

COMING OF AGE. —OR— GETTING ON IN THE WORLD.

A THRILLING ROMANCE.

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER VI.

MY REVENGE.

(Continued.)

'The chap who fired the mill, sir. Oh, my eye, aint he frightened, I can tell you!'

'Secured him,' I said, 'are you certain of the man?'

'I'm certain it's the man who dodged about the premises that night; he does not deny it, he's so precious frightened!'

'A tall man, marked with small-pox, like?'

'Awfully marked, sir. I knowed him on the instant. I've been on the watch along with the police, sir, ever since you saw me last. I caught him, sir. I was the werry fust to lay a hand on him, and—wasn't he frightened!'

The fright of the gentleman alluded to appeared to give inexpressible delight to Mr. Boxham, to judge by the fat chuckle which followed each allusion to the circumstance.

'I suppose I am required at the police-station, Ike?'

'Why, yes, sir; they would like to know if as how you have any knowledge of the party who is so werry frightened—they are anxious on that pint, sir. Me and the policeman started off at once, and the policeman is coming up the road directly. I was obliged to run on a head and get the start; I wasn't going to let him tell it all!'

'We will start at once, Ike,' said I, jumping up; 'there may be some mistake.'

'Oh! yes, lots of mistake,' said Ike, ironically, as we closed the street-door behind us, and met the police officer, whose temper had been soured by Boxham's rude behavior, coming up the steps. We did not reach the stationhouse till half-past eleven o'clock, and then several minutes passed before the prisoner was brought to me. One glance sufficed to assure me that the gentleman arrested on suspicion of setting fire to my mill was the identical Mr. Holts, better known to myself and the readers by the name of Grainger or Vanclose.

Ike Boxham was right; Mr. Holts was suffering from considerable alarm, and as he advanced, shaking in every limb, and with his hands beseechingly clasped together, no truer picture of an abject coward could have been placed before me. Such a man forgetting, in his trouble, all that was manlike, I could readily imagine had been the brutal husband and unnatural father Mrs. Holts had lately described.

'Oh! Mr. Farley, you know me, sir,' he began, in a whining tone; 'you knew me years ago for a respectable man, a friend of your friends, weak-headed, but a good fellow enough, wasn't I? How many times have we sipped together and sworn friendship over our wine, and you do not credit for a moment the base suspicions brought against my honor, do you now? Dear Mr. Farley, I am a poor man, but I have always been an honest one—upon my soul I have!'

'Spare me your protestations,' said I, coldly; 'they do not interest me in your favor.'

'Oh! don't say you are prejudiced against me too, Mr. Farley,' he cried, bursting into tears.

'Can you account for your appearance in Thames street a few hours before the fire broke out?'

'I was not there, upon my—'

'Why you told us you were, you liar! bawled the indignant Boxham. Holts gave a startled glance in the direction of the giant Ike, took in the police officer at the door, turned to me again.

'Ah! so I was, but my sorrows have affected my recollection—oh! what shall I do, what shall I do? I was there, I whimpere he, 'I wanted to see a friend of mine who holds a place in your employ.'

'Your son?'

Mr. Holts jumped with surprise, but there was ready tact in his reply.

'My son, as you say, sir; surely it was natural enough for a father to desire to see his son and bless him. My dear son who—'

'Your pardon, Mr. Holts,' said I, interrupting him; 'but spare me an exhibition of your histrionic talent—I have come on a painful errand, and would not needlessly prolong my stay here. My carman tells me you were watching after your son had left the premises—account for that, sir.'

'I was not—it was—may I die if I did not go away before then. I can prove it

—I can prove it!'

'So much the better for you, Mr. Holts.' I turned to the officer at the door, 'I know this man, and unfortunately know nothing to his advantage—I suppose that is sufficient for the present?'

'Quite, sir.'

'Mr. Farley, I hope you will say nothing to prejudice the law against me, screamed the coward; 'it will be very hard to rake up all the follies of the past, over which I have mourned for many, many years; it may transport me for life, sir; for mercy's sake have some consideration!'

'I must add, that if this man be the incendiary, he had no malice to satisfy, and I believe no object to gain.'

'There! there!' cried Holts, 'it's plain enough. Why should I be the wretch to set the mill on fire and have no reason, no excuse? Mr. Farley, you will speak up for me before a judge and jury, won't you?'

'Mr. Holts,' said I, sternly, 'you can brow some light upon the mystery; it is in your power to point out the prime mover of that plot which has succeeded but too well. You knew the mill was uninsured that night, sir. Take my word for it, you will find it best to tell the whole truth, for mayhap in your anxiety to screen the guilty one, you may suffer the punishment for his crime—and the law's punishment for arson is no light one.'

Mr. Holts wrung his hands.

'Hanging!' said the officer; 'and so the sooner you make a virtue of necessity the better. We were quick enough to put our hands upon you, and we shall soon save you the trouble of confession by discovering the truth ourselves.'

'Oh! dear, oh! dear, what shall I do?'

'We've got a very strong idea now. Do you know what T stands for?'

'Oh!'

'Come now, have you anything to say?'

'It does go better for you, I know,' said Holts, beginning to whimper again; 'and I am innocent enough—why should I suffer for the guilty? I'll tell all, I'll tell all,' he cried; 'I was the tool for him whose tool I have been so many years—he did it with his own hand—Tregancy did it—bring me a Bible, I will swear it.'

'Where does he live? I asked eagerly.

'I don't know—I haven't known for months,' cried he. 'Mind if he's already caught, I've turned Queen's evidence.'

'This man is ready to confess everything; is some one in authority here prepared to listen to him?'

'Certainly, there is, sir,' answered the officer.

'Then, having no right to interfere at present, I leave him in your hands—I shall know all at the examination; I am late—you must excuse me—I have more business to do to night.'

Uttering one rapid excuse after another, I backed out of the room, and left Mr. Holts to make his statement.

Ike Boxham followed me into the street.

'Good night, Boxham,' said I abruptly checking the commencement of an oration; 'I am pressed for time. Good night.'

Five minutes afterwards I was in a cab hastening in the direction of the hotel wherein John Tregancy had resided at the time of our last meeting. It was the only address with which I was acquainted, and I feared it was a vain hope to dream of meeting him. Yet he must be seen and spoken with; there was my revenge to come, and I would not leave a stone unturned to find him.

The west end hotel was closed when the cab stopped before the door, but there were lights in many windows of the house, and, doubtless, there was a night porter to be found in so vast an establishment.

'Wait,' said I to the cabman.

'All right, yer honor.'

A loud summons at the door, instantly responded to by a sleepy-looking individual in black.

'Is Mr. Tregancy still residing here?'

'Mr. who?'

'Tregancy.'

'Don't recollect the name. I'll ask.'

The yawning individual shuffled out of sight, leaving me to wait his return in the dimly-lighted hall. He was as long in returning as if he had been to make inquiry of every living creature on the premises. Presently, however, he came shuffling back again, yawning worse than ever.

'Mr. Tre—yah!—ranid left three months ago.'

'If you could favor me with his address—'

'Don't know it.'

'Will you be good enough to ask? His trunks were probably directed to some other hotel in the vicinity, and the address may still be on the books.'

'The butler's fast asleep and won't answer nothing more,' said the man, irritated by my persistency.

'Wake the butler, then—my business is important.'

I slipped a half-crown into the man's

hand, and with the ruling passion strong in stupor, the ready fingers closed upon the gift.

'I'll go and ask again sir,' said the man more wide awake by several degrees; 'I'll tell him it's a matter of life and death, sir.'

'It is,' I answered.

The man went away with alacrity, leaving me to admire a specimen of ornamental text-hand, framed and glazed and secured against the wall, which informed me that 'The servants of that establishment were not allowed to receive gratuities.'

The porter must have adopted urgent measures, and startled the butler out of his equanimity as well as his sleep, for that important personage, half dressed and rather nervous, made his appearance in the hall.

'I beg pardon, sir—bless my soul, life and death, sir, you say, sir. Very sorry, sir, to have kept you waiting, sir. Detective, I presume, sir?'

'Can you oblige me with Mr. Tregancy's address?'

'Fortunately we can, sir. Mr. Tregancy left his address behind, sir, in order that his letters might be forwarded. The address is in the book on the—I'll get it directly, sir.'

Butler dashed at the door of a small room on my left and disappeared. Porter having fulfilled his mission and been paid for it, sank into an easy chair underneath the gas lamp, and fell asleep with an angelic smile upon his countenance.

Re-appearance of butler with a slip of paper in his hand.

'Ink not quite dry yet, sir—here's address, sir—Gray's Inn Road, sir.'

'Thank you.'

'Hope it is nothing very serious, sir Mr. Tregancy was nice gentleman enough, sir. Paid for everything, sir, at once—and—ahem!—did not forget the servants, sir.'

The butler of that vast establishment, who, I have no doubt, had snug hundreds in the savings bank or three per cents., and perhaps indulged in Elysian dreams of a public house with cook in St. Giles', was not too proud, despite the text-hand warning on the wall, to accept my second half-crown, which melted gracefully in his dumpy hand.

In the cab again, and rattling to No.—Gray's Inn Road. Before the house, a large gloomy building, dark, weather-beaten and neglected, standing at the corner of a dark and more neglected street. Looking at it, it seemed to me a type of John Tregancy's life and sinking fortunes.

Three times a forcible appeal to the listening sense of the sleepers within, before I heard feet echoing in the passage.

'Who's there?' demanded a woman's voice through the key-hole.

'Does Mr. Tregancy live here?'

'No; he's left.'

'I want his address—if you can give me that information you will oblige me—it is most important I should know it.'

'I'll ask the missus.'

The girl left the key-hole and the sound of slipped feet ascending stairs succeeded.

A long silence, my back against the door, the cabman nodding on his box, the cab-horse fast asleep and snoring.

To my impatient mind it appeared full half an hour before the girl's feet were heard descending the stairs and advancing towards the door again.

'Missus says she doesn't know exactly.'

Baffled in my pursuit, I still hesitated to resign it—to let the link in the chain be wholly lost.

'Not exactly!' I repeated.

'He asked what sort of place York Road was and the names of some of the streets in York Road, a day or two before he left; that's all missus knows, sir.'

'York Road, Lambeth?'

'Yes, sir.'

I turned away and walked towards my cab.

'Where to, sir?' asked the cabman, waking up.

'Hammersmith.'

A moment afterwards, I pulled the check-string and cried out—

'To York Road, Lambeth, and drive your hardest.'

There did not seem the shadow of a chance that I should find him; having no address to guide me, not being sure he had even crossed the Thames, I still could not give up the search. Feverish and excited, I must keep on the chase, however hopeless the pursuit. He had made inquiry concerning York Road, Lambeth—it might possibly be his place of abode—I would go thither at least—those who were already following in my track would follow on as small a hope, and I must be there before them!

Back again, down Gray's-Inn Road and Chancery Lane, through Temple Bar, along the Strand and across Waterloo Bridge to York Road, Lambeth.

I peered from the cab-windows at every house in the road, with what intention I hardly knew myself; certainly, with little hope of discovering John Tregancy. York Road was deserted; from its beginning in

Waterloo Road, to its end in Westminster Bridge Road, there was not a solitary human being to enliven the dreary prospect. I gazed at the few lights in up-stairs windows of the houses on either side, and once as the figure of a man passed behind a blind, I cried out 'Stop!' But the folly of the proceeding shamed me into saying 'drive on again,' and the cabman, cursing softly to himself, complied with the request.

At Westminster Bridge Road, the cabman called 'Which way, sir?'

I hesitated.

'Back once more,' said I, at last; 'and over Waterloo Bridge.'

The cab turned and we retraced our course. In the few moments that had intervened, signs of life had started as if by magic in the street; there was a policeman muffled in his rough great-coat standing beside a lamp-post, a man in workman's clothes with a basket at his back tramping to some early job, and a cab standing at the door of a house, in one of those narrow, dirty streets which lead to Belvidere Road.

When my cab brought me to Waterloo Road again, I thought of the other cab I had seen standing at the door of a house in the by-street. What did it want there at that hour of the morning?—had it just brought home a late fare?—was it waiting to take away some one?—to take away whom?

'Back again,' I cried.

'Again?' said the man surlily.

'Yes, half-way—to the corner of the street in which that cab was standing.'

At the corner of the street the cabman stopped once more, I instantly leaped out.

'Wait here,' cried I.

After some reflection, I walked slowly down the street. The owner of the strange cab was standing in the door-way, smoking a short pipe—the door was open.

'Are you engaged?'

'Yes, sir.'

A shilling slipped into his hand elicited a ready reply to my next question.

'Your fare is a gentleman?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Going to the railway, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir, for the third time.'

'Have you seen him?'

'What's the row—is anything up?—inquired the cabman.'

'Have you seen him?' I repeated.

'Yes; I have just brought him from the West End.'

'What kind of man is he, tall?'

'Yes, and dark—not unlike a blessed nigger, I may say—what's he done, mate?'

'Nothing.'

I had found him by the strangest chance—I had not tracked him all that night in vain—it was destined he and I should meet. The tread of feet softly descending the stairs, aroused me to the task before me, and after a moment's pause, I advanced at a quick step down the narrow passage.

Some one turned the angle of the stair-case—Tregancy! He started, stopped as I steadily advanced, hesitated, then turning back, walked slowly up the stairs again.

He went into the front room on the first floor, and I followed him. When I entered he was standing in the centre of the room, with his hand resting heavily upon the table. An old-fashioned gas-chandelier, the lights turned nearly out, hung from the ceiling.

'John Tregancy, you did not expect to see me here to-night,' said I, closing the room door.

'No,' he answered, with his glittering eyes fixed on me.

'You have had your revenge—I have come for mine.'

'Indeed.'

'I have come to relieve Mr. Tregancy's mind, too; he may have some doubts as to the complete ruin he has effected—let him dispel them on the instant.'

Tregancy began gently drumming his long fingers on the table.

'Let me add, that the man Holts, or Vanclose, is arrested, has confessed, and that the officers of justice are on Mr. Tregancy's track.'

Tregancy continued beating on the table with his fingers. His eyes had not once dropped beneath my glance—he stood there braving every look—a tiger brought to bay.

'Not one word in denial of your guilt,'

'Have you come to hear me lie? he asked, in a low suppressed tone.

'Not one word in defence, Tregancy?'

'I shall not defend myself to Philip Farley,' he answered, scornfully; 'or utter words that would be brought against me in a court of justice, by the hirelings who wait your signal to arrest me. When I am cooler and have more command over myself, I will answer such as you!'

'Neither denial nor defence,' said I unmoved by the withering hate which spoke in his last words; 'well, then, Tregancy, I wait for one word of regret.'

'God will strike me dead before I utter it.'

'Not [regret for my misfortunes, I am not asking that but for your crime, man?'

(To be continued.)

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