

COMING OF AGE.

— OR —
GETTING ON IN THE WORLD.

A THRILLING ROMANCE.

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER III.

FOREBODINGS.

(Continued.)

"My dear Charley," said I: "I am not afraid of so extraordinary a coincidence—the chances are too much in my favor to frighten me. I renewed my insurance on the Chelsea mill last year two days after the right time, and we were not burnt out in consequence."

"I wish we were on the safe side," said Charley, still harping on the theme; "if anything happens, it will be my fault. I ought to have insured first of all."

"It's very extraordinary that you cannot be quiet," snubbed Frank; "you'll only make yourself ill."

"Come, Charley," said I; "I will satisfy you and myself too; I'll go back to the mill, and have a look at it, before I start for Hammersmith. Will that ease your mind?"

"It will make you very late home, Mr. Philip," said he.

"There is no one sitting up for me, except the stable boy," replied I, with a suppressed sigh; "and half an hour will make no difference."

I rose to go at once.

"I hope to be sufficiently well in a week, to take my place in the chaise and let the boy drive me the rounds," said Charley; "and Frank will act as substitute till my name is scratched off the sick-list."

"I thought that would surprise you," said Frank; "it did old Crawley, when I asked his permission this afternoon. However, he gave it, and so with a little extra labor, I shall take your customers and my own to-morrow, Mr. Philip; rather a curious berth of mine, a sort of self-acting opposition."

"I am very sorry to put you to all this trouble, Frank, I really think—"

"I really think you had better say no more about it, Philip," interrupted Frank; "for it is all settled, and I shall be at your mills at the usual time."

After wishing Charley a speedy cure and making my adieu in the back parlor to Mr. and Mrs. Esden, who were as anxious to know how their boy was as if they had not heard for a week, I stood with Frank at the street-door exchanging a few words before departure.

"I hope poor old Charley will soon be on his legs again," said Frank; "I think he will, for it was not a very serious pitch-out. Thank you, Philip, for calling to-night, and thank you more for promising to go round to the mill; that has satisfied him and will keep him quiet till the morning. And—hallo!" looking over his shoulder, there goes the governor creeping up-stairs again, to ask about Charley's arm and head, and here goes to turn him out of the room. Good night, Phil."

Frank ran back to the bed-room and getting into my chaise I drove off towards Thames street, to fulfill the promise I had made my nervous agent.

It was nearly ten o'clock before I reached the mill, and found a man to take charge of my horse and chaise. Opening a small door in the great gate by means of a private key I passed through, closed it after me, and walked with a quick step towards the centre of the paved yard. All was dark and desolate, the workmen had left, the empty waggons were standing about the yard, there was no worker of the night in that mass of building which loomed out from the black background of a starless sky. Not a light to be seen, all safe, all quiet; so quiet that I could hear at regular intervals, the low washing of the tide against the wharf, and the strange far-off murmur of a wakeful city.

After the bustle of the day the long weary drive, the excitement of business on Mark Lane, the anxiety I had felt concerning Charley Esden, I found the stillness of my mill yard a relief, and stood enjoying it a moment. It was the first time I had been alone that day, and I did not hasten off the premises after my conviction of security; but put my hands in my pockets in an easy attitude and took another look round the mill-yard.

Suddenly, my complacency and self-possession received a shock; for immediately behind me I heard a quick grating noise, a noise such as a person in heavy boots would have made by unexpectedly slipping on the stones. I turned and looked straight before me—there was something huddled against the wall in the distance, and it bore a strong resemblance to the figure of a man. I advanced cautiously towards it. It moved when I was within ten paces of its hiding place, and made a violent rush at me. I sprang aside to elude the force of the attack, and the figure dashed by me,

staggered, recovered, and snorting forcibly, prepared for another rush in my direction.

"What do you want here?" I demanded, ready to grapple with the intruder at his next attack, and to raise the echoes of Thames street for further assistance to secure him.

At the sound of my voice the figure paused, put his hands in his pockets, and came with a well-known slouching gait towards me.

"Lor! is that you, Mr. Farley; why, whoever would have thought of seeing you here, sir, at this time of night? I was uncommonly near knocking you down, sir, and falling on you."

"What do you want here, Boxham?"

"Why, I aint easy in my mind to-night, sir; there's something not exactly right somewhere about, and I'm blest if I can get to the bottom of it."

"Indeed," said I, astonished at this second victim to a nervous attack, similar in character to that of Charley Esden's, "what has given rise to your suspicions, Ike?"

"Why, I'll just tell you, sir; look here, there's been a scove hanging about the place ever since it's been dark this evening. Once I caught him right in the yard, looking round him as if he wanted to steal something—and I'm not quite certain he wasn't arter the sacks now—and an hour arter that, he was dodging about the other side of the way, up and down, as if he was waiting for somebody, which he wasn't."

"Can you describe the man's appearance?"

"Well, I think I should know him again, tallish and skinnish, if there is such a word, sir, and if there isn't, I beg your pardon."

"Could you see his face?"

"Yes, sir, and a precious ugly face it was."

"And was his manner singular enough to arouse your suspicions?"

"Look here, sir; when you came at eight o'clock and drove away agin directly I was in the chaise-house, finishing up a bit before going home to Salk."

"Who's Salk?"

"Mrs. Boxham, sir, I always call her Salk."

"Well, well, be quick, Ike; I have to go to Hammersmith. There's St. Paul's striking ten."

"And I'm blest, sir, if somebody's head did not look in at the door, and bob away agin when I turned round. This made me curious, sir, and I spelt it over going home, and just as I got the knocker in my hand, I thought I'd come all the way back agin, for I wasn't at all satisfied. And I came back agin and I've been round everywhere, and the mill's locked up all right and the counting house doors fastened, and I was going away quite satisfied when I suddenly heard a noise, and so I crept along by the wall there and—with a stentorian burst of laughter that set the echoes ringing and made me jump a little, 'ho! ho! I caught you, sir!'"

"Then you feel satisfied now, Boxham."

"Well," scratching his head vigorously; "that man meant something, and I'm darned if I am quite easy now."

Ike, after looking round the yard for some one to catch, said—

"And might I ask, guv'nor, what brought you here?"

"I thought I would look in before my return home, and see if the lights were out, and all the men gone. What time does the engine-man come to-morrow?"

"Four in the morning, sir."

"And there's a watchman paid to go the rounds of this wharf and the adjoining premises every hour; the place is safe enough. And next week, when the horses are here, we shall have a watchman all to ourselves. Good night, Ike. Don't stop any longer, I have not the slightest fear."

"I wish we were going to have a wacking dog instead of a watchman, sir. The watchman gets into the public houses, and gets talking to the policemen, and gets drunk like one o'clock. I know him; but a dog, oh! wouldn't he walk into their legs when they came slipping over the gates?"

"Well, Ike, we will have a wacking dog as well."

"Thankee, sir," said he, as he walked by my side to the gates; "and I'll take him under my own care, sir, if you have no objection."

"Certainly not."

And you think it's quite right here, sir, or I don't mind stopping an hour or two longer—all night for the matter o' that."

"Yes, all right enough, Ike; if the place be robbed there is not much money in the counting-house."

We passed into Thames street once more, and I locked the gate carefully behind me.

"Which way are you going, Ike?" asked I, as I mounted into my chaise.

"Blackfriars Bridge way, sir."

"Jump up? I can give you a lift on your journey."

I could see Ike blush by the light of the lamp glimmering at the corner of the next street.

"No, no, thankee, sir," said he sheepishly, "I'd rather not, sir. You're very kind, and p'raps nobody would see me, but I shouldn't much—like."

"Then you will not get up?"

"No—no, sir, thankee," he repeated.

"Well, good night, Boxham. Many thanks for your care of my new establishment. I shall have to tell you of a rise in salary shortly. Good night."

Ike Boxham reiterated my good night. I drove away, thinking of the signs and warnings of the last few hours, and occasionally experiencing Ike Boxham's sensation of not feeling quite easy in the mind, which sensation gradually subsided as I approached Hammersmith and home.

CHAPTER IV.

RUIN.

In the early morning, when the church clocks were striking two; when the darkness of the night had not departed, and the night's children had not all gone home; when sober men were quickening their pace, and thinking of the wife or mother sitting up; when men, whose wives or mothers were not objects of consideration, were still at dancing-rooms, and flash saloons, and places worse than both; when a strange world of vice was keeping holiday, whilst virtue slept or prayed for loved ones to come home; when the stern policemen were looking suspiciously at stragglers in the streets, and the streets were full of echoes, a cry of "Fire," startled outward, homeward bound, and homeless, woke up the slumberers, and, by its magic word, filled the London high ways with hurrying mobs of people.

When the red flames began to mount above the house tops, and gables, chimneys, factoryshafts, and steeples, to start forth in dark relief against the fiery background; when the clouds turned into crimson canopies that Lyons never equalled; when men, at suburban turnpikes, were asking of policemen and late cabmen "where the fire was?" and getting speculative answers, a messenger of evil thundered at my door, and roused the neighborhood.

"My window was flung up on the instant."

"Who's there, below? What is it?"

"If you please, Mr. Farley, will you get up. The mill's on fire."

"The mill in Thames street?"

"Yes, sir."

The servants and the nursemaid were beginning to stir in their rooms, when I cried out—

"Keep in your beds. It is nothing that concerns you. Don't leave the house. I am going out."

I was soon dressed, and standing in the Hammersmith Road, by the side of the messenger and the night cab that had brought him to my house.

"Who sent you to me?"

"Mr. Frank Esden, sir."

"And the mill—my mill—is on fire?"

"Yes, sir, and burning furiously."

"Strange—awfully strange!"

One glance at the red sky in the distance, then I was in the cab and rattling Londonwards. The surprise, the dread nature of the intelligence so suddenly conveyed, the time of night, the haste with which I had dressed, the glaring sky ahead of me, all added to an excitement which I exerted myself vainly to subdue.

"I must think of this coolly—with some of my old dispassionate thought," I muttered; "there may be ruin beneath those ominous clouds; but I must not face it like a child. Drive faster, man, leaning out of the cab, 'and there's a guinea for you.'"

"All right, sir."

Kensington turnpike, and the toll-keeper's face peering in at the window.

"Toll, please, sir."

I tendered a piece of silver, and received some halfpence in return.

"A bad fire, sir," observed the man.

"Yes, very."

The change fell from my nerveless hand into the muddy road, and as the man stooped to pick it up, I cried out:

"Drive on—don't wait. Drive on there!"

Through Kensington, Knightsbridge, down Piccadilly, at Charing Cross, along the Strand and Fleet street, where the crowd was gathering and talking noisily, as it streamed on towards the burning mill. I had collected myself at last—had resolved to look the very worst in the face, and not shrink back with horror.

The mob grew denser at the corner of Thames street, and I was compelled to dismount, and force my way along as the crowd pushed, struggled, and fought, in its eagerness to reach the scene of attractions. A broad, dazzling light, the noise of engines pumping on the flames, a myriad of white, upturned faces, a host of policemen with their staves keeping back the people, a wall of human beings that stood before me, arresting further progress.

"Now then, you, sir, bawled a man in a corduroy suit, as twisted himself half-round, to expostulate indignantly; 'where are you shoving to? You can't get by here; you've got as good a place as any of us, what's the good of kicking?'"

"Let me pass, there's a good man."

"That's uncommonly likely—that is. Now just keep back," he shouted, as I pressed in my efforts; "or I'm blowed if I stand it!"

"I must get by here—I am the owner of the mill—my name is Farley, let me pass."

The man twisted his head further round on his shoulders in the effort to get a good look at me, and see if my appearance warranted the assertion.

"You don't mean that," he ejaculated; "here—ho—clear the way there—where's a policeman—clear away a moment and let Mr. Farley pass. It's Mr. Farley the master."

An agitation amidst the crowd in front of me, an endeavor to form a passage through the living wall, a repetition of my name on every lip, and a sudden curiosity in every body to catch a glimpse of me. The news of my arrival spread, a policeman came to my assistance from the inner ring, and with hundreds of faces looking into mine—hundreds of eager looks and staring eyes, such as I had afterwards in many fevered dreams forced my way along.

"Quick as you can, sir—this way, sir—move aside there, keep back."

Dragged through the mob at last, and standing ankle deep in water, along with the policemen, firemen, and a few interested beings, with the crowd of eager sight-seers swaying at the back. The gates of the yard, through which I had passed a few hours since, were open, and the mill beyond was on fire from top to bottom, and the roaring flames were leaping towards heaven. I saw at once there was no hope for the mill, and that no power could save it—that the temple of ambition I had reared would be a blackened mass in a few more hours, and all the scheming, bartering, struggling of a life would sink within its ruins. One spasm of the heart, a long-drawn breath, a compression of the lips, and then I gazed at the fire with eyes undimmed, and saw my fortune burn away.

"Philip!"

"Frank?"

We stood in the great, bright fireside, and held each other's hands a moment, with that strong, fervent clasp which only friends in affliction interchange.

"My dear old Phil, I hope this does not break your heart?"

"Do I look broken-hearted, Frank?"

"It almost breaks my own," said he, releasing my hand, "to see your blazing ruin, to know what loss it brings to you, and to feel, by a strange chapter of accidents, that my poor brother Charley is the cause."

"Not he, not he," said I, quickly; "I hope he will not let that thought torture him one moment, or believe I blame him in the least degree. Is he aware of this?"

"I left him asleep, and in ignorance. It will be dreadful news to tell him."

"Keep it from him, then."

"If he should wake up, and see my father in the room, he will have his suspicions that something has gone wrong. He will hear the noises in the streets, too, the cries of fire outside the house."

"He will not think of the mill, and your father will not enlighten him."

"When I heard the people running past, Philip, when I opened the street-door, and saw the glaring red sky before me, I thought in an instant 'Philip's mill! Charley will think the same.'"

"Does this fire strike you, Frank, as a most remarkable event?"

Frank stared at me, before he answered, "It is more than remarkable."

"A strange coincidence?"

"Strange indeed, Phil. Oh! if Charley had paid that insurance before his accident—if Holts had made more haste—"

"That mill would not have been on fire, much less the funeral pile of Philip Farley's fortune," I concluded.

"What do you mean?" inquired Frank; "you don't believe the mill has been set on fire; for heaven's sake don't say that, Phil."

"As sure as you and I are standing here, I am the victim of foul play."

"What enemy so vile? what devil so black?"

"Time will show," I answered.

"Philip, don't judge too hastily—this may be one of those singular coincidences that occur once in a hundred years, and you, by God's will, are the sufferer this time."

I have said, "Time will show," said I, doggedly; "I will wait for that time patiently, and say no more. How the mill blazes, look!"

The ravening flames were leaping higher to the sky—darting at it a wild sea of fire, and breaking into spray which drifted with the wind, and threatened further mischief. Frank and I stood side by side, and watched the conflagration. There was nothing to be done but watch and suffer; even the efforts of the black-helmeted figures, that passed and repassed the sheets of flames, and seemed at times to be walking in their midst, were unavailing. A few questions were asked me from time to time by gentlemen of the fire brigade, and gentlemen of the press, and I replied to them with a composure that astonished Frank and my inquirers. Frank was certainly more excited than I, for as the flames devoured their prey, and the mill burned for a moment with a greater fury, Frank leaped, groaned, tugged at his hair, and more than once ran several yards towards the ruin, as if to join the firemen, or take the management out of their hands.

(To be continued.)

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September 5th, 1890.