried. But I always understood that Bartlett was worth about four thousand pounds.”

“But there was a good deal of it in books, was there not?”

“Most of it — nearly all, in fact, save a bit of freehold land in the city.”

“Call it two thousand, then, to be on the safe side. Well, two thousand pounds is better than nowt. But can you make this Weevil pay up? Is he worth powder and shot?”

“Certainly; Moses is a rich man, though he does plead poverty

[351]

and pretend that he has lost every penny he possessed in unlucky speculations. Oh, I’ll make him pay, never fear!”

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“So Rupert Ravensmere is heir to two fortunes — Birch Dene and a book-shop. If he does not get one, he’ll happen get t’other. You are lucky, Robin.”

“That remains to be seen. My life, so far, has been a strange mixture of good and evil fortune. It may continue so to the end. I suppose Weevil took such pains to get rid of me because he suspected the existence of a will?”

“Of course he did. He must have had a shrewd idea, too, that you were the heir. That was why he was in such a hurry to reduce the estate to possession. He is nothing if not suspicious, and his calculation doubtless was that, though a will might subsequently be found, nobody would trouble him if you were *non est*. Had he been a bolder man he would probably have got rid of you in a more summary fashion. However, the rascal took his measures well, I must give him that credit; and but for one or two of those accidents which, fortunately, so often frustrate rascally schemes, he would have succeeded. Solomon Slow is very wild about it all; threatens to wring Weevil’s neck, and expresses an ardent desire to finger his five hundred pounds. I rather think he is indulging in a few extra extravagances on the strength of it already.”

“I should dearly like to see him. What is he doing?”

“He is in a book-shop at Winchester — went without leaving his address, and I had a great difficulty in finding him. I suppose I have your authority to proceed against Weevil?”

“Certainly, and make the miserly wretch disgorge to the last penny. However, he did me a service without intending it; for had he not made me a workhouse apprentice I should not have got to Birch Dene and found my father and —”

“Your fortune.”

“Yes,” said Robin, gravely. But the fortune he meant was Miriam Ruberry, not the estate. “And now I think it is time we went to Mr. Glazebrook’s office. He said he would expect us about two o’clock.”

[352]

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)
THE CAMPAIGN OPENS.

THE first proceeding, after the two lawyers had been introduced to each other and a few compliments exchanged, was the perusal by Mr. Glazebrook of Mr. Chubb's notes, which were as full and clear as a barrister's brief.

"These are important links in the chain we have to forge, Mr. Ravensmere," said Glazebrook, when he had gone through the notes, read Colonel Dene's letter to Sophie, and inspected the miniature and the trinkets. "True, this letter is not signed in full; but there will be no difficulty, I apprehend, in showing that it is in your father's handwriting, and that this miniature is his likeness. The fact that they were in your mother's possession is presumptive evidence that she was the lady to whom he was married at Port-of-Spain, and it can, no doubt, be shown that you are the little boy called Robin, mentioned in Mr. Chubb's notes."

"I can prove that," said Chubb; "so can several others. That white lock alone would be sufficient to identify him. How well I remember pointing it out to Bartlett."

"White lock? I see, at the back of Mr. Ravensmere's head. That is an important point, and suggests an idea. Would it be possible, do you think, to find somebody at Lulworth who could recognize Mr. Ravensmere by means of that lock, somebody who knew him and his mother when they were living there as the wife and son of the late Colonel Dene?"

"I think it would," said Robin, "I remember the place quite well, and I have no doubt that I could find people there who remember us — my mother and myself, I mean."

"You must go then and look them up; for I have received a letter from Pomeroy, from which, so far as I can make it out, the trustees regard you as an impostor. Listen; I will read it:"

" 'DEAR SIR, — I am favored with your letter of the 10th inst., which I have laid before my clients and taken their instruction thereupon. They are aware, as well from papers found in the late Colonel Dene's cabinet, as from information communicated to them by Mrs. Dene, that he was married in early life to a

[353]

lady of the name of Mendoza, who bore him a son. But they are also aware, from a statement made not many weeks ago by the colonel himself to Mrs. Dene, that, long before his second marriage, the lady in question and her son died in London under very melancholy circumstances. For this reason, and for others that will readily occur to you, my clients regard it as quite impossible that your client can be the late Colonel Dene's rightful heir, and I may add that it would require very strong evidence indeed to convince them to the contrary.

'I am, dear sir, your obedient servant, THOMAS POMEROY.' "

"Well, there is not much of it," observed Ruberry; "but what there is, is to the point. No shillyshally or nonsense."

"As you say, it is to the point." At the same time you must judge a letter of this sort as much by what it does not say as by what it does. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the trustees are acting less on Pomeroy's opinion than their own."

"How so?"

"Because they are not acting as I think Pomeroy would have advised them to act; as I or any other sensible lawyer would have advised them. What say you, Mr. Chubb?"

"I am quite of your opinion. Had I been in Pomeroy's place I should have advised the trustees to receive your statement, if only that they might form some idea as to what sort of a case you have, and the nature of the evidence on which you rely. Let us get to know all we can, I should have said."

"And no doubt Pomeroy did say it. But clients sometimes take the bit in their teeth and act on their own opinion, and so, I suppose, it has been in this case. I shall now take out a writ of ejectment, just to show them that we are in earnest. And we have scored one point in the game. The marriage and the birth of a son and heir are admitted. We have only to prove that this son is our young friend here. Rather a big 'only' perhaps; nevertheless I think that, with patience and diligence, it may be done. Don't you think so, Mr. Chubb?"

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

Mr. Chubb did think so, and before the conference broke up, it was arranged that he should act as Mr. Glazebrook's London agent in the matter, and accompany the plaintiff to Hampshire in order, if possible, to obtain further evidence in support of his identity.

Mr. Glazebrook was quite right in his surmise that the trustees were not acting altogether in accordance with Pomeroy's advice. He had, in fact, strongly urged them to let Glazebrook, as he proposed, state the grounds on which Robin claimed to be the heir, and had they been strong men and left to themselves they would

[354]

doubtless have done so. But they were not strong men, and they were not left to themselves. Before deciding they consulted Mrs. Dene, and Mrs. Dene absolutely refused to listen to reason. That a miserable factory boy, as she called him, should claim to be her son's elder brother and heir to Birch Dene aggravated her beyond measure. She spoke of him as a "base, ungrateful impostor," and the bitterness of her anger against him seemed to be even greater than her sorrow for her husband's death. The idea of taking any step which implied that his claim might conceivably be other than fraudulent was odious to her. She even asked Mr. Pomeroy whether Robin could not be prosecuted, and wanted him to treat Glazebrook's letter with silent contempt.

The trustees might, of course, have taken their own line, but, being good-natured, easy-going men, in their sympathy with Mrs. Dene, and rather terrorized by her passionate utterances, they could not muster up courage to oppose her wishes. Moreover, from her point of view, which was in a great measure theirs, "the miserable factory boy" had not a leg to stand on.

Was it not absurd on the face of it, she asked, to suppose that if Nelson were really Colonel Dene's son, he would have kept the fact to himself until after the colonel's death? Did anybody believe that a gentleman's son would consent to work in a factory for a single day, much less for years? Was it not plain that Nelson had, somehow or other, discovered the secret of the colonel's previous marriage, and was now making a nefarious attempt to supplant her son? Did anybody ever hear of such villainy? After all the colonel's kindness to him, too! But her husband always had an unfortunate

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

weakness for low people, and this was the result. It was to please him that she had taken up Miriam Ruberry. She had once thought her a nice girl — for her station — but she felt persuaded now that Miriam was just as bad as Nelson, and that this vile plot had been hatched between them. To enter into a correspondence on the subject, either with Glazebrook or anybody else, would be nothing less than a degradation.

Yet, though Mrs. Dene's influence with the trustees was great, and they felt as sure as herself that Robin was an impostor and his claim a fraud, they could not, as men of the world, altogether ignore the advice of the family lawyer, and after some hesitation allowed him to return a civil and guarded answer to Glazebrook's letter. But when Glazebrook fired his first shot, in the shape of a writ of ejectment, their confidence received a rude shock, and

[355]

it began to dawn on their minds that there might be "something in it" after all. This was undoubtedly Pomeroy's opinion.

"Of course there is something in it," he said. "Do you think that Glazebrook would take up a palpably fraudulent case, or that Robert Ruberry, who is one of the keenest men alive, would place his purse at the disposal of one whom he knew to be an impostor?"

"He perhaps thinks we will buy him off," rather weakly suggested Mr. Giles, who was a sleeping-partner in a large banking-house.

"That's it — an attempt at blackmailing," observed Mr. Tilbury, the other trustee, a neighboring county gentleman, who, except when his wife or Mrs. Dene interposed a veto, invariably followed his lawyer's advice.

Pomeroy shook his head.

"I don't think so at all," he said. "Glazebrook is neither a sharper nor a pettifogger, and you may be sure that Robert Ruberry would not risk his money in such a hopeless speculation, for they cannot help knowing that there is no possibility of any blackmail being forthcoming. You have no power, as trustees, to buy the claimant off, and I don't think either of you gentlemen —" (smiling).

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“No, by jingo!” exclaimed Mr. Tilbury, with superfluous energy. “It is quite enough to be a trustee, without having to pay the piper.”

“And in justice to a family of nine children, I positively decline to incur any responsibility whatever,” said Mr. Giles, as he buttoned up his breeches-pocket. “But what is to be done? That is the question — what is to be done?”

“We must put in an appearance, of course, and let the action proceed. It is not merely our duty; we have no alternative. The heir in possession is the infant, William Ravensmere Dene. We know no other heir, and until and unless the plaintiff proves his case there can be no other, so far as we are concerned. I advise you neither to yield nor compromise. It is our clear duty to protect the interests of Mrs. Dene and her son. My only regret is that you would not let me accept Glazebrook’s offer to give us a statement of his alleged facts. We should have been all the wiser and none the weaker for it. It is always a mistake to hold an opponent cheap, especially such a dark horse as this Nelson. We know our own case, but we don’t know his; and many an equally improbable story has turned out to be true.”

[356]

The serving of the writ made an impression even on Mrs. Dene, albeit she would not for the world have admitted it in words.

“Their impudence is as great as their folly!” she exclaimed. “What do they hope to gain by it? Nelson is a villain. He wormed himself into my poor Eustace’s confidence, only to betray him. I shall begin to think soon that he contrived the attack on Oaken Cleugh, in the expectation that my husband would be killed. He is quite capable of it, or of any other atrocity. While as for those Ruberrys, I have not words to express my detestation of their conduct. Surely the fact that my husband lost his life in defending their property should be enough to prevent them from taking part in this vile attempt to rob his son of his inheritance. If the claim were not so utterly preposterous there might be some excuse for them. But it is so entirely unsupported by evidence, so altogether impossible and absurd! Don’t you think it is, Mr. Tilbury, impossible and absurd?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Quite so, madam, quite so. Impossible and absurd,” answered Mr. Tilbury, confidently, though he was not nearly so sure about it as he pretended. “What I cannot understand is, how Robert Ruberry, who is sound in politics and a man of means, can mix himself up in such a discreditable affair.”

“What can you expect from tradesmen, Mr. Tilbury? Everybody knows that they make their money by robbing their work-people and cheating their customers. If my poor husband had kept the Ruberrys in their place this trouble would never have happened.”

“You are quite right, madam; it is always a mistake to be too familiar with inferiors,” responded Mr. Tilbury, who made it a rule never to contradict Mrs. Dene — or his own wife.

Meanwhile Robin and Mr. Chubb were on their way to Hampshire.

They were so far successful in their quest that they found several people of undoubted respectability — the parson, the doctor, and others — who had a perfect recollection of Mrs. Ravensmere and her son, and could corroborate Robin’s story to the letter. But when it came to identifying the young man who called himself Ravensmere Dene with little Robin Ravensmere, who had left the village a dozen years previously, there was a difficulty. He had greatly altered, and no wonder. The doctor and the parson’s wife recognized the lock of white hair, and an old servant of Mrs. Ravensmere, after a minute examination of Robin’s features, professed her readiness to swear that he was the same, quite independently

[357]

of the fact that he was able to remind her of many matters and incidents which could be known only to themselves.

Chubb made copious notes, and took down the names of all whose evidence was likely to be of use.

“We are getting on,” he observed to Robin; “adding a few more links to our chain, as Glazebrook would say. But it is not yet as complete as I should like it to be. We want something more from your father. His recognition of you is good, as far as it goes, but his failure to acknowledge you openly looks queer, and will want a good deal

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

of explanation. Your evidence and Miss Ruberry's will be taken *cum grano*, as that of interested parties, and against it we have Mrs. Dene's positive declaration that her husband distinctly told her, not many weeks before his death, that his first wife and her child died in London; and he certainly acted as if he thought so. And it is an unfavorable feature that he did not mention you in his will, though, to be sure, the will was made several years before you found each other. Still, he might have added a codicil. These are points that would tell very much with a jury, and we must try to get over them, somehow."

CHAPTER LVI.

THE DOOM OF THE RIOTERS.

ONE of the minor results of the riots was the reconciliation of the brothers and the restoration of domestic peace at Oaken Cleugh.

The elder, being neither critical nor unbelieving, not only credited Robin's story at the first telling, but, like many others of the wise-after-the-event order, affirmed that he had suspected something of the sort all along. When he heard that Miriam and the heir to Birch Dene had "made it up," his delight was unbounded, and expressed, occasionally, in a fashion which was not altogether agreeable to the parties chiefly concerned. He evidently thought that the realization of his hopes for his daughter's matrimonial future was in great part due to his own management and forethought.

"Didn't I tell you, Robert?" he said, one day, to his brother. "Didn't I tell you as Miriam would marry a real gentleman by birth and breeding? And you only laughed at me. Let them laugh as wins. Who is right now, I should like to know? Tell me that; who's right now?"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Well, if it comes to that, I don’t think you are much righter than anybody else,” returned Robert, with a touch of his old cynical humor. “You said as she would marry a highflyer, and I never said she would not. All I said was, as she would please herself; and that is just what she has done. They made it up before she knew as he was owt but a factory lad.”

“Nay, nay; Miriam has more sense.”

“Ask her, then. And if you guessed as he was a highflyer all along, why did you fight so shy of him and warn her?”

“Well, I never heard owt like that in all my life! Who but you put me up to it?”

“What if I did? It only shows as I was just as blind as you; we’ve no occasion to fratch (boast), neither of us, Ben.”

Ben was silenced, though he did not seem convinced, and he took an early opportunity of putting to Miriam the question which his brother had suggested, albeit in a roundabout and (as he thought) rather a delicate way, his respect for his daughter having been greatly increased by her betrothal to the heir.

“Where’s Robin this morning?” he asked Miriam, by way of leading up to the subject.

“Down at Factory Hollow, helping my uncle to plan the new buildings.”

“Ay, they’re very throng just now, and if it wasn’t for my gout I’d be there too. Robin seems to be making himself very useful.”

“Yes, he takes great interest in the work. Uncle says that Robin is his right-hand man.”

“And it is very creditable to the lad, and him a gentleman born and the owner of Birch Dene — when he gets his rights — to be messing about among bricks and mortar. I was just thinking, Miriam, as I should like to know — if you wouldn’t mind telling me — when Robin fust spoke to you?”

“When Robin first spoke to me?” returned the girl, looking delightfully innocent and demure. “Let me see! Yes, I think it was shortly after I came home — one Sunday morning.”

“God bless me, Miriam, so long since as that? And what said he — if it’s a fair question?”

Miriam knitted her brow as if she were trying to recall the exact words.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“He said, ‘Good-morning, Miss Ruberry.’ ”

“Oh, be hanged to that tale.”

“Father!”

[359]

“I did not mean — it was a twinge of this confounded gout. I mean, did he say nowt else?”

“Very likely. But you were present; you should know as well as I. It was that time he came up to ask you to get a doctor for a poor lad who had been hurt.”

“Oh, that was the time, was it? But I don’t mean owt of that sort. I mean, when did he first say owt particular?”

“That is a difficult question to answer. He has said so many particular things. You must be more precise.”

“Well, then, when did you first know as you had a liking for each other?”

“That is more than I can tell you, father; for I think we liked each other before we knew it ourselves. It grew from small beginnings, and I believe is growing yet.”

“That is not it, neither; and you know quite well what I mean, I do believe. However, I’ll try to put it plain this time: did Robin and you begin a-sweethearting before you knew as he was the heir, or after? Tell me the truth.”

“Certainly, father, why not?” said Miriam, with a bright blush and glistening eyes. “We have nothing to conceal. It was before.”

(“Robert was right, after all,” thought Mr. Ruberry.)

“Oh, before, was it! But suppose now, as things was to turn out awkward (not as I think they will), and Robin was to miss getting the property, how then?”

“What do you mean by ‘how then’? Robin would be Robin all the same, wouldn’t he? And it is he I love, not the property.”

“Oh, ay, he would be Robin sure enough, and as poor as one too.”

“So much the better. It would be manifest then that I loved him for himself alone.”

“Come now, Miriam, you don’t mean that?”

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Yes, I do, father; and if it were not that Robin holds it his duty to prove beyond a doubt that he is Colonel Dene’s son and no impostor, as Mrs. Dene and the trustees pretend to believe, I really doubt whether he would go on with the action,”

“Not go on with the action! Why, what on earth for!”

“Because it is really against his own brother, and it does not seem kind and Christianlike for brothers to go to law.”

“Why, what childish nonsense you talk! And you used to be a sensible lass, Miriam. However, I suppose that when love comes in at the door sense flies out of the window. If Robin has any

[360]

ideas of that sort, it’s a good job as his interests are in safe hands. And, talking of the action, I wonder when it will come off. It seems to me as if it was hanging fire a good deal. Glazebrook may be as ‘safe’ as they say; but there’s one thing sure — he’s slow.”

Mr. Ruberry was so far right that the case of “Doe Rem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff” (the tenant who had been selected as the nominal defendant) did not appear to be making much progress. Since the opening of the action it had moved hardly at all, and when Mr. Glazebrook was questioned on the subject he always answered that he had not finished the pleadings, which, he explained, were rather complicated and required to be very carefully drawn. The truth was that he was dilatory with intention — playing a waiting game. He had a good case; a case which, in ordinary circumstances, he would have had no hesitation in bringing to a speedy issue, and which he would have backed himself to win.

But the circumstances were so far from being ordinary, that if Robin came short of success, if he failed to make good his claim, he would be pronounced guilty of fraud and branded as an impostor.

For this reason Mr. Glazebrook was desirous to make his position so strong as to render failure impossible. As yet, however, the case, fairly good as it was, had a flaw: the difficulty of explaining to the satisfaction of a jury why Colonel Dene had made so close a secret of Robin’s existence, keeping it even from his family solicitor and omitting to place anything on record whereby, in the event of his death, his son’s

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

identity might be established, had not been met. Knowing something of the character of the man, Glazebrook felt sure that he had not neglected so obvious a duty, and that, either in a letter to a friend, or otherwise, he had set down the facts and formally acknowledged Robin as his heir. The shrewd old lawyer, moreover, hoped that the publicity which was being given to the case (it was the talk of the county) would result in the discovery of the “missing link,” as he called it. Should this hope not be realized — after waiting a reasonable time — he would have to go with the case as it stood, and put his trust in the evidence which he had already obtained.

As for Robin, though the suspense was hard to bear, he was too well occupied to let it fret him overmuch, and, as Mr. Ruberry had insisted on his taking up his quarters at Oaken Cleugh, he had the consolation of seeing and conversing with Miriam every day.

[361]

Then there came the trial of the rioters — at a special assizes held at Lancaster — whither Robert Ruberry, Jim Rabbits, Gib Riding, Harker, and himself, together with many others, were subpoenaed as witnesses. And a memorable and painful trial it was, reminding Robin, in some of its incidents, of his mother’s trial at the Old Bailey, and making almost as deep an impression on his mind.

Seven of the prisoners, one of whom was a woman, were condemned to death, eight or nine to transportation for life, and several others to shorter terms of transportation and imprisonment. The scene in court when these sentences were pronounced baffles description. As the dread words, “May the Lord have mercy on your souls,” fell from the judge’s lips, one of the victims, a wretched little apprentice only just in his teens, shrieked wildly for pity, and the wails and exclamations of the women, some of whom had travelled threescore miles on foot to “take a last look” at those they loved, were so heart-rending as to melt to tears even the case-hardened officers of the court.

In two instances the capital sentence was commuted to transportation for life, yet among the few that were left for execution was the little factory lad who, as the

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

hangmen dragged him to his doom, moaned continually the same prayer, "Mother, mother! God help me!"

Robin looked on, with pallid face and close-set teeth, his heart almost bursting with indignation and pity. For he knew that these unfortunates were the victims of cruel laws and a merciless government; that, after being degraded and demoralized by incessant toil, they were provoked to crime by want and despair. And now, for the one offence of their lives, they were as severely punished as if they had been criminals by profession and evil-doers by choice.

This is no imaginary picture, the coinage of a romancer's brain. All happened as has been described — the riots, the fire, and the trial; and little more than twenty years before the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne of England, a lad of sixteen was hanged at Lancaster for alleged participation in the burning of a Lancashire cotton factory. One of his companions on the scaffold was a woman of fifty-four, whose offence was stealing some potatoes from Shudehill Market during a riot at Manchester.

Nobody was more affected by the trial and its results than Robert Ruberry. It seemed to complete that moral transformation of his character which recent events at Birch Dene had begun.

[362]

"Let us go home," he whispered to Robin, when the last of the prisoners had been removed from the dock.

Robin took his companion's arm, for he looked faint and feeble, and led him slowly down the hill to the King's Arms. On their way thither neither of them spoke; their feelings just then were too deep for words. When they reached the inn, Robert Ruberry sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out some dreadful sight.

"Ay, let us go home," he repeated. "I shall never get over this, Robin. I used to talk about hanging as if it did not amount to much. I know what it means now. The cry of that poor lad will ring in my ears till my dying day. His blood will be on my head. God forgive me! If I had behaved a bit kindlier to him — and he wasn't a bad lad — and treated th' hands like human beings, this would never have happened. But I never

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

thought it would come to this, Robin. If you'll believe me, I never did. If it had lain with me, they would not have been prosecuted. But th' Crown took it up, and, though I was like to give evidence, I said as little as ever I could."

This was true. His evidence had helped the prosecution hardly at all, and he positively refused to identify any of the men who had sought his life. But for the Blackfaces and the leaders who betrayed them, after luring them to their ruin, the prisoners would, in all probability, have been acquitted.

By way of consoling the stricken man, Robin called his attention to this side of the question, and said something about the iniquity of the law and the severity of the judge. But Robert Ruberry refused to see in this any extenuation of his conduct.

"Ay, th' law is bad enough to have been made by devils," he said. "But what of that? Haven't I been saying all my life as ours is the finest constitution under the sun, and denouncing all who wanted to reform it as traitors and rebels? As for the judge — I wonder how he can sleep in his bed o' nights. But he's what the law has made him, and I'm no better. It is no use talking, Robin, I'm no better. Ay, let us go home, I cannot bide here any longer. Order the post-chaise and find Jim Rabbits; he can ride on th' box. And there's some women yon' fro' Birch Dene. Take this five-pound note, and tell Jim to order 'em a good dinner and let 'em ride home on the coach."

[363]

CHAPTER LVII.

THE MISSING LINK.

THE trial of the rioters was followed by a period of comparative calm, for albeit the condition of the factory folks was in no way improved they were completely over-awed, and most of their leaders either in hiding or in jail. The government, regarding this as a favorable sign, thought it expedient to relax somewhat the rigor

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

of their rule, an opportunity by which Robert Ruberry profited to make still another effort to obtain Romford's release. But, instead of applying as before to the Manchester chief constable, he addressed himself to the county members, who, believing him to be still the good old Tory he always had been, did their best to forward his views. He also sought, through Robin, the co-operation of Mr. Chubb, who had powerful friends in the administration. The joint efforts of these intercessors were crowned with success, and a few weeks later Robert Ruberry received an intimation that William Romford would be discharged from custody almost immediately. This was followed by a letter from the Radical weaver himself, stating that he was to be set free on the following day, and that the government were behaving well; they had given him a small gratuity and the amount of his coach fare to Manchester. But having been so long locked up he had a great longing to stretch his legs and take a big breath of country air. So he meant to walk home and "save the brass." He expected to reach "th' far end" towards the end of the week, but, as prison life was not conducive to good fettle, he could not be "rightly sure" to a day or two.

This was disappointing to Romford's numerous friends and admirers, for they would have liked to give him a public welcome and escort the returning hero, "flags flying and music playing," to his own house. But, as there was no telling at what hour of the day or night he might come, this project had to be abandoned. All the same, a sharp lookout was kept on the Manchester road, and Rupert Ravensmere called on Mrs. Romford, and asked her to send him word the moment her husband arrived.

[364]

"I'll send Will hissel', Mr. Ravensmere," she answered, in a voice tremulous with joyful excitement. "I'll send him fust thing, unless he torns up late at neet, as he very like will. You may be sure as there's nobody he'll tak' so much pleasure in seeing as yo' as has been so good to me while he wor' away. I'm reyt sorry as he's walking. It's a most terrible long way fro' Lunnon, and him wake wi' living on skilly and such like, and getting neyther exercise nor fresh air. And there wor no need for him to walk. But he is a gradely kindly lad, is my Will; he thinks I have been hard put to it and wants to bring a bit o' brass home wi' him. But he doesn't know as Robert Ruberry continued

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

th' allowance as I had fro' your father. I did not like taking it, at the fost, and if it had not been for yo' 'suading me, I shouldn't ha' done. Well, what wi' that and th' weyving, I've saved — how much thinken yo'?"

"I really couldn't tell, Mrs. Romford. I have no idea."

"Guess!"

"Well, perhaps a couple of pounds."

"Five! A fi'pun note."

"Five pounds! Why, what a thrifty little woman you are! But where do you put it? Aren't you afraid of being robbed?"

"No, I'm not. I put it where nobody can find it. Where thinken yo'?"

"In that chest?"

"Nay, that would be th' fost place where onybody would look. I'll show yo', but yo' mustn't tell —"

"Certainly not. I'll be as secret as the grave."

"Look under th' bed."

Robin looked.

"I see nothing but a child's shoe," he said.

"And there is nowt else. But see you, now!"

With that Mrs. Romford put her arm under the bed and pulled out the shoe. Then with her forefinger she extracted therefrom a piece of crumpled paper, which, on being unfolded, proved to be a five-pound note.

"There, now!" she exclaimed, holding it up in triumph. "Don't yo' think it's safe?"

"As safe as if it were in a bank," said Robin. "Why, you are quite rich!"

"I shall be when my dear lad comes home. He's sure to bring a pound or two wi' him. And I'll tell you what — we'll have a supper — roast goose. I know where there's a gradely thumper as

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

I can get cheap. Not as it's roasted yet, but it will have to be. Roast goose and barm dumplings. Will you come? You're a gentleman now, I know, and we are nobbut poor folks, only I thowt —"

"I'll come with pleasure, Mrs. Romford. When is it to be?"

"Let me see. Next Saturday neet — no, next but one. There'll be Jim Rabbits and th' wife, and yo', and us — nobody else, unless —"

"Yes, unless what, Mrs. Romford?" said Robin, seeing that she hesitated.

"Unless you think — if I might make so bowd — Miss Ruberry would come wi' you. I should be gradely fain if hoo would do us th' favver."

"I think she would," returned Robin, with a smile. "I'm almost sure she would. I'll ask her."

"That is aw reynt, and thank yo' kindly, for if yo' ax her, I'm sure hoo'll come. That'll just mak' six, and if we don't manage to eat th' goose among us, and about fifteen dumplings as weel, it'll be a quare do. Do you know, I've gotten into my yed as Will'll be here o' Saturday neet. I know he will if he can, and if he is I'll send him up to yo' i' good time o' Sunday."

Mrs. Romford's prevision was confirmed by the event. Her husband did return on the Saturday night; and on the following morning he appeared at Oaken Cleugh, looking rather pale and worn, yet in fair health and good spirits."

Robin and he exchanged warm greetings, but Robert Ruberry kept in the background, and his face was troubled.

"Won't you two shake hands?" said Robin.

"I shall be very glad," said Robert; "but I did you a great wrong, Romford, and I feared —"

"You mean as you geet me sent to prison; but you geet me out again, and you've been good to th' wife. That is enough for me, and folks speak as well of you now as they used to speak ill. I'm not one as bears grudges. And, after all, I'm not sure as you didn't do me a good turn in getting me taken up. If you hadn't I should have been among the rioters — though not of them — for I hate violence, and, as sure as we're alive, some o' them Blackfaces would have sworn my life away. Ay, let's shake hands, by all means. We have summat to forget and forgive, every one on us. And so your father is dead, Mr. Ravensmere! I am right sorry, for he was a kind neighbor and a noble

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

gentleman. I only heard about a fortnight since. I was shifted about from prison to prison, and my letters went wrong. If I had heard

[366]

sooner I might have saved you some trouble. Th' last time I saw him — you mind when — he gave me a bit o' papper for you. Here it is" (handing Robin a sealed letter). "We had a long talk, and he told me what I may say I knew already, that you were his son and heir, but he wanted me to say nowt about it for a few months on account of his wife's health. I promised, of course, though I do not quite understand his scruples. If I had been in his place I should have owned you at once. My wife isn't a fine lady, thank God! She never ails much, even at them times, and does not know what nerves is. And then I chanced to say that it might be awkward for you if owt happened to him before he made it known. He said the same thought had occurred to him, and he would provide for that chance at once. And then he sat down at his desk and wrote out that papper, and signed it, and asked me to attest his signature, which I did, as you will see. His first idea was to lock it up in his desk, along with his other private pappers, but, at th' last minute, he changed his mind.

" 'It might get overlooked,' he said, 'or fall into careless hands. You are my son's friend; I confide it to you. Give it to him, either now or later, as you may think best. I don't think I am likely to die just yet. But life is uncertain, and the worst thing a man can leave to those he loves is a legacy of trouble. I will instruct Pomeroy to add a codicil to my will the next time I go to Manchester, but meanwhile that document will suffice.'

"I took it home and put it in my old kist (chest), thinking to give it to you the next time you called, but, as ill-luck would have it, the head constable called before you."

Silently and in tears — for the weaver's narrative had revived the poignancy of his grief — Robin broke the seal and read the paper. It began by saying that, in view of the uncertainty of life, and there being reasons why the disclosure should not be publicly made for some little time, the writer desired to place on record the fact that the young man known as Rupert or Robin Nelson was his son by a previous marriage, and

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

that a certificate of this marriage and proof of the birth would be found among the other family papers in his cabinet. He then went on to explain briefly how he had lost sight of his wife and child and come erroneously to the conclusion that they had been drowned in the Thames, and why, owing to the partial loss of Rupert's memory, following on a brain fever, they had not sooner found each other. As to Rupert Nelson (so called) being his son, there could, he said, be not the least

[367]

doubt. The account he gave of their life at Lulworth was true in every respect, and he had told him of many things which could be known to none save themselves. Colonel Dene concluded with the expression of a hope that, in the event of its being necessary to "produce this plain statement," the trustees, his wife, and all his friends would have no hesitation in recognizing Rupert Ravensmere Dene as his elder son and rightful heir.

"Will it be of any use in this law as is going on?" asked Romford; "for, though I witnessed it, I did not read it."

"Of very great use," answered Robin. "It is what Mr. Glazebrook has been looking for this long time. It completes our case and ought to make a trial unnecessary. At any rate, I hope it will. How good of my father to make so full a statement, and I'm greatly obliged to you, Romford, for suggesting the idea to him."

"Well, I don't know. I dare say he would ha' made it all th' same, and a man shouldn't want his memory jogging about a thing o' that soort. Duty isn't all o' one side between parents and children; if there be any difference it's agen th' parents, though some folks doesn't think so. A child cannot help being born, but a mon needn't be a fayther, nor a woman a mother, unless they like. As for being obliged to me, happen the less as is said about that the better. It worn't vary sharp on me to keep th' knowledge o' that papper to mysel' all this time. But it's not too late yet, you say, and better late than never."

This was exactly what Glazebrook observed when Robin gave him his father's statement, which he did on the following day. The old lawyer called it "the missing link," and said it made their case so strong that if the other side knew all the facts they would probably "throw up the sponge."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

“Why not tell them all the facts, then, and so put an end to the strife?” asked Robin.

“For several reasons, my dear sir. To begin with, it is contrary to all the rules of the game — once proceedings have begun — to show your opponent your hand. And as your character has been publicly assailed, so it must be publicly vindicated. Why, in the very last *Guardian*, it is given as a positive fact that the action of ‘Doe Dem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff ‘ has been abandoned, and more than insinuated that the plaintiff is an impostor. Another reason. It is well for you, well even for the trustees, that your claim should be examined by a court of justice and ratified — as I take for granted it will be — by the verdict of a jury.”

[368]

“I am in your hands, Mr. Glazebrook, and I think you are right. When do you propose to bring the matter to an issue?”

“At the next Lancaster assizes, three months hence, before a special jury. The pleadings are all but ready, and I do not suppose that Mr. Pomeroy is likely to put any hindrances in the way.”

CHAPTER LVIII.

ROBIN’S CHOICE.

THREE months later a rather mixed company were gathered under the roof of the old King’s Arms (now, alas, among the things that have been) and at another ancient hostel hard by. Besides the usual frequenters of the house during the assizes — barristers, attorneys, deputy sheriffs, and other major and minor limbs of the law — there were the plaintiff and the defendants in the suit of “Doe Dem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff,” their solicitors and their solicitors’ clerks, Mrs. Dene, Miss Ruberry and her father, Mr. Chubb, Dr. Yockleton and Solomon Slow, Will Romford and Harker, three or four people from Lulworth, and two eminent physicians from Manchester, who were

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

ready to swear that cases of partial loss of memory, after brain fever, were of common occurrence.

Robert Ruberry had not come. He said that, unless he were forced, he would never enter Lancaster Castle again, but on the day before their departure he had a long talk with Miriam and Robin, which led to important consequences later on.

The lovers met Mrs. Dene two or three times, both in the corridors of the inn and the precincts of the castle; but she held her head high, and did not condescend to notice them, even with a look.

The Nisi Prius Court-house was crowded, for the suit bid fair to be a *cause célèbre*, and among the advocates engaged therein were several legal luminaries of the first magnitude. The trustees had specially retained the Attorney-General, while the plaintiff's leading counsel was no less a personage than Sir Slingsby Slasher, who had the reputation of being the most successful verdict winner of the day. Rather to Robin's surprise, however, he did not make a slashing speech. Quite the contrary, in fact, for he spoke in a quiet, subdued, colloquial tone, very soothing to the feelings, and much more effective with the jury than a set oration would have been. He metaphorically buttonholed them; his manner was so insinuating

[369]

and confidential that they could not possibly help thinking for the moment that he and they were about the most knowing fellows in the world; and the way in which, from time to time, he said, "I need not tell you, gentlemen," was simply inimitable.

But the evidence was the main thing, and there was, fortunately, plenty of it. Robin himself was the first witness examined, and though he stood two hours in the box, and though Mr. Rufus (one of the Attorney-General's juniors) asked him all the unpleasant things he could think of, and was very sarcastic and scornful touching his temporary loss of memory, he came well out of the ordeal. Next, the witnesses from Lulworth delivered their testimony, and to them followed Chubb, Yockleton, Solomon Slow, and the others. Romford was the last, and Sir Slingsby Slasher so contrived matters that the weaver's evidence and the "putting in" of Colonel Dene's "statement"

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

came as the finishing stroke; and when he said, "That is my case," and sat down with a "Didn't I tell you so?" glance at the jury, he knew that the case was won.

He did not, however, expect that the verdict would be delivered before the following day, and probably no one was more surprised than himself when, just as the Attorney-General was rising to address them, the foreman of the jury put a question to the judge, which caused the learned gentleman to resume his seat with a gesture of disgust and a look of dismay.

"Do you think there's any use in going on wi' this, my lord?" asked the foreman, a stalwart, shrewd-faced farmer from Grange-over-Sands.

"I beg your pardon," said the judge, politely, "but really I don't quite understand the question. Would you kindly be a little more explicit?"

"Well, what we want to know is, if it be of any use going on — because, unless it can be shown as that statement is a forgery, we are of opinion that the plaintiff has proved his case, and we shall give a verdict accordingly."

"That is not a point which I can decide. If the defendants elect to go on with the case, we must hear it to the end. Perhaps, in the circumstances, you had better take the opinion of your clients, Mr. Attorney-General."

On this the Attorney-General, Mr. Pomeroy, and the trustees held a hurried consultation.

"Well, what say you, Sir Charles?" asked the judge, when they seemed to have made up their minds.

[370]

"My clients desire me to say, my lord, that they have no personal feeling or pecuniary interest in the matter whatever. They could not decide it on their own authority alone, but, as the jury are of the opinion that the plaintiff has proved his case, and I am not prepared to say that he has not, my clients are willing to let the case close now, with a verdict in his favor. There remains only the question of costs —"

"There will be no difficulty on that score," put in Sir Slingsby Slasher. "Mr. Ravensmere Dene is quite willing, desirous even, that the costs should be borne by the estate."

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

This was the end of the case of Doe Dem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff, so far as the legal proceedings were concerned, but what may be termed the final settlement and general wind-up took place out of court.

An hour or two later, as the trustees and Mr. Pomeroy were talking over the events of the day in their sitting-room at the King's Arms, one of the servants brought a note from Mr. Ravensmere Dene, asking for an interview, as he had something of importance to communicate.

"You have no objection, I presume?" said Mr. Pomeroy, addressing the trustees. "As the fight is over we may as well be friendly, and, as the family solicitors, it behooves us to be on good terms with its head."

"Let us see him, by all means," said Mr. Giles; "I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance, and I hope he will give our house his account."

"So shall I," echoed Mr. Tilbury, "and I hope we shall be good neighbors. There is some very fine shooting on the Birch Dene moors."

"Give our compliments to Mr. Dene," said Pomeroy to the servant, "and say that we shall feel honored by his company whenever it suits his convenience to pay us a visit. Or, stay, I will write a note. It will be more respectful than a verbal message."

A few minutes after the missive was despatched, Robin, accompanied by Mr. Glazebrook, answered it in person.

"I have come to make a proposal," he said, after the usual commonplaces had been exchanged, "and, as it affects the interests of my brother, I should like to make it in the presence of Mrs. Dene, if she would favor us with her company for a few minutes."

"She is in her room; I will go and fetch her," replied Pomeroy, albeit not very confidently, for he greatly doubted whether she would oblige them with her company.

[371]

But curiosity prevailed over resentment, and he presently returned with the lady on his arm. She looked very downcast and had evidently been weeping. After greeting Robin with a scarcely perceptible nod, Mrs. Dene sank sullenly into a chair and leaned her head on her hand.

Without any further preface Robin proceeded to business.

The Salamanca Corpus: Birchdene (1889)

“I need hardly say,” he observed, “that I am very well satisfied with the result of our action. It makes me the possessor of a fine property, and, what I value much more highly, gives me a name and a position, and vindicates the fair fame of my mother and the character of my father. As touching the property, however, I think it gives me more than is rightly my due. Willy Dene is as much my father’s son as myself, and it does not seem fair that I should take the lion’s share. But, as I am only life tenant, I cannot dispose of the property as I would, yet what I can do I will; and I intend to make over to him, so long as I have the power, or to trustees acting on his behalf — that is to say, during my lifetime — one half of the income arising from the property, and to leave Mrs. Dene in undisturbed possession of Dene Hall, with an allowance of a thousand a year, in addition to her settlement. Her lawyers will put the matter into proper shape. That is my proposal.”

“And a very noble and generous proposal,” exclaimed Pomeroy, warmly; “all the more so as your brother’s portion would otherwise be very inadequate, and his mother has by no means a large settlement. Do you understand, Mrs. Dene? Mr. Dene will convey to your son an entire moiety of the rental of the estate and make you, further, an allowance of a thousand a year. He deserves our heartiest thanks.”

“And I do thank him,” said Mrs. Dene, rising from her chair and offering Robin her hand. “I have thought ill of you and spoken ill of you, for until to-day I would not — could not believe that your claim was genuine. But now I ask your forgiveness and tender you my thanks, my warmest thanks, for this great generosity. It would have been better for us all if my husband had been more frank with me. He meant to be kind, I dare say, but it was very mistaken kindness. However, that is all past, and I trust that for the future we shall be good friends.”

She spoke fairly and her manner was not ungracious, yet Robin fancied that if she had spoken all her mind she would have said that, though she preferred half a loaf to no bread, she still considered

[372]

that her son was morally entitled to the entire loaf, and the imputation of blame to his father grated on his feelings.

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

But, as Robin wanted peace and could afford to be generous, he took her hand and assured her that, so far as it depended on him, their re-cemented friendship should never be broken again.

“You are good enough to say, Mr. Dene,” observed Mr. Pomeroy — “you are good enough to say, that you will leave Mrs. Dene and your brother in undisturbed possession of Dene Hall. It is very kind of you, I am sure, but where, then, may I ask, if it be not an impertinent question, do you intend to reside yourself? I think I heard a whisper that — ahem! that there was some likelihood of your leading a certain fair lady to the hymeneal altar?”

“Yes. I think it is very likely that I shall be married before very long — and, as for a house, I intend to fit up the Old Hall (an ancient moated mansion, about a mile from Oaken Cleugh, latterly used as a farm-house) and live there. The situation is very convenient — near the factory, I mean — and I prefer the active life of a manufacturer to the more tranquil existence of a country gentleman. The new mill which Mr. Robert Ruberry is building will be much larger than the old one, and, though he will retain an interest in the business and give me the benefit of his advice, I shall be the principal partner and sole manager. I like having to do with machinery and work-people. I don’t think I could find a more congenial occupation, and I cannot be idle.”

“And Mr. Ruberry?”

“He will retire from business and devote himself to country pursuits. And now, what do you say to celebrating the settlement of our differences in the way customary with Englishmen? Will you all honor me with your company at dinner this evening?”

On this all present declared that nothing would give them greater pleasure.

Robin wanted to include in the party all the witnesses without exception, both gentle and simple, but Romford asked to be excused.

“You are very kind, Mr. Dene; but, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rayther not”

“Why?”

“Well, to begin with, I have not a wedding garment; and I don’t think as Mrs. Dene and them lawyers and trustees would like to sit down wi’ a radical weyver; and, what is more, I wouldn’t like to sit down with them. They’re rank old Tories, every one on ’em. But I’ll tell you what we’ll do, if you like. Mr. Slow and

[373]

me and two or three more on us will dine at your expense at the Shoulder o' Mutton —”

“But Slow will dine with us!”

“Not for choice. He says as he prefers the society of the free and easy to the company of the polished and polite. I've yerd, too, as he sings a good song; and, as I can do a bit i' that line mysel', we shall have a fine time on't — better than you! I don't think as Giles and Tilbury could sing a song between 'em to save their souls, and you mut as well try to make a sucking pig whistle th' Doxology as get music out o' them leather-faced old lawyers. It will be a deal comfortabler for everybody. What sayen yo'?”

“As I want everybody to be comfortable, I say yes!”

“That's aw reynt then, and we shall not forget to drink your health and wish you and her much happiness.”

Shortly before the dinner hour Mr. Chubb drew Robin aside.

“I shall have to leave to-night on my way south,” he said, “and, as I may not have another opportunity of speaking to you, I would like your instructions about this money I'm to have next week from Weevil.”

“You think the old villain will pay up?”

“I am sure; because if he doesn't he will be sold up first and locked up afterwards, and he knows a good deal better than that.”

“Three thousand four hundred, I think you said, was the amount.”

“As nearly as possible, of which five hundred will go to Solomon Slow; and then there are the smaller legacies and expenses.”

“Of course. Well, you may remit me the balance in a draft on some Manchester banker. But I shall not spend the money on myself. I mean to devote it to a purpose of which, I am sure, our dear old friend Bartlett would highly approve.”

“And what is that, pray?”

“The building and endowment of a free school and library at Birch Dene.”

“You are quite right. The money could not be more usefully applied. To combat ignorance is to combat vice. Your career, so far, has been a very remarkable

The Salamanca Corpus: *Birchdene* (1889)

one, Mr. Dene; but we may almost say, I think, that the story of it ends with to-day's *dénoûement*."

"The first part of it, Mr. Chubb," answered Robin, gravely. "My life as a waif ends with this trial; but the second part — my life and work as a man — begins only from to-day."