The Prison Wall

By

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THE PRISON WALL

Seven years have passed, and the curtain rises upon a high gloomy stone wall. Grouped about the pavement which skirts the wall are nearly a score of persons, waiting in a state of painful expectancy. They are waiting for friends and relatives; and this gloomy stone wall encloses a prison.

Although it is broad day, the aspect of the scene is inexpressibly depressing. It is September; but the treacherous month has crept upon November, and stolen one of its cheerless days, when dull sky and dull atmosphere conspire to send the spirits down to zero. Not that these unhappy mortals require any outward influence to render them miserable; their countenances and attitude show that clearly enough. There are among them young women, almost children, and they stand about the prison with pale faces and clasped hands, with eyes cast down to the earth. They exchange but few words; they have sufficient special occupation in their thoughts to render them indisposed for conversation. They are poorly clad, and some of them shiver as the damp wind steals round the massive wall which shuts out hope.

Near to the prison door are a young and an old woman--one seventeen years of age on her last birthday, the other seventy. The young woman has no covering on her head; the old woman wears an ancient bonnet, which was the fashion once upon a time. Her little wrinkled face is almost hidden in the bonnet, and her ancient cotton dress falls in such straight lines about her, that, but for the pale wrinkled face and the shrivelled hands that peep from out the folds of a faded shawl, it might reasonably have been supposed it covers the limbs of a child. The bonnet has moved several times in the direction of the girl-woman, as if its owner were curious about her companion; but the girl takes no notice. At length, a piping voice asks, 'Are you waiting for some one, my dear?'

The girl answers 'Yes,' but does not look at the questioner.

'Who for, my dear?'

No answer.

'You needn't mind me,' pipes the old woman; 'I don't mean any harm; and it does my old heart good to talk. Perhaps you've got a mother of your own.'

'Mother!' echoes the girl, somewhat bitterly, and yet with a certain plaintiveness. 'No, I've got no mother; I never 'ad one as I knows of.'

'Poor dear, poor dear! Come, my dear, talk kindly to an old woman who might be your grandmother. Ay, I might, my dear. I'm seventy-one come the th of November, and I'm waiting for my daughter. You've got a long time before you, my dear, before you come to my age.'

'Seventy-one!' exclaims the girl, 'I shall never be seventy-one. I shouldn't like to be. What's your daughter in for? How old is she? She must be older than me.'

'She's thirty, my dear, and she's in for begging. What's yours in for?'

'My what in for?' sharply and sullenly.

'Your friend. You needn't be so sharp with an old woman like me. You may be a mother yourself one day, poor dear!'

The girl turns with a gasp--it may be of joy or pain--and takes the old woman's hand and begs her pardon.

Her friend is in for worse than beggin', the girl says, and relapses into silence, retaining the old woman's hand in hers, however, for a little while.

Many persons pass this way and that, but few bestow a second glance upon the group; and even if pity enters the heart of one and another, it does not take practical shape, and in its passive aspect it is, as is well known, but cold charity. One man, however, lingers in passing, walks a few steps, and hesitates. He has caught a glimpse of a face that he recognises, and it is evident that he is distressed by it. He turns boldly, and pauses before the forms of the old woman and the girl.

'Blade-o'-Grass!' he exclaims.

She raises her head, and looks him in the face. No shame, no fear, no consciousness of degradation, is in her gaze. She drops him a curtsey, and turns her face towards the prison doors.

Girl as she is, she is a woman, and well-looking. Her dress is of the poorest, and she is not too tidy; but the grace of youth is upon her. It is not upon all who are brought up as she has been. But she has this charm, and good looks as well; and she is grateful for them, for she likes to be called pretty. Remember that, at that momentous period in the life of Blade-o'-Grass when her future hung on a chance, Mrs. Manning 'kept the prettiest one, the one with the dimple.'

What is it that causes the gravest of expressions to pass into the countenance of Mr. Merrywhistle as Blade-o'-Grass looks up? He does not say; but the grave expression remains upon his face during the interview. He has not seen her since the spring. Somehow or other, he lost sight of her. Years ago, when Tom Beadle 'set her up' as a flower-girl, he had a strong inclination to do some substantial good for her--to remove her from the associations by which she was surrounded, and which dragged her down to the lowest level. But, in the first place, he could ill afford it; and, in the second, when he had spoken of his wish to Jimmy Virtue, that worthy had asked him if he thought he could take all the world's work upon his one pair of shoulders. 'And after all,' Jimmy Virtue had said, 'isn't the gal gettin' a honest livin'?'

The old woman peers into Mr. Merrywhistle's face, and as her ancient bonnet goes up in the air, it seems capacious enough to bury her whole body in. Mr. Merrywhistle gives her a kind look, and addresses himself to Blade-o'-Grass.

'This is not a fit place for you--' he is about to add, 'my poor child,' but her womanly appearance checks him.

'Ain't it?' she replies, with a smile on her lips that is not pleasant to see. 'What is then?'

He is surprised at her reckless manner. 'Have you business here? Are you waiting for any one?

'Yes.'

'For whom?'

'Ah, that's what I asked her,' pipes the old woman; 'but she wouldn't tell me.'

'I'm waitin' for Tom,' she says, answering him.

'Tom Beadle?'

'Yes, Tom Beadle.'

'Is he in prison, then?' he asks, very gently.

'Yes; he's been doin' a month.'

'What for?'

'What does it matter? Priggin'--anythin'.'

Perceiving that Blade-o'-Grass does not wish to pursue the conversation, Mr. Merrywhistle steps aside, sad at heart; but lingers, looking pityingly at Blade-o'-Grass. As he does so, a clock strikes the hour, and the eyes of the expectant group turn eagerly to the prison door, which presently opens. Six or seven persons walk out. The women blink their eyes as they come into the light; the men shake themselves like dogs; some raise their hands to their brows, and look about them as Gulliver might have done when he found himself in a strange land. The little old woman hastens to her daughter, a patient-looking woman, and for a moment two faces are hidden in the ancient bonnet. One man, who has seven or eight friends waiting for him, shakes his fist at the prison, and kicks the stone wall savagely.

'That's how I'd like to serve the guvner of that there cussed hole!' he exclaims. 'Give me something to drink, or I shall choke!'

Another man looks around with a vacant stare: there is no one to meet him. With something like a sigh his head sinks into his shoulders, and he slinks away, hugging the wall as he goes.

The last to come out is Tom Beadle. Blade-o'-Grass is by his side in an instant.

'Come along, Tom,' she says, clinging fondly to his arm, and pulling his face down to hers and kissing it; 'I've got something nice to eat at home.'

'You're a good sort, Bladergrass,' says the thief. 'Let's get away from this place quick, and go home.'

Home! Yes, to Stoney-alley, not twenty yards from where her mother had died. A room in an attic, which had been thoroughly cleaned and made tidy for the return of the prodigal. No furniture to speak of; a fire, and a saucepan on the hob; a mug of beer, a flat bottle with gin in it; one chair and a stool, and a table; a bed in the corner.

Tom surveys the room with satisfaction beaming in his eyes. Blade-o'-Grass looks at him, and joy breaks like sunlight over her face because he is pleased.

'Drink some beer, Tom.'

He takes a deep draught, puts the jug down, heaves a long breath, and repeats,

'You're a real good sort, Bladergrass. Give us another kiss, old gal!'

ONE OF MANY HAPPY NIGHTS.

But that the gray streaks are thickening in Mrs. Silver's hair, and that her husband is fast growing bald, it might have been but yesterday that we were sitting with them in the cosy parlour in Buttercup-square. Everything inanimate is the same as it was seven years ago, and does not appear to have grown any older or shabbier; the very cuckoo in the clock retains its youth, and its tones, as it asserts itself to be the great 'I am,' are as fresh as ever they were. Hark! it is speaking now, and 'Cuck-oo!' issues six times from its throat, sparklingly, as if defying time. It is six o'clock. The days are drawing in, and it is dark enough for lights. But Mr. and Mrs. Silver sit in the dusk before the fire, talking of the matters nearest to their hearts. Their married life has been a happy one--with clouds in it, of course. Natural griefs and sorrows have come to them, as to others. At first a storm threatened their future, but it did not burst over them. The exercise of kindly impulse; the wise and good desire to accept the inevitable, and to make the loneliness of their lives a means of happiness to others; their dependence on one another, and mutual love and faith; their recognition, in their every action, of higher duties of life than are generally acknowledged in practice,--turned the storm to sunshine, brought happiness to them. If they were to die now, they would be blessed with the happy assurance that their lives had been productive of good to others. So might we all live; so should we all live. The world would be the better for it. No man or woman is unblessed with the want of continual opportunity for doing good or being kind.

'Christmas will very soon be here once more,' says Mr. Silver.

'We'll have a merry gathering,' Mrs. Silver answers. 'There will be changes before the next comes round.'

'Yes; our little children are men and women now.'

'Good men and women, thank God!'

'Wife,' he says, 'I have thought many times of your words when I brought little Charley home twenty-three years ago. The child was lying in your lap, and you said, "Perhaps this is the reason why God has given us no children."'

She looks at him with a tender light in her eyes. Between these two love does not show itself in words, but in ministering to each other unselfishly.

'They have been a blessing to us, dear,' she says. 'Our household will be smaller presently. Charley and Ruth, I think, are fond of each other. He brings her home now every night.'

'What did Charley earn last week?

'Thirty-eight shillings.'

'Is that sufficient to marry on?'

'Quite sufficient, and to spare; and Charley has money put by to start with. They must live near us. Charley would like to, I know, and Ruth too; but it will be time enough to talk of these things by and by.'

'Carry your mind ten years on, my dear.'

'Well, I do so.'

'What do you see?'

'If we live?'

'If we live.'

She muses a little, looking into the fire.

'Ourselves old people; Charley and Ruth happily married, with children of their own; Mary married also, although her prince is not yet come, and is a stranger to us. Richard will go abroad: I can tell, by his reading and conversation, that his heart is set upon it. And Rachel--poor Rachel!--stopping sometimes with us, and sometimes--nearly always indeed--with Ruth and Charley. I can see myself with hair perfectly white, and you with only a fringe of white hair round your head.'

He laughs softly and pleasantly, and caresses her hand.

'I can see nothing but happiness, dear.'

They sit quietly before the fire, and the darkness grows deeper. The door opens, and Mr. Merrywhistle enters softly.

'Don't stir,' he says; 'and don't light the gas. I was told you were here, and I know how fond you are of sitting in the dark.'

It was indeed a favourite habit with them when they were alone. He sits by them in silence; for a minute or two no word is spoken. Then Mrs. Silver places her hand lightly on his shoulder.

'I understand, I understand,' he says; 'you are waiting for me to speak. You always know when I am in trouble.'

'How can I help knowing? Your face I cannot see, but I hear your heart in your voice.'

'Tell me: is it a good thing to make other persons' troubles ours?'

'What is sympathy for?' she answers in return.

'I have spoken to you now and again of a child--a girl--whom I have seen occasionally----

'The flower-girl?'

'Yes, the flower-girl; the girl whom I met for the first time in the company of a boy who deceived me--a boy who told me the most unblushing l---- stories, and who yet had some humanity in him.'

'That is many years ago. The girl must be almost a woman now.'

'She is a woman, God help her!--more woman than her years warrant I should think she is about the same age as Ruth. And it comes upon me again, that fancy, when I speak of Ruth and think of this poor girl.'

'Yes; you have told us there is a singular likeness between them.'

'It is striking--wonderfully striking. But there can be nothing in it; for Ruth, you have said, was the only child of a poor woman who died a fortnight after the little thing was born.'

'Yes, my friend.'

'So that it is pure accident; but the fancy remains, for all that I shall never forget the sad story that this poor Blade-o'-Grass told me of the tiger that worried her, and clamoured for food. It was hunger, my dear friends, hunger. I shall never forget her notion that

Hallelujah came to her while she was asleep, and put baked potatoes in her lap. I shall never forget my pleasure when I first saw her with a basket of flowers, and bought a flower of her. But I have told you of these things before, and here I am babbling of them again, like an old man that has lost his wits.'

'Never mind, friend; go on.'

'I saw poor Blade-o'-Grass this morning. I haven't seen her for many months. I had occasion to pass by a certain prison early, and I saw her, with a dozen others, waiting outside. She was waiting for this boy that was--this man and thief that is. I lingered until the prison doors were opened, and let him and others out. And when he came'--there were tears in the old man's voice as he spoke--'and when he came, this unhappy girl kissed him and clung to him as with less shame she might have kissed and clung to a better man, had she been taught something good when she was younger.'

'My dear, dear friend!' says Mrs. Silver, taking his hand in hers.

'I cannot tell you what I feared as I saw her, and spoke to her before the prison doors were opened. Poor Blade-o'-Grass! poor child! Nay, let me have my way.'

And this good old man, whose heart is as tender as that of a good woman, sheds tears and trembles; if a daughter's happiness had been at stake, he could not have been more moved. Wisely, Mr. and Mrs. Silver do not disturb him, but talk together of other subjects until Mr. Merrywhistle exclaims, with something of his usual cheerfulness, 'What on earth are we sitting in the dark for?' Whereat Mr. Silver smiles, and lights the gas. As if the light is the means of suddenly waking up the cuckoo from a nap, it immediately proclaims seven o'clock, and in another hour the whole of Mrs. Silver's family are assembled in the parlour. Rachel, the blind girl, has no outdoor occupation, but all the others have. Charley, as you know, is a printer, and, being out of his time, is earning good wages; Richard is a watchmaker, still an apprentice, and making famous progress; and Mary and Ruth are both of them in the postal telegraph office. For it has been part of Mrs. Silver's plan to give her family the opportunity of making their way in the world, and boys and girls have been taught that to work is one of the chief duties and one of the best blessings of life. Charley and Ruth come in together. He has grown quite a man since we last saw him, and Ruth, Blade-o'-Grass's sister, is as bright and cheerful-looking a lass as one can meet. She is particularly bright just now, and looks particularly happy, for she and Charley have had a brisk walk; her cheeks are glowing healthfully, and there is a bright sparkle in her eyes. Then questions are asked and answered. The events of the day are narrated, and it is wonderful what interest is manifested in these trifles. Every few minutes the comfortable parlour in Buttercup-square is filled with merry laughter.

'Come, come, children,' says Mr. Silver, after nearly an hour has been spent in this manner; 'are we to have any reading to-night?'

The books are instantly brought forward, and the youngsters are busy turning over the leaves. When last we were in their company they were deep in the beautiful story of Paul and Virginia. Since then, they have had rare nights with their favourite authors, and have laughed and cried, as hundreds of thousands of others have done, over the sayings and doings of the men and women and children who play their parts in the s of Thackeray and Scott and Dickens and Jerrold, and authors of long ago. It is not a novel that engages their attention now; this is one of their 'play' nights, when scenes from Shakespeare are read. When the rustling of the leaves has ceased, they all with one accord turn to Rachel, the blind girl. She knows they are looking at her, and her face flushes as she says, 'Yes, I am ready.' Then says Richard, in a deep bass voice, laying his finger on the first line of the fourth act of The Merchant of Venice, 'What, is Antonio here?' And Charley forthwith answers, 'Ready, so please your grace;' and the play commences. They all take parts, with the exception of Mr. Merrywhistle, who is the audience, and who applauds as if the house is packed, and there is not standing room for one. Mr. Silver takes Shylock (the villain's part generally falls to his share), and Ruth reads the few lines that Nerissa has to say. But the great wonder of the reading takes place when Richard, as the Duke, says,

'You hear the learned Bellario, what he writes:
And here, I take it, is the doctor come.'
Up rises Rachel, the blind girl.
'Give me your hand. Come you from old Bellario?'

And Rachel bows, and answers, in a gentle voice, 'I did, my lord.' The scene proceeds, and Rachel speaks Portia's lines with grace and power, and does not falter at a word. How they all praise her and cluster round her when the act is finished, and the books are closed!

But this is only one of very many such nights passed in that happy home in Buttercup-square.

FACE TO FACE--SO LIKE, YET SO UNLIKE.

On the following Saturday, Ruth and Charley had a holiday, which, with the sanction of their kind guardians, they intended to spend at the International Exhibition. The holiday had been planned a month before its arrival, and had indeed been the occasion of an innocent conspiracy between Ruth and Rachel and Charley, and of much mysterious conversation. Rachel was to accompany them. The day, which had been looked forward to with such rapturous anticipation as only the young can experience and enjoy, at length arrived. In a very flutter of delight, the two girls and their hero--for Charley was Rachel's hero as well as Ruth's--bade Mrs. Silver good-morning, and went out into the streets with joy in their hearts. Very tender were they to each other, and very tender were Ruth and Charley to their blind companion. No words of love had passed between Ruth and Charley, although their attachment was known to their kind guardians, as you have read. But, indeed, no words were required; their looks, their almost unconsciously-exercised tenderness towards one another, were sufficient confirmation of mutual affection. These two young persons were enjoying the purest, happiest dream that life contains. May all the grown-up people who read these s have enjoyed such a pure and happy dream! May all others live to enjoy it!

Ruth and Charley, of course, with the usual blindness of lovers, believed that no one noticed anything particular in their behaviour; but in this respect they were as blind as Rachel--more so indeed, if there be degrees in blindness, for even she guessed their secret In the course of their rambles through the Exhibition, she sat down and asked to be left alone for a while, and when Ruth and Charley demurred, insisted, with a pretty and affectionate wilfulness, on having her own way.

'And don't hurry,' she said, turning her face to them and smiling sweetly. 'You will find me here when you come back. I am tired, and want a long, long rest.'

And there the blind girl sat, seeing nothing, enjoying everything, while unsuspecting Ruth and Charley wandered away into fairyland, arm in arm. Soft strains of music came to Rachel's ears, and she listened and drank them in, with clasped hands and head inclined, She was as one inspired; visions of beauty passed before her, and the melodious notes were imbued with palpable loveliness for her. Many a passer-by paused to look at her beautiful face, and felt the better for it, and a great lady came and sat down beside her. When the music ceased, the lady said, 'My dear, are you here alone?'

'O no,' replied Rachel, 'I have friends; I asked them to let me sit by myself. I wanted to listen to the music. They will come for me presently.'

'You love music?'

'Who can help loving it? I can see it'

The lady's voice was soft and sweet, and Rachel felt goodness in her manner. 'Tell me,' she said, 'what is before me.'

They were sitting opposite a piece of sculpture--a perfect work--and the lady described it, and described it well, and told the story that it illustrated.

'Ah,' sighed the blind girl, 'it is beautiful!'

The lady was accompanied by her husband and child.

'Is this your little daughter?' asked Rachel.

'My dear,' exclaimed the lady, 'I thought--thought----'

'That I was quite blind,' said Rachel, smiling. 'So I am. But see--your little girl's hand is in mine.'

And indeed the child, who was standing by her mother's side, had placed her hand in Rachel's, beneath the folds of the blind girl's shawl.

'And without that I think I could tell,' added Rachel.

'Yes, my dear, it is my little girl,' said the lady.

Rachel stooped and kissed the child, whose hand stole round Rachel's neck, and caressed it. Lips purer and more innocent had never met. So they sat, talking for a little while longer, until Rachel raised her face, and smiled a happy greeting to Ruth and Charley, who were standing before her. The lady and the child bade good-bye to Rachel, and kissed her; and when they met again, an hour afterwards, the child gave Rachel a flower.

Like the incense of a breeze that has been wandering among sweet-smelling plants; like the soft plash of water on a drowsy day; like the singing of birds, are such small circumstances as these. Thank God for them!

And what had Ruth and Charley been doing? Dreaming--nothing more--walking almost in silence among the busy eager bustling crowd, standing before works of beauty, and enjoying. Everything was beautiful in their eyes. Perfect harmony encompassed them; the commonest things were idealised; their souls were filled with a sense of worship.

How quickly the hours passed! It seemed to them that they had been in the place but a few minutes, and it was already time for them to go. They left with many a sigh, and many a parting glance at the wonders which lined the spaces through which they walked. Ruth's hand was clasped in Charley's beneath her mantle, and a tender light was in her eyes as they made their way through the restless throng. It was still light when the omnibus put them down within a mile of Buttercup-square. The tramway carriage would have carried them to the avenue that led to Buttercup-square; but both Ruth and Rachel expressed a desire to walk, wishful perhaps to prolong the happy time. Charley, nothing loth, gave an arm to each of the girls, and they walked slowly onwards, Rachel being nearest to the wall. They were passing a man and a girl, who were talking together. The girl had just uttered some words to the man, who was leaving her, when Rachel cried suddenly in a voice of alarm,

'Ruth, was it you who spoke?'

Her face was deadly pale, and her limbs were trembling.

'No, Rachel,' answered Ruth, surprised at the blind girl's agitation.

As she replied, both she and Charley turned, and saw Blade-o'-Grass. Thus, for the first time since their infancy, the sisters looked each other in the face. Each saw, instantaneously, such a resemblance to herself, that they leant towards each other in sudden bewilderment Their gaze lasted scarcely as long as one might count three, for Charley hurried Ruth and Rachel on; he also had seen with amazement the likeness that Blade-o'-Grass bore to Ruth, and that there should be any resemblance to his treasure in such a forlorn disreputable--looking creature as Blade-o'-Grass, smote him with a sense of pain. Ruth walked along, dazed; but before they had gone a dozen yards she stopped, and pressed her hand to her heart.

'Ruth! dear Ruth!' exclaimed Charley, placing his arm round her, for indeed she was almost falling. She released herself, and said in a faint voice:

'Rachel, why did you ask if it was I who spoke?'

'The tone was so exactly like yours, Ruth,' answered Rachel, 'that the words slipped out from me unaware. Who was it that spoke?'

'It must have been a poor girl whom we have just passed.'

'What is she like?' Ruth's lips trembled, but she did not answer the question.

'Why must the words have slipped from you unaware, Rachel?'

'Because, if I had considered an instant, I should not have asked. You could not have said such a thing.'

'What thing?--Nay, Charley, don't interrupt me,' said Ruth, in such an imploring tone, that he was mute from fear, for Ruth's eyes were filled with tears, and her face was very pale. 'What thing, Rachel?'

'Just, then,' answered Rachel slowly and solemnly, 'a voice said, "For God's sake, Tom, bring home some money, for there's not a bit of bread in the cupboard!"'

'Charley!' cried Ruth hurriedly, 'stand here with Rachel for a few moments. Don't follow me; let me go alone.'

She was his queen, and he obeyed her; but his apprehensive looks followed her, although he did not stir from the spot Ruth hastened to where Blade-o'-Grass was standing. The poor outcast was very wan and wretched. Ruth knew part of her own history; for Mrs. Silver, when her adopted children arrived at a proper age, had told them, gently, as much of the story of their lives as she deemed it right and necessary for them to know. The hours in which she unfolded their stories to her children were quiet and solemn; there was no one present but she and her adopted one; and she told them their history so gently and with such sweet words of love, that they were never unhappy when they learnt the truth. Ruth therefore knew that she was an orphan; and she, in common with the others, had shed many grateful tears, and had offered up many grateful prayers, for the merciful heart that had made life a blessing to her. As she stood before her sister, so like, yet so unlike--her sister never to be recognised, or acknowledged as of her blood--the thought came to her, 'But for my dear good mother I might have been like this--ragged, forlorn, hungry, with not a bit of bread in the cupboard!'

Blade-o'-Grass, whose wistful eyes had followed the strange likeness to herself, saw Ruth turn back, and dropped a curtsey as her sister in her warm soft dress stood before her.

Then said Ruth timidly, 'It was you who said that?' She herself might have been the suppliant, her voice and manner were so quiet and humble.

'Said what, miss?'

'That you hadn't a bit of bread in the cupboard.'

'It's true, miss, and to-morrow's Sunday.'

Ruth thought of what a happy day the Sabbath was to her and hers in Buttercup-square, the goodness of it, the peacefulness of it! And this forlorn girl before her, the sight of whom had so strangely unnerved her, had only one thought of that happy Sabbath to-morrow--whether she would be able to get bread to eat. Tears choked her voice as she asked, 'Will you tell me your name?'

'Blade-o'-Grass, miss.'

Ruth looked up in surprise. 'Is that your real name?'

'Yes, miss, I ain't got no other.' Ruth's hand had been in her pocket from the first, with her purse in it; but she could scarcely muster sufficient courage to give. She judged poor Blade-o'-Grass with the eyes of her own sensitive soul, and felt that if money were offered to her, she would sink to the earth in shame.

'Will you pardon me,' she said hesitatingly, the hot blood flushing her neck and face; 'will you pardon me if I offer you--if I beg of you to--to----'

The hand of Blade-o'-Grass was held out eagerly, imploringly, and Ruth emptied her purse into it. Blade-o'-Grass wondered at the munificence of the gift, and the modesty with which it was given, and her fingers closed greedily on the silver coins.

'God Almighty bless you, miss!' she exclaimed, taking Ruth's hand and kissing it 'God Almighty bless you!' The tears were streaming down both their faces. A warm hand pressure, a last grateful look from Blade-o'-Grass, and the sisters parted.

'O, Charley! Charley!' sobbed Ruth, as she clasped his arm, 'I might have been like that!' They walked in silence to their home, and Ruth whispered to her companions not to say

anything to their kind guardians of what had taken place. 'It might make them sad,' she said.

It was dusk when they went indoors. Rachel went to her room first, and Ruth and Charley lingered in the passage.

'Ruth!' he whispered.

She laid her head upon his breast with the confidence and innocence of a child. He stooped and kissed her cheek, still wet with her tears. She clung to him more closely--hid her face in his neck. A wondering happiness took possession of them.

ROBERT TRUEFIT ALLOWS HIS FEELINGS TO MASTER HIM.

The chance acquaintanceship which had so strangely sprung up seven years ago between Mr. Merrywhistle, Robert Truefit, and Jimmy Virtue had ripened into intimacy, and it was not unusual for the three to meet in the old man's leaving-shop in Stoney-alley. The shop and the stock were, on the whole, less fragrant than on the occasion of Mr. Merrywhistle's first introduction to them. An additional seven years' mouldiness lay heavy on the shelves; but familiarity had rendered the musty vapour less objectionable to the benevolent gentleman. There was no perceptible change of importance in Jimmy Virtue; his skin certainly had got tougher and dryer and yellower, but otherwise he did not seem to be a day older. His eyebrows were as precipitous, and his glass eye as mild, and his fierce eye as fierce, as ever they were. No perceptible change either was to be observed in the articles which filled his shop: the same faded dresses and dirty petticoats were crammed into inconvenient corners; the same crinolines loomed from unlikely places; the same old boots hung from the ceiling; and doubtless the same vanities of vanities were enclosed in the box which served as a resting-place in Jimmy Virtue's parlour.

It was a dull, miserable November night. A thick fog had lain upon Stoney-alley during the day, necessitating the use of candles and gas; towards the evening the fog had cleared away, and a dismal rain had set in; Stoney-alley and its neighbouring courts and lanes were overlaid with dirty puddles. It was by a strange chance, therefore, that Mr. Merrywhistle and Robert Truefit found themselves in Jimmy Virtue's parlour on this evening; they said as much to each other. Each of them had some special business which brought them in Jimmy's neighbourhood, and he expressed his pleasure when he saw them. They were the only living friends he had; other friends he had, but they were not human; notwithstanding which some hours would have hung dreadfully upon Jimmy's hands, if he had been deprived of them. These friends were aces, deuces, knaves, and the like; in other words, a pack of cards. Very dirty, very greasy, very much thumbed and dog's-eared, but very useful. Jimmy spent comfortable hours with these friends. Sitting in his chair, he would place an imaginary opponent on the seat opposite to him, and would play blind All-Fours with his unreal foe for large sums of money. 'Jack' was the name of his opponent, and Jimmy often talked to him, and called him a fool for playing, and abused him generally for incapacity. For Jimmy nearly always won; and many and many a night Jack was dismissed a ruined and brokenhearted shadow, while Jimmy, after putting up his shutters, let down his turn-up bedstead, and went to bed a winner of hundreds, sometimes of thousands of pounds. For Jack's wealth was enormous; he never refused a bet, never declined 'double or quits.' So reckless a player was he--being egged on by Jimmy--that it was impossible he could have come by his money honestly. Be that as it may, his ill-gotten gains were swept into Jimmy's imaginary coffers, to the

old man's delight and satisfaction. It is a positive fact, that Jimmy had grown into a sort of belief in Jack's existence, and often imagined that he saw a shadowy opponent sitting opposite him. There was a very good reason why Jimmy so invariably won and Jack so invariably lost. Jimmy cheated. He often slipped into his own cards an ace or a knave that properly belonged to Jack. When Jimmy did this, his manner was as wary and cautious as though flesh and blood opposed him. It was a picture to see this old man playing All-Fours with Jack for ten pounds a game, or for 'double or quits,' and cheating his helpless adversary.

When Mr. Merrywhistle and Robert Truefit entered Jimmy's parlour--they had met at the door of the leaving-shop--he was playing greasy All-Fours with Jack, and had just scored a winning game. Robert Truefit always had something new to speak of: a trade-union outrage, a strike, a flagrant instance of justices' justice, a mass meeting and what was said thereat, and other subjects, of which a new crop springs up every day in a great country where tens of millions of people live and have to be legislated for. The late war, of course, was a fruitful theme with Robert Truefit, who spoke of it as an infamous outrage upon civilisation. Especially indignant was he at the sacrilege which lay in one king invoking 'the God of Battles,' and in the other praying to the Supreme to assist him in bringing desolation and misery to thousands of homes. But this is no place for the outpourings of Robert's indignation on those themes. From those lofty heights they came down, after a time, to Blade-o'-Grass. It was Mr. Merrywhistle who introduced her name. He asked Jimmy if he had seen her lately. No; Jimmy hadn't seen her for a month.

'You see,' said Jimmy, 'she's a woman now, and 'as been on 'er own 'ook this many a year. Besides which, once when I spoke to her she was sarcy, and cheeked me because I wanted to give 'er a bit of advice--good advice, too. But she was up in the stirrups then.'

'Has she ever been prosperous?' inquired Mr. Merrywhistle.

'Well, not what you would call prosperous, I daresay; but she's 'ad a shillin' to spare now and agin. And then, agin, she 'asn't, now and agin. She's 'ad her ups and downs like all the other gals about 'ere; you couldn't expect anythin' else, you know. And of course you've 'eerd that Tom Beadle and 'er----'

'Tom Beadle and her--what? asked Mr. Merrywhistle, as Jimmy paused.

'O, nothin',' replied Jimmy evasively; 'it's sich a common thing that it ain't worth mentionin'.'

'I saw her myself about six weeks ago,' said Mr. Merrywhistle; and he narrated how he had met Blade-o'-Crass outside the prison, and what had passed between them, and what he had seen. 'Tell me,' he said, 'is she married to Tom Beadle?'

Jimmy Virtue's eye of flesh expressed that Mr. Merrywhistle outrivalled Simple Simon in simplicity. 'I do believe,' thought Jimmy, 'that he gits greener and greener every time I see him.' Then he said aloud contemptuously, 'Married to Tom! As much as I am!'

Mr. Merrywhistle twisted his fingers nervously, and otherwise so comported himself as to show that he was grieved and pained.

'I wouldn't 'ave a 'art as soft as yours,' thought Jimmy, as Mr. Merrywhistle rested his head upon his hand sadly, 'and as green as yours--no, not for a 'atful of money.'

'Poor child! poor child!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle. 'I wish I could do something for her.'

'Too late,' said Jimmy shortly.

'Yes, too late, I'm afraid,' said Robert Truefit. 'Blade-o'-Grass is a woman now. Her ideas, her principles, her associations, are rooted. When she was a sapling, good might have been done for her, and she might have grown up straight. But she had no chance, poor thing! And Jimmy's tone and your fears point to something worse than hunger. You fear she is leading a bad life.'

'No, no!' interposed Mr. Merrywhistle earnestly; 'not that--indeed, not that. But I would give more than I could afford if I knew that she was married to Tom Beadle.'

'Thief as he is? questioned Robert Truefit.

'Thief as he is,' replied Mr. Merrywhistle.

His grief was contagious: Robert Truefit turned away, with a troubled look on his face; Jimmy Virtue preserved a stolid silence, as was his general habit on such occasions. 'What can one good man do?' presently said Robert Truefit, in a low tone; but his voice was singularly clear. 'What can a hundred good men do, each working singly, according to the impulse of his benevolent heart? I honour them for their deeds, and God forbid that I should harbour a wish to check them! Would that more money were as well spent, and that their numbers were increased a hundredfold! They do some good. But is it not cruel to know that Blade-o'-Grass is but one of thousands of human blades who are cursed, shunned, ignored, through no fault of theirs, and who, when circumstances push

them into the light, are crushed by System? If they were lepers, their condition would be better. And they might be so different! To themselves, and all around them. To the State; to society. In actual fact, and putting wordy sops in the pan out of the question, what do statesmen do for such poor places as these? Give them gin-shops and an extra number of police. No prompt effort made in the right direction; no clearing away of nest-holes where moral corruption and physical misery fester and ripen. Where legislation is most needed, it moves at a snail's pace. So wrapt up are statesmen in the slow hatching of grand schemes, that they cannot stoop to pour oil upon these festering social wounds. And what is the result? While they legislate, Blades-o'-Grass are springing up all around them, and living poisoned lives. And while they legislate, if there be truth in what preachers preach, souls are being damned by force of circumstance. What should be the aim of those who govern? So to govern as to produce the maximum of human happiness and comfort, and the minimum of human misery and vice. Not to the few--to the many, to all.' He paused, and turned to Mr. Merrywhistle. 'Seven years ago,' he continued, 'we talked of poor Blade-o'-Grass. I told you then--I remember it well--that England was full of such pictures as that hungry ignorant child, with the tiger in her stomach, presented. Seven years before that, it was the same. During that time Blade-o'-Grass has grown up from a baby to a woman. What a childhood must hers have been! I wonder if she ever had a toy! And see what she is now: a woman for whom you fear--what I guess, but will not say. What will she be--where will she be--in seven years from now? Seventy years is the fulness of our age. Carry Blade-o'-Grass onwards for seven years more, and find her an old woman long before she should have reached her prime. What has been done in the last seven years for such as she? What will be done in the next--and the next? There are thousands upon thousands of such babes and girls as she was seven years and twice seven years ago growing up as I speak; contamination is eating into their bones, corrupting their blood, poisoning their instincts for good. What shall be done for them in the next seven years? Pardon me,' he said, breaking off suddenly; 'I have let my feelings run ahead of me perhaps; but I'll stick to what I've said, nevertheless.'

With that he wished them goodnight, and took his leave. Mr. Merrywhistle soon followed him, first ascertaining from Jimmy Virtue the address of Blade-o'-Grass.

Jimmy, being left to his own resources, went to the door to see what sort of a night it was. The rain was still falling drearily. It was too miserable a night for him to take his usual pipe in the open air, and too miserable a night for him to expect to do any business in. So he put up his shutters, and retired to his parlour. Then he took out his greasy pack of cards, and conjured up Jack for a game of All-Fours. With his eye on his opponent, he

filled his pipe carefully, lighted it, puffed at it, and cut for deal. He won it, and the first thing he did after that was to turn up a knave (slipping it from the bottom of the pack) and score one. He was in a more than usually reckless and cheating mood. He staked large sums, went double or quits, and double or quits again, and cheated unblushingly. He won a fortune of Jack in an hour; and then contemptuously growled, 'I'll try you at cribbage, old fellow,' The cribbage-board was his table, and he scored the game with a bit of chalk. Jack fared no better at cribbage than he had done at All-Fours. Jimmy had all the good cribs, Jack all the bad ones. By the time that the table was smeared all over with chalk figures, Jimmy was sleepy. He played one last game for an enormous stake, and having won it and ruined Jack, he went to bed contentedly, and slept the sleep of the just.

TOO LATE.

Mr. Merrywhistle had no very distinct plan in his mind when he left Jimmy Virtue's shop to visit Blade-o'-Grass. Sincerely commiserating her condition, he wished to put her in the way to get an honest and respectable living, but was deeply perplexed as to the method by which she was to arrive at this desirable consummation. Some small assistance in money he might manage to give her; but in what way could it be applied? by what means was she to be lifted out of that slough into which she had been allowed to sink? And then he feared that she was past training. As Robert Truefit had said, Blade-o'-Grass was a woman now, with a grown-up person's passions and desires firmly rooted in her nature. And he feared something else, also. But he would see her and speak to her freely; good might come of it.

The room she occupied was at the extreme end of Stoney-alley, and Mr. Merrywhistle was soon stumbling along dark passages and up flights of crippled stairs. When he reached the top of the house, as he thought, he tapped at a door, and receiving no answer, turned the handle, and entered. A very old woman, sitting before a very small fire, smiled and mumbled in reply to his questions; and he soon discovered that she was deaf and childish, and that he was in the wrong apartment. As he stumbled into the dark again, a woman, with a child in her' arms, came on to the landing with a candle in her hand, and showed Mr. Merrywhistle that there was still another flight of stairs to mount. Blade-o'-Grass lived up there, the woman said; first door on the right She didn't know if the girl was at home. And then she asked if he was a doctor. No, he answered, surprised at the question; he was not a doctor. The crazy stairs complained audibly as he trod them. He knocked at the first door on the right, and paused.

'You'd better go in, and see, sir,' called the woman from below; 'perhaps she's asleep.' Mr. Merrywhistle hesitated. What right, he thought, had he to intrude on the girl's privacy, and at this time of night? But the knowledge that he was there for no bad purpose made him bold, and he opened the door. A candle that was burning on the table threw a dim light around, but the corners of the miserible apartment were in shade. The woman was right in her conjecture: Blade-o'-Grass was in the room, asleep. She was lying on the ground, dressed, before a mockery of a fire; her head was resting on a stool, round which one arm was thrown. The faintly-flickering flames threw occasional gleams of light on the girl's face, over which, strange to say, a smile was playing, as if her dreams were pleasant ones. The benevolent old gentleman looked round upon the miserable apartment, and sighed. It was a shelter, nothing more--a shelter for want and destitution. Then he looked down upon the form of the sleeping girl, clothed in rags. Child-woman indeed she was. Her pretty face was thin and pale; but there was a happy expression upon it, and once her arm clasped the stool with fond motion, as if she were

pressing to her breast something that she loved. Yet, doubtless, there are many stern moralists, philanthropic theorists, and benevolent word-wasters, who would have looked coldly upon this sleeping child, and who--self-elected teachers as they are of what is good and moral--would only have seen in her and her surroundings a text for effervescent platitudes. But the school in which they learn their lessons is as cruel and harsh as the school in which Blade-o'-Grass learns hers is unwholesome and bitter.

Mr. Merrywhistle was debating with himself whether he should arouse her, when a slight motion on his part saved him the trouble of deciding. 'Is that you, Tom?' she asked softly, opening her eyes, and then, seeing a strange figure before her, scrambled to her feet.

'I have come to see you,' said Mr. Merrywhistle.

Although she curtseyed, she was scarcely awake yet. But presently she said, 'O, yes, sir; I arks yer pardon. It's Mr. Merrywhistle?

'Yes, child; may I sit down?'

She motioned him to the only chair the room contained. 'It's very late, ain't it?' she asked. And then anxiously, 'Is anythink up?'

Mr. Merrywhistle was sufficiently versed in vulgar vernacular to understand her meaning. No, he said, there was nothing the matter. She gave a sigh of relief as she said, 'I thought you might 'ave come to tell me somethin' bad.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'O, ever so long.'

'Alone?' he asked, after a slight pause.

But to this question she made no reply.

'Times are hard with you, are they not, my child?' he said, approaching his subject.

'Very 'ard,' she answered, with a weary shake of the head.

'Have you given up selling flowers?'

''Tain't the season for flowers,' she answered; 'wilets won't be in for three months.'

He felt the difficulty of the task he had set himself. 'How do you live when there are no flowers?'

'Any'ow; sometimes I sells matches; I can't tell you 'ow, and that's a fact.'

'But why don't you work?' he inquired, with a bold plunge.

'Work!' she exclaimed. 'What work? I don't know nothin'. But I've been arksed that lots of times. A peeler told me that once, and when I arksed him to get me some work that I could do, he only larfed.'

'Suppose now,' said Mr. Merrywhistle, 'that I were to take you away from this place, and put you somewhere where you could learn dressmaking or needlework.'

She gave him a grateful and surprised look. 'I don't think it'd answer, sir. I knows lots o' gals who tried to git a livin' by needlework, and couldn't do it. I knows some as set up till two o'clock in the mornin', and got up agin at eight, and then couldn't earn enough to git a shoe to their foot. And they couldn't always git work; they'd go for weeks and couldn't git a stitch.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Mr. Merrywhistle, who was as ignorant as a child in such matters. 'What did they do then?'

Blade-o'-Grass laughed recklessly. 'Do! what do you think? Beg, or----somethin' else.'

He was pained by her manner, and said, 'My poor child, I have only come here out of kindness, and to try if I could do some good for you.'

'I know, sir,' she said gratefully; 'you've always been kind to me as long as I can remember; I don't forget, sir. But there's some things I know more about nor you do, sir. A gal can't git a livin' by needlework--leastways, a good many of 'em can't. There was a woman livin' in the next room: she worked 'er fingers to the bone, and couldn't git enough to eat. Last winter was a reg'lar 'ard un; and then she lost her work, and couldn't git another shop. She took to beggin', and was 'ad up afore the beak. She was discharged with a caution, I 'eerd. It was a caution to her: she died o' starvation in that there room!'

Grieved and shocked, Mr. Merrywhistle was silent for a little while; but he brightened up presently. He was sincerely desirous to do some tangible good for Blade-o'-Grass. He thought of the situations held by Ruth and Mary in the Postal Telegraph Office. Suppose he was to take Blade-o'-Grass away from the contaminating influences by which she was

surrounded; give her decent clothes, and have her taught the system, so that she might be an eligible candidate. He could set some influence at work; Mr. Silver would do his best, and there were others also whom he could induce to interest themselves. He felt quite hopeful as he thought. He mooted the idea to Blade-o'-Grass. She listened in silence, and when she spoke, it was in a low voice, and with her face turned from him.

I've see'd them gals, and I'd like to be one of 'em; but----'

'But what, Blade-o'-Grass?' he asked kindly, almost tenderly; for there was a plaintiveness in her voice that deeply affected him.

'They must be able to read, mustn't they?'

'O, yes; they would be useless without that.'

'And they must be able to write, too. Where do you think I learnt to read and write? I don't know one letter from another.'

Here was another difficulty, and a gigantic one; but it seemed as if each fresh obstacle only served to expand Mr. Merrywhistle's benevolent heart.

'Why, then,' he said cheerfully, 'suppose we teach you to read and write. You'd learn quickly, I'll be bound.'

A sudden rush of tears came to her eyes, and she sat down on the floor, and sobbed, and rocked herself to and fro.

'It's too late!' she cried. 'Too late!'

Too late! The very words used by Robert Truefit They fell ominously on Mr. Merrywhistle's ears. He asked for an explanation; but he had to wait until the girl's grief was spent, before he received an answer. She wiped her eyes in a manner that showed she was mad with herself for giving way to such emotion, and turned on her would-be benefactor almost defiantly.

'Look 'ere,' she said, in a hard cold voice, 'all them gals are what you call respectable, ain't they?'

'Yes, my child.'

'Don't call me your child; it 'urts me--O, it 'urts me!' She was almost on the point of giving way again; but she set her teeth close, and shook herself like an angry dog, and so checked the spasms that rose to her throat 'They must show that they're respectable, mustn't they, or they couldn't git the billet?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then, I ain't respectable, as you call it; 'ow can I be? A nice respectable gal I'd look, comin' out of a orfice! Why, they've got nice warm clothes, every one of 'em, and muffs and tippets, and all that I've see'd 'em, lots of times.'

'But you can leave your past life behind you,' urged Mr. Merrywhistle, overleaping all obstacles; 'you can commence another life, and be like them.'

'Be like them! I can't be. It's too late, I tell you. And I'll tell you somethin' more,' she added, slowly and very distinctly: 'I wouldn't leave Tom Beadle to be the best-dressed gal among 'em.'

'Why?'

'Why!' she echoed, looking into his face with wonder. 'Why! Tom Beadle's been the best friend I ever 'ad. He's give me grub lots and lots o' times. When I was a little kid, and didn't know what was what; when the tiger was a-tearin' my very inside out; Tom Beadle's come and took pity on me. No one else but 'im did take it. I should 'ave starved a 'undred times, if it 'adn't been for Tom. Why, it was 'im as set me up for a flower-gal, and 'im as took me to the theaytre, and 'im as told me I should lick Poll Buttons into fits. And so I did, when I 'ad a nice dress on; they all said so. And there's another reason, if you'd care to know. No, I won't tell you. If you arks about 'ere, I daresay you can find out, and if you wait a little while, you'll find out for yourself. She stood up boldly before him, and said in a low passionate voice, 'I love Tom, and Tom loves me! I wouldn't leave 'im for all the world. I'll stick to 'im and be true to 'im till I die.'

Here was an end to Mr. Merrywhistle's benevolent intentions; he had nothing more to urge. The difficulties Blade-o'-Grass herself had put in the way seemed to him to render her social redemption almost impossible. Blade-o'-Grass saw trouble in his face, and said, as if he were the one who required pity:

'Don't take on, sir; it can't be 'elped. Next to Tom, no one's been so good to me as you've been. Perhaps I don't understand things as you would like me to understand 'em. But I can't 'elp it, sir.'

Mr. Merrywhistle rose to go. He took out his purse, and was about to offer Blade-o'-Grass money, when she said, in an imploring tone:

'No, sir, not to-night; it'll do me more good, if you don't give me nothin' to-night I shall be sorry to myself afterwards, if I take it. And don't believe, sir, that I ain't grateful! Don't believe it!'

'I won't, my poor girl,' said Mr. Merrywhistle huskily, putting his purse in his pocket. 'I am sorry for all this. But, at all events, you can promise me that if you want a friend, you'll come to me. You know where I live.'

'Yes, sir; and I'll promise you. When I don't know which way to turn, I'll come to you.'

He held out his hand, and she kissed it; and went down-stairs with him with the candle, to show him the way. He walked home with a very heavy feeling at his heart. 'There's something wrong somewhere,' was his refrain. He was conscious that a great social problem was before him, but he could find no solution for it. Indeed, it could not be expected of him. He was ready enough (too ready, many said) with his sixpences and shillings when his heart was stirred, but he was not a politician.

When Blade-o'-Grass reëntered her cheerless room, she set the candle on the table, and began to cry. Her heart was very sore, and she was deeply moved at Mr. Merrywhistle's goodness. She started to her feet, however, when she heard the sounds of a well-known step on the stairs. Wiping her eyes hastily, she hurried into the passage with the candle. Tom Beadle smiled as he saw the light He was a blackguard and a thief, but he loved Blade-o'-Grass.

'I've got some trotters, old gal,' he said, when they were in their room, 'and 'arf-a-pint o' gin. Why, I'm blessed if you 'aven't been turnin' on the waterworks agin.'

Her eyes glistened at the sight of the food.

'Look 'ere, old woman,' said Tom Beadle, with his arm round her waist "Ere's a slice o' luck, eh?' And he took out a purse, and emptied it on the table. A half-sovereign and about a dozen shillings rolled out. She handled the coins eagerly, but she did not ask him how he came by them.

Half an hour later, Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass, having finished their supper, were sitting before the fire, on which the girl had thrown the last shovelful of coals. In the earlier part of the night, she had been sparing of them; but when Tom came home rich,

she made a bright blaze, and enjoyed the comforting warmth. Tom sat on the only chair, and she on the ground, with her arm thrown over his knee. She was happy and comfortable, having had a good supper, and seeing the certainty of being able to buy food for many days to come. Then she told him of Mr. Merrywhistle's visit, but did not succeed in raising in him any grateful feeling. All that he saw was an attempt on the part of Mr. Merrywhistle to take Blade-o'-Grass away from him, and he was proportionately grateful to that gentleman.

'I'd 'ave punched 'is 'ead, if I'd been 'ere,' was Tom's commentary.

'No, Tom, you wouldn't,' said Blade-o'-Grass earnestly. 'He only come to try to do me some good, and he's give me money lots o' times.'

'He didn't give you any to-night,' grumbled Tom.

'He wanted to, but I wouldn't take it; I couldn't take it'

'Blessed if I don't think you're growin' soft, old woman! Wouldn't take his tin!'

'Somethin' come over me, Tom; I don't know what. But he'll make it up to me another time.'

There was a soft dreaminess in her tone, as she lay looking into the fire with her head upon Tom's knee, that disarmed him. He took a good drink of gin-and-water, and caressed her face with his hand. Just then the candle went out. Blade-o'-Grass placed her warm cheek upon Tom's hand. They sat so in silence for some time. Tender fancies were in the fire even for Blade-o'-Grass. As she gazed she smiled happily, as she had done in her sleep. What did she see there? Good God! a baby's face! So like herself, yet so much brighter, purer, that thrills of ineffable happiness and exquisite pain quivered through her. Eyes that looked at hers in wonder; laughing mouth waiting to be kissed. It raised its little hands to her, and held out its pretty arms; and she made a yearning movement towards it, and pressed her lips to Tom's fingers, and kissed them softly, again and again, while the tears ran down her face.

'O, Tom!' she whispered, ''ow I love you!'

What a rock for her to lean upon! What a harbour for her to take shelter in!

She fell into a doze presently, and woke in terror.

'What's the matter, old gal?' asked Tom, himself nodding.

And then she gasped, between her sobs, that she dreamt it was born with a tiger in its inside!

Hark! What was that? Heavy steps coming up-stairs. No shuffling; measured, slow, and certain, as though they were bullets being lifted from stair to stair. Tom started to his feet. Nearer and nearer came the sounds.

'Give me the money, Bladergrass; give me the money, or you might get into trouble too!' He tore the money out of her pocket; when he came in he had given it to her to keep house with. Then he cried, 'The purse! Where's the purse? Throw it out on the tiles--put it on the fire!'

'I 'aven't got it, Tom,' answered Blade-o'-Grass hurriedly, her knees knocking together with fright. 'What's up?'

'The peelers! Don't you 'ear 'em? Curse the light! why did it go out? If they see the purse, I'm done for!'

They groped about in the dark, but could not find it For a moment the steps halted outside the door. Then it opened, and the strong light from the policemen's bull's-eye lamps was thrown upon the crouching forms of Tom Beadle and Blade-o'-Grass.

'You're up late, Tom,' said one of the policemen.

'Yes,' said Tom doggedly, and with a pale face; 'I was jist goin' to bed.' The policeman nodded carelessly, and kept his eye upon Tom, while his comrade searched about the room.

'Got any money, Tom?'

'What's that to you?'

'Come, come; take it easy, my lad. You haven't been long out, you know.'

'And what o' that?' exclaimed Tom, beginning to gather courage, for the policeman's search was almost at an end, and nothing was found. 'You can't take me up for not bein' long out.'

'But we can for this,' said the second policeman, lifting a purse from the mantelshelf. 'Is this yours, sir?'

A man, who had been lingering by the door, came forward and looked at the purse by the light of the lamp. 'Yes, it is mine.'

'And is this the party?'--throwing the light full upon Tom Beadle's face. He bore it boldly; he knew well enough that the game was up.

'I can't say; the purse was snatched out of my hand suddenly, and I didn't see the face of the thief. I followed him, as I told you, and saw him run down this alley.'

'And a nice hunt we've had! Been in a dozen houses, and only came to the right one at last. How much was in the purse, sir, did you say?'

'Twenty-three shillings--a half-sovereign, and the rest in silver.'

'Now, Tom, turn out your pockets.'

Tom did so without hesitation. A half-sovereign and twelve shillings were placed on the table.

'Just the money, with a shilling short. What have you been having for supper, Tom?'

'Trotters.'

'Ay; and what was in the bottle?'

'Gin, of course.'

'Trotters, fourpence; gin, eightpence. That's how the other shilling's gone, sir. Come along, Tom; this'll be a longer job than the last.'

As Tom nodded sullenly, Blade-o'-Grass, who had listened to the conversation with a face like the face of death, sank to the ground in a swoon. The policemen's hands were on Tom, and he struggled to get from them.

'Come, come, my lad,' said one, shaking him roughly; 'that's no good, you know. Best go quietly.'

'I want to go quietly,' cried Tom, with a great swelling in his throat that almost choked his words; 'but don't you see she's fainted? Let me go to her for a minute. I hope I may drop down dead if I try to escape!'

They loosened their hold, and he knelt by Blade-o'-Grass, and sprinkled her face with water. She opened her eyes, and threw her arms round his neck.

'O, Tom!' she cried; 'I thought--thought----'

'Now, my girl,' said the policeman, raising her to her feet in a not unkindly manner; 'it's no use making a bother. Tom's got to go, you know. It isn't his first job.'

'Good-bye, old gal,' said Tom tenderly; 'they can't prove anythin'. They can't lag me for pickin' up a empty purse in the street; and as for the money, you know 'ow long I've 'ad that, don't you?'

She nodded vacantly.

'That's well trumped-up, Tom,' said the policeman; 'but I don't think it'll wash.'

Tom kissed Blade-o'-Grass, and marched out with his captors. When their steps had died away, Blade-o'-Grass shivered, and sank down before the fire, but saw no pictures in it now to bring happy smiles to her face.

HELP THE POOR.

Merry peals of bells herald the advent of a bright and happy day. Care is sent to the right-about by those upon whom it does not press too heavily; and strangers, as they pass each other in the streets, are occasionally seen to smile amiably and cheerfully--a circumstance sufficiently rare in anxious suspicious London to be recorded and made a note of. But the great city would be filled with churls indeed, if, on one day during the year, the heart was not allowed to have free play. The atmosphere is brisk and dear, and the sun shines through a white and frosty sky. Although the glories of spring and summer are slumbering in the earth, nature is at its best; and, best thing of all to be able to say, human nature is more at its best than at any other time of the year. The houses are sweet and fresh, and smiles are on the faces and in the hearts of the dwellers therein. Men shake hands more heartily than is their usual custom, and voices have a merry ring in them, which it does one good to hear. It is an absolute fact, that many men and women today present themselves to each other unmasked. Natural kindliness is in the enjoyment of a pretty fair monopoly, and charity and goodwill are preached in all the churches. One minister ends an eloquent exordium with 'God help the poor!' and the majority of his congregation whisper devoutly, 'Be it so!'--otherwise, 'Amen!'

In the church where this is said are certain friends of ours whom, I hope, we have grown to respect: Mr. and Mrs. Silver with their flock, and Robert Truefit with his. Mr. Merrywhistle has brought Robert Truefit and the Silvers together, to their mutual satisfaction; and Robert has agreed to spend Christmas-day in Buttercup-square with his family--wife and four young ones. Thus it is that they are all in church together. They make a large party--fourteen in all, for Mr. Merrywhistle is with them--and there is not a sad heart among them.

'If I had been the minister preaching,' says Robert Truefit to Mrs. Silver, as they come out of church, 'I should not have ended my sermon with "God help the poor!"'

'With what then?'

'With "Man, help the poor!"' answers Robert Truefit gravely.

Here Charley and Ruth come forward with a petition. They want permission to take a walk by themselves; they will be home within an hour.

'Very well, my dears,' says Mrs. Silver; 'don't be longer, if you can help it.'

It is Ruth who has suggested the walk, and she has a purpose in view which Charley does not know of as yet. But Charley is happy enough in his ignorance; a walk on such a day with his heart's best treasure by his side is heaven to him. He is inclined to walk eastward, where glimpses of the country may be seen; but she says, 'No, Charley, please; you must come my way.' Perfectly contented is he to go her way, and they walk towards the City.

'You remember the day we went to the Exhibition, Charley?'

What a question to ask him! As if it has not been in his thoughts ever since, as if they have not talked of it, and lingered lovingly over the smallest incidents, dozens and dozens of times! But he answers simply, 'Yes, Ruth.'

'And what occurred when we came back, Charley?'

'The poor girl do you mean, Ruth?'

'Yes, the poor girl--so much like me!'

'I remember.'

'I have never forgotten her, Charley dear! I want to pass by the spot where we met her, and if I see her, I want to give her something. I should dearly like to do so, to-day! Do you remember, Charley?--when we saw her, she had not a bit of bread in the cupboard. Perhaps she has none today.'

'Take my purse, Ruth, and let us share together.'

'I shall tell her, Charley, that it is half from you.'

'Yes, my dear.'

But though they walk past the spot, and, retracing their steps, walk past it again and again, and although Ruth looks wistfully about her, she sees nothing of Blade-o'-Grass. They walk homewards, Charley very thoughtful, Ruth very sad.

'Come, Ruth,' says Charley presently, 'we must not be unhappy to-day. Let us hope that the poor girl is provided for; indeed, it is most reasonable to believe so.'

'I hope so, Charley, with all my heart.'

'What you hope with all your heart, dear Ruth, is sure to be good and true. Is there anything else you hope with all your heart?'

There is a tender significance in his tone, and she glances at him shyly and modestly, but does not answer.

'You can make this happy day even happier than it is, Ruth; you can make it the happiest remembrance of my life if you will say Yes to something!'

Her voice trembles slightly as she asks, 'To what, Charley?'

'Let me tell our dear parents how I love you. Let me ask them to give you to me. Is it Yes, Ruth dear?'

'Yes, dear Charley.' But so softly, so tenderly whispered, that only ears attuned as his were could have heard the words.

Presently,

'And do you love me with all your heart, Ruth?'

'With all my heart, Charley.'

O, happiest of happy days! Ring out, sweet bells! A tenderer music is in your notes than they have ever yet been charged with!

It is twilight, and all the elderly people are in the parlour in Buttercup-square. The children are in another room, engaged in mysterious preparation.

'I think we shall have snow soon,' says Mr. Merrywhistle.

'I'm glad of it,' says Robert Truefit. 'Something seems to me wanting in Christmas, when there is no snow. When it snows, the atmosphere between heaven and earth is bridged by the purity of the happy time.'

Mrs. Silver is pleased by the remark; the firelight's soft glow is on her face. Charley enters, and bends over her chair.

'My dear mother,' he whispers.

She knows in an instant by the tremor in his voice what he is about to say. She draws him to her, so that the firelight falls on his face as well as on hers.

'Is it about Ruth?' she asks softly.

'Yes, yes,' he answers in a tone of eager wonder. 'How did you know?'

She smiles sweetly on him.

'I have known it for a long time, Charley. Have you spoken to her?'

'Yes; and this is the happiest day I have ever known. O, mother, she loves me! She gave me permission to ask you for her.'

Mrs. Silver calls her husband to her side.

'Charley has come to ask for Ruth, my dear.'

'I am glad of it. Where is Ruth?'

'I will bring her,' says Charley, trembling with happiness.

'Did I not tell you, my dear?' Mrs. Silver asks of her husband.

'It is a happy Christmas, indeed,' he answers.

Ruth is glad that it is dark when she enters the room. Mrs. Silver folds the girl in her arms.

'My darling child! And this wonderful news is really true?'

'Yes, my dearest mother,' kissing Mrs. Silver's neck, and crying.

'What are you people conspiring together about?' asks Mr. Merrywhistle, from the window.

'Come here, and join the conspirators,' says Mrs. Silver. 'Our plots will fail, without your assistance and consent.'

Mr. Merrywhistle joins the party by the fire, and Robert Truefit steals quietly out of the room.

'It is eighteen years this Christmas,' says Mrs. Silver, 'since Ruth was given to us. She has been a comfort and a blessing to us, and will continue to be, I am sure.' Ruth sinks on her knees, and hides her face in Mrs. Silver's lap. This true woman lays her hand on Ruth's head, and continues: 'It is time that Ruth should know who is her real benefactor.'

'Nay, my dear madam,' expostulates Mr. Merrywhistle, blushing like a girl.

'My dear friend,' says Mrs. Silver, 'it is necessary. A great change will soon take place in Ruth's life, and your sanction must be given.--Ruth, my dear, look up. Before you were born, this friend--whom we all love and honour--came to me, and asked to be allowed to contribute out of his means towards the support of our next child. You can understand with what joy his offer was accepted. Shortly afterwards, my dear--eighteen years ago this day--you came to us, and completed our happy circle. You see before you your benefactor--your father--to whom you owe everything; for all the expense of your training and education has been borne by him. It is right that you and Charley should know this. And, Charley, as--but for this our dearest friend--the happiness which has fallen upon you could not have been yours, it is of him you must ask for Ruth.'

'Sir--'says Charley, advancing towards Mr. Merrywhistle.

'Not another word,' cries Mr. Merrywhistle, with Ruth in his arms; 'not another word about me, or I'll go and spend my Christmas-eve elsewhere. If, as Mrs. Silver says, my consent is necessary, I give you Ruth with all my heart.'--He kisses Ruth, and says: 'A happy future is before you, children. No need for me to tell you where your chief love and duty lie--no need for me to remind you to whose parental care and good example you owe all your happiness. To me, an old man, without kith or kin, their friendship and love have been priceless; they have brightened my life. It comes upon me now to say, my dear girl and boy, that once--ah, how many years ago!--such a prize as the love which animates you seemed to be within my reach; but it slipped from me, and I am an old man now, waiting to hear my name called. Cling to your love, my dears; keep it in your hearts as a sacred thing; let it show itself daily in your actions towards each other: it will sweeten your winter when you are as old as I am, and everything shall be as bright and fresh to you then as in this your spring-time, when all the future before you seems carpeted with flowers. Ruth, my child, God bless you! Charley, I am proud of you! Let your aim be to live a good life.'

Mrs. Silver kisses the good old man, and they sit round the fire undisturbed; for it appears to be understood in the house, that the parlour must not be invaded until permission is given. It is settled that Charley and Ruth shall wait for twelve months; that

Charley shall be very saving; that Ruth shall leave her situation, and keep house for the family, so that she shall enter her own home competent to fulfil the duties of a wife. But, indeed, this last clause is scarcely necessary; for all Mrs. Silver's girls have been carefully instructed in those domestic duties, without a knowledge of which no woman can be a proper helpmate to the man to whom she gives her love.

The shadows thicken, and the snow begins to fall There is peace without, and love within. Mrs. Silver, as she watches the soft snowflakes, thinks that it will be just such a night as that on which, eighteen years ago, she and her husband brought Ruth home from Stoney-alley. She recalls every circumstance of her interview with the landlady, and hears again the pitiful story of the motherless babe. Then she looks down upon the pure happy face of Ruth, and her heart is filled with gratitude to God.

And Ruth's twin sister, Blade-o'-Grass?

She was sitting in the same miserable attic from which Tom Beadle was taken to prison. He was not in prison now, having escaped just punishment by (for him) a lucky chance. When Tom was brought before the magistrate, he told his trumped-up story glibly: he had picked up the empty purse in the street, and the money was, the result of his own earnings. When asked how he had earned it, he declined to say; and he advanced an artful argument. The policeman had reckoned up the money which the man who had lost the purse said it contained--twenty-three shillings. Twenty-two shillings were found in Tom's pocket, and the other shilling was spent, according to the policeman's version, in trotters and gin. Not another penny, in addition to the twenty-two shillings, was discovered in the room. Now, said Tom, it wasn't likely that he would be without a penny in his pocket, and the fact that he had just the sum the purse had contained was simply a coincidence. He argued that it would be much clearer against him if a few coppers more than the actual money lost had been found. Of course this defence was received with derision by the police, and with discredit by the magistrate. But it happened that the prosecutor was too unwell to attend on the morning that Tom made his appearance in the police court, and he was remanded for a week. Before the week passed by, the prosecutor died, and Tom was set free. Blade-o'-Grass was overjoyed; it was like a reprieve from death to her. But the police were angry at Tom's escape, and kept so sharp a watch on him, that he found it more than ever difficult to live. I am not pleading Tom's cause, nor bespeaking compassion for him; I am simply relating certain facts in connection with him. When Christmas came, things were at their very worst. They had no Christmas dinner, and Tom was prowling about in search of prey.

On the night before Christmas Blade-o'-Grass listened to the merry bells with somewhat of bitterness in her soul. Everything about her was so dreary, the prospect of obtaining

food was so faint, that the sound of the bells came to her ears mockingly. What she would have done but for her one comfort and joy, it is difficult to say.

Her one comfort and joy! Yes, she had a baby now, as pretty a little thing as ever was seen. All her thought, all her anxiety, was for her child. Blade-o'-Grass possessed the same tenderness of nature that had been so developed in Ruth as to make her a pride of womanhood. How proud Blade-o'-Grass was of her baby! How she wondered, and cried, and laughed over it! As she uncovered its pretty dimpled face, and gazed at it in worship, all the bitterness of her soul at the merry sound of the bells faded away, and for a little while she was happy. She talked to the babe, and, bidding it listen to the bells, imitated the glad sound with her voice, until the child's face was rippled with smiles. But the hard realities of her position were too pressing for her to be able to forget them for more than a few minutes. Tom had not been home since the morning, and she had had but little food during the day. Not for herself did she care; but her baby must be fed. If she did not eat and drink, how could she give milk to her child? 'I'll go and arks Jimmy Wirtue for somethin',' she thought; and so that her appeal to the old man might be fortunate, she cunningly took her baby out with her. Jimmy was playing All-Fours with Jack, who, having come into another fortune, was dissipating it recklessly as usual for the benefit of his remorseless foe.

'What do you want? What's that bundle in your arms?' growled Jimmy, as Blade-o'-Grass peeped into his parlour.

'Ifs my baby,' said Blade-o'-Grass; 'I've come to show it to you.'

'And what business have you with a babby?' exclaimed Jimmy, in an excited manner. 'Ain't you ashamed of yourself? Take it away; I don't want any babbies 'ere.'

But Blade-o'-Grass pleaded her cause so meekly and patiently, and with so much feeling, that Jimmy was bound to listen and sympathise, hard as he was.

'Lookee 'ere,' he said harshly, holding up his finger, as she stood looking at him entreatingly: 'it's now nigh on eighteen year ago since Mrs. Manning----you remember Mrs. Manning?'

'O, yes,' sighed Blade-o'-Grass.

'It's now nigh on eighteen year ago since she come round a-beggin' for you; and now you come round a-beggin' for your babby.'

'I can't 'elp it,' said Blade-o'-Grass; 'don't speak to me unkindly; I am weak and 'ungry.'

'Why, you was only a babby yourself then----what's the matter?'

Blade-o'-Grass was swaying forward, and would have fallen if he had not caught her. His tone was so harsh, that the poor girl's heart was fainting within her at the prospect of being sent away empty-handed. Jimmy assisted her into his chair; and without considering that he was about to upset Jack, who was sitting on the box, opened it, and produced a bottle of spirits. He gave her some in a cup, and she revived. Then, grumblingly, he took a sixpence out of a dirty bag, and gave it to her, saying:

'There! And don't you come botherin' me agin!'

How grateful she was! She made him kiss baby, and left him with that soft touch upon his lips. He stood still for a few moments with his fingers to his lips, wondering somewhat; but he recovered himself very soon, and glaring at Jack, took swift revenge in All-Fours for his softness of heart, and ruined that shadowy creation for the hundredth time.

When Blade-o'-Grass quitted Jimmy's shop, she felt as if she would have liked to sing, she was so blithe and happy. She spent the whole sixpence, and treated herself to half a pint of stout. 'This is for you, pet!' she said to her baby, as she drank. She drank only half of it; the other half she saved for Tom. But although she waited up, and listened to the bells--gratefully now--until long past midnight, Tom did not come home. And when she rose on Christmas morning, he was still absent. She wandered out to look for him, but could not find him; and then hurried back, hoping that he might have come in her absence. As the day wore on, she grew more and more anxious, and tormented herself with fears and fancies as to what could have happened to him. So she passed her Christmas-day. In the afternoon she fell asleep, with her baby in her arms. At first she dreamt of all kinds of terrors, and lived over again, in her dreams, many of the miseries of her past life; but after a time her sleep became more peaceful, and her mind wandered back to the time when, a child of three years of age, she sat on the stones in the dirty yard, looking in silent delight at the Blades of Grass springing from the ground.

When she awoke it was dark. She went to the window, shivering; it was snowing fast. All the food was gone, and she was hungry again. What should she do? Suddenly a terrible fear smote her. Baby was very quiet. She looked at the sleeping child's white face by the white light of the snow, and placed her ears to the pretty mouth. Thank God! she felt the child's warm breath. But it would wake up presently, and she had no milk to give. The child's lips and fingers were wandering now to the mother's bosom. She could not stand this agony of hunger and darkness and solitude any longer; she must go into the streets.

Out into the streets, where the snow was falling heavily, she went. She looked wistfully about for Tom, but saw no signs of him. Into the wider thoroughfares she wandered. How white they were! how pure! how peaceful! A virgin world had taken the place of the old; a newborn world seemed to lie before her, with its pure white ready for the finger of God to write upon. She wandered on and on, until she came to a square. She knew it immediately--Buttercup-square. Why, here it was that Mr. Merrywhistle lived, and he had made her promise that she would come to him when she wanted a friend. 'When I don't know which way to turn, I'll come to you,' she had said. Well, she didn't know which way to turn. She walked slowly towards a house, through the shutters of which she could see pleasant gleams of light. It was Mrs. Silver's house, and she paused before it, and thought to herself, 'I'll wait 'ere till I see 'im.' And so, pressing her babe to her bosom, she waited, and listened to the music of happy voices that floated from the house into the peaceful square. Did any heavenly-directed influence impel her steps hitherward? And what shall follow for poor Blade-o'-Grass? I do not know, for this is Christmas eighteen hundred and seventy-one, and I cannot see into the future; but as I prepare to lay down my pen, I seem to hear the words that Robert Truefit uttered this morning--'Man, help the poor!'

THE END.