

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

From Dickens's Household Words.

THE LITTLE OAK WARD-ROBE.

The quiet old town of Abbeylands was on the eve of going to sleep; several of the oil-lamps had retired from public life after winking in a mysterious manner to their companions to follow their example; the shops in the High Street had already put up their shutters; the rain was falling in torrents; the chimney-tops were veering in all directions, as if performing a demoniac polka with the inconstant wind; a miserable wet night, about ten o'clock, and not a soul stirring. The three policemen had gone home; the thieves, if there were any, were afraid of catching cold; the surgeon had just returned from a country visit and was putting up his horse in the little stable behind his house; waiters at the Pigeon's Arms were flying about in all directions with suppers, and slippers, and cigars, and brandies and waters; and far away from the coffee-room—not in a private apartment, seven shillings and sixpence a day—but in a low, dingy, little bedroom, which served him for parlour and all, a young man was standing with his arms folded across his breast and looking into a trunk which he had recently opened. 'A stock in trade,' he said, 'from which something may be made after all!'

Yes, from that small box may be evoked powers as tremendous as the genie's in the Arabian Nights—wealth—happiness—revenge—and that's the best of all! Nothing was visible to account for these glowing anticipations. The contents seemed of the ordinary kind—clothes—not many, not very splendid in material; only among them were mixed up pieces of apparel belonging properly to the softer sex; crumpled-up bonnets, worn-out old shawls, faded cotton gowns. Poor fellow! he was perhaps bringing down presents to an aunt. They couldn't be very expensive ones, but the kindness of the remembrance would make up for want of value. 'Hark! ten o'clock!' he said, as the Abbey clock struck the hour. 'I must be off, or the old rascal will have shut up shop.' He buttoned his coat, threw a sporting coat over his shoulders, and emerged into the dusky street. 'I saw it,' he said, 'at the corner of the staircase. If the villain hasn't moved it, all will go well. If he has, how can I describe it without exciting suspicion?'

One shop was open in the cross road at the top of the main street. A great glaring lamp still flourished in front of the window; under it, and sheltered by a sort of verandah that projected over half the pavement, was standing a deal table with two chairs on the top of it: on them were various articles of crockery—were, useful and ornamental; a small swing glass marked in chalk two shilling and six pence; and, between the chairs, a little pile of books, the lowest being *The Whole Duty of Man*, and the highest *The Wandering Jew*. Inside of the dark recess, where innumerable goods were piled up on both sides of a narrow passage, sat a man with a pen behind his ear; a ledger lay before him, which he might perhaps have been able to read, if he had felt so inclined, with the aid of a very thin and dirty tallowing candle, which was stuck into an ink bottle; but his studies lay in another direction. He was absorbed in thought. 'After all,' he thought, 'what good has it done me? It isn't so great sum when all's told. Two hundred and thirty pounds wouldn't ruin the Bank of England. It ruined George Evans, though,' he began again. His father should have kept his papers better. If the man was fool enough to lend me the money, and lost my note of hand, what business is it of mine, that his son must lose the whole of it? Did I make the law? If they had brought me by acknowledgment, wouldn't the money have been paid? The lad has given up pestering me with his letters. I hope never to hear of him again; besides the Statute of Limitation makes it also safe, and the money by this time would all have been spent; for I hear he has turned a reprobate, and gone on the stage. This is a wicked world, and theatres are the schools of Satan. Amen!'

This ejaculation was uttered aloud, and was considered by the utterer of it—the worthy Mr Benson, pawnbroker and second hand furniture merchant—the bond and seal of all religious observations. It was heard by the young man in the horse cloth wrapper.

'I'm glad you're not shut up, sir,' he said, going through the narrow gangway to the end of the room. 'I want to do a little business with you.'

'A watch?' said Mr Benson, opening a little drawer, in which lay a number of square tickets of dirty paper.

'No; I don't happen to have such a thing,' replied the visitor. 'I come to buy something. As I passed the shop to-day, I saw a piece of furniture I require; a narrow case, with drawers in it, of oak I think it was. Ah! there it is, just under the staircase.'

'Of oak indeed? you may say of the very finest oak that ever grew in clay. Why, that oak would fetch a large price, independent of the great convenience of the drawers. I paid a pretty sum for it at Farmer Merriwood's sale, when the old gentleman died ten days since; it had been in his family, they said, two hundred years—a very fine piece

of furniture, and dirt cheap at one pound ten.'

'I'm no great judge of these things,' said the young man; but I have an aunt in the town who is in want of just such an article. I wish to make her a present of it; and I will pay for it, now, on condition, that if she doesn't like it, you shall take it back and supply me with another article to-morrow morning. Very fair—that's very fair—but how can I send it to-night?'

'Nay, that must be part of the bargain,' replied the purchaser, counting the money into Mr Benson's hand; 'and you must also give me a receipt for the—what shall we call it?—the wardrobe, with all it contains; for fortunes are sometimes found in very odd places,' he added, with a smile. 'I've heard of chair-bottoms being stuffed with five pound notes.'

'I run this risk of all that,' said Mr Benson, writing the receipt, and so to carrying it home, it ain't very heavy. I'll manage that. What's the address?'

'Mrs Truman, number two, Abbeyfield Lane,' replied the youth, 'not a very elegant part of the town; but the poor must live somewhere.'

'It's a very dark ill-charactered place,' said the pawnbroker. 'Couldn't you wait till to-morrow morning? A man was robbed and murdered there twenty years ago.'

'Oh, things are improved since then,' said the young man with a laugh; 'besides, an old chest of drawers is not so very tempting a property, in spite of the goodness of the oak, and the time it was in Farmer Merriwood's possession.'

Mr Benson looked at his visitor with doubt at first; but he saw nothing but the fine open countenance of a young man of twenty-two, and gradually became satisfied that there was nothing to be afraid of. For one instant a thought came into his head to invite the purchaser to take a glass of gin and water—but it died away, like other good resolutions.

'If you arrive at my aunt's before me,' said the young man, 'say I sent her the wardrobe; but I hope to be in time to receive you.' So saying he wrapt his horse-cloth closer round him, and departed.

Mr Benson looked round well-pleased. He had ended the day well by disposing of a useless piece of lumber at a considerable price. 'He must be very fond of his aunt, that young man,' he said, and if she's no better judge of furniture than he is, I wish she would come and deal at my shop. He cast a look round—to see that there was no risk from candle or lamp—hoisted the wardrobe on his shoulder, locked the door, and walked rapidly towards Abbeyfield Lane. On arriving at number two, he knocked gently at the door, but received no answer for some time.

'Why this is the house that has been empty so long! I didn't know any one had taken it. Where did they get their furniture? Another knock produced a motion within, a step sounded in the passage, and an old lady opened the door. She seemed astonished at the lateness of the visit. 'I was just going to bed,' she said, 'and only sat up to let in my nephew. He is longer of coming than he said.'

'He'll be here immediately,' replied Mr Benson, 'and in the meantime has presented you with his very handsome piece of furniture. He has paid for it—all, except the portage—and the solid oak is no joke to carry on a night like this.'

'If my nephew was here,' said the old lady, 'I would ask you to come in; but I'm a lone woman, and it wouldn't be proper—there's sixpence for the carriage, and I'm greatly obliged to the dear boy. He's always so thoughtful of his poor old aunt.'

'Pray, ma'am, have you been long in this cottage?' inquired Mr Benson; and may I ask you where the furniture came from?'

'My Nephew took the house for me three days ago. Some of the furniture came by the canal—and the rest we hope will arrive to-morrow.'

'If you require any additional articles, you will find the best qualities and lowest prices at my shop,' said Mr Benson, putting the poor woman's sixpence into his pocket, and resuming his homeward way. 'I don't like this,' he said, as he splashed up the high Street. 'There's something curious about that old woman. Why did she give me a whole sixpence?—looking so wretchedly poor too? And why did she seem so delighted to lay hands on the wardrobe? I'm sorry I let it go at thirty shillings. The young fool would have given double the money—but I'm always so soft-headed. I shall never be rich—but what of that? Wealth is not happiness, Amen!'

He extinguished the flaring lamp at the front of his premises: removed the table and all that it contained within the door, turned the key on the inside, and drawing out from a secret drawer a bottle of gin, and, lighting a kettle from the fire which had hitherto glowed unseen behind a set of window curtains hung over the model of a suspension bridge, he proceeded to concoct a pretty strong tumbler, which he applied to his lips with the self-satisfied air of a man who felt that he had deserved some relaxation and enjoyment, after the labours of a well-spent day. A pipe, also, soon added its perfume to the happiness of the position, and Mr Benson sat like a great Indian idol, inhaling the incense of his gin and tobacco, blandly smiling as the smoke curled in gay wreaths round the bowl of his long clay, and occasionally sipping the comfortable potion before him. The clocks which had either been sent to him in pledge, or were arranged on different brackets for sale, kept up a miscellaneous concert of hours

from one o'clock to twelve—for they were not by any means particular in their notions either of time or tune; but, as a majority of them seemed to be of opinion it was getting near midnight, the contemplative proprietor lighted one more pipe, poured forth one other libation, and carefully locked away the now half-empty bottle in the sanctum devoted to its custody.

He watched once more the curls of the smoke; but fancy was at work, and aided the wreaths as they rose, twisting them into excellent chests of drawers, or handsome mahogany side boards, on which he expected enormous profits; into little cottages they expanded themselves, which he felt sure he could buy for very little money; then, as the candle began to burn less clearly, he saw one of the large puffs which he traced with more than usual attention, convert itself into a bed in a dingy little apartment, and through the half-drawn curtains he saw the emaciated countenance of a dying man. The fire uttered a little sound at this moment, as the coals collapsed to the bottom of the grate, and he thought the noise it made formed itself into words from the old man's lips: 'I lent him the money, George—two hundred and thirty pounds. I have lost the note of hand; but if he doesn't pay it he is a villain, and will repent it when the hour comes on him as it does on me now.'

'Nonsense! folly! madness!' cried Mr Benson, pushing back his chair, and hurrying the tumbler to his lips. 'Would the man have me give money to every person that chose to say he had lent it, with nothing to show for it but a white faced dying old—Ha!—a carriage at my door at this hour!—a knocking—who can it be? Some one in distress—come to arrange about pawning the family plate; a countess, perhaps, to pledge the family jewels—coming, coming.' He opened the door and peeped out through the falling rain. A carriage, covered with mud and dripping with wet, was at the kerb stone. The driver let down the steps and a lady tripped lightly across the sloppy pavement and entered the shop. 'The carriage will wait,' she said; 'turn the key and double lock—for I have something of importance to say to you.' He set down the light, and looked carefully into the woman's face. It was flushed and excited; the eyes flashed with great brilliancy, and her lips quivered with agitation—a tall masculine woman, plainly dressed, and evidently under the influence of some strong feeling.

'You are Mr Benson, the pawnbroker?' she said.

'I am; said the dealer in second hand furniture, books, statues, and miscellaneous articles, clocks, watches, wearing apparel, and double barrel guns.'

'You attended the sale at Farmer Merriwood's last Wednesday?'

'I did.'

'Did you buy it?'

'What?'

'I forgot. I haven't told you. I won't tell you. What did you pay for all the articles you bought at Cecil Green, at Farmer Merriwood's?'

'I got tolerable bargains, ma'am; I don't deny that—the family all dispersed—no near relations. I paid for all I had there a matter of fifteen, or, perhaps, twenty pounds.'

'Will you make me out a list of them?—transfer them at once to me—and I will give you two hundred across the table.'

Mr Benson looked at the woman as she spoke.

'No, madam,' he said, 'two hundred's too little. It's worth two hundred to you, it's worth a great deal more to me.'

'We won't fight about that. What did you buy?—beds? sofas? drawers?—let me see the list.'

He took from a wire that hung from the cross bar of his desk the auctioneer's account.

The woman gazed at it; and on coming near the end started. 'Yes,' she said, 'here it is. What do you ask for all? But tush! I want nothing but one small article. Keep the rest of the trash. Give me the oak wardrobe with the four drawers in it, and I will give you what you demand. Come!'

'I can't,' said Mr Benson, turning pale, and trembling with agitation. 'It's gone—sold—delivered—lost.'

'Fool,' cried the woman. 'You have ruined me and yourself. That wardrobe would have enriched us both. Why did the villains not advertise the sale? I would have come to it if I had been dying. Can you recover it? Who bought it? Will money tempt them to sell it again? Tell me the name of the purchaser, and I will get possession of it yet.'

'I don't remember the name of the person. I think it was a clergyman's wife from Ipswich—or, no. I think it was a Liverpool gentleman who was going to America; but if he's not sailed it might be possible—I don't say it would to recover the furniture still.'

'Give me his address. I will go to Liverpool myself—to America anywhere.'

'It may, perhaps, be got back without so much trouble,' said Mr Benson, after a pause. 'But why are you so very curious about a common chest of drawers? I examined it very carefully. I assure you; they are nothing but ordinary oak—no secret recesses—no hidden spring; there's surely no some mistake about it.'

'There's no mistake. Did you take out the drawers when you made your examination? Did you turn the top one upside down? Did you see that the bottom was thick and heavy that it was double? That it might contain,

documents, notes, a will, receipts, acknowledgments?'

'No, I didn't turn it out. I'm an unsuspicious, innocent man—grossly imposed on—ruined. Amen!'

The pawnbroker seemed so overcome that the woman was melted. 'Hear what I tell you,' she said. 'If we arrange matters together, we may yet be rich. Do I understand that you will share with me whatever that drawer contains?'

'What does it contain?' inquired Benson in a whisper. 'Does it contain anything?'

'Why do I offer you hundreds for it?' inquired the woman; 'but I will tell you all. Did you know Farmer Merriwood?'

'No, I can't say I knew him. I once sold him a second hand saddle; and he made some row about the stuffing coming out. I had to let him off for half the price agreed on.'

'It's like him—harsh, cold, selfish—so: I was told, in his latter years. He was different long ago—very different.'

'I didn't know him then,' replied Mr Benson.

'I did,' continued the woman; 'but no wonder he changed; for misery was in his heart, and disgrace fell on his family. These things change a man's temper.'

'Some people didn't think so. He had a daughter; twenty years ago people called her beautiful. She was his only child. She was beautiful, at all events, to him. Her name was Caroline. How she loved him! how she attended to all his wishes, and read to him, and played on the piano to him, and was everything to him, and so playful, and so kind. We all loved her.'

'Did you know her?'

'Did I know her? I knew her from the time of her birth. I was a distant relation. Cousin Janet they called me, though I was their paid servant; but the word cousin was better than all their wages. So we went on for years and years, I taking care of the house, Philip Merriwood attending to the farm, and Caroline, the delight of us both. Don't you see what's coming, old man? You must be dull as this wretched room you live in, if you don't guess what followed.'

'I can't,' said Mr Benson. 'I'm trying, I can't. Amen!'

'Not when I tell you that the Marquis of —, but never mind his name: it is best, perhaps, omitted; but he had a son—his eldest son, Lord Rostock—flashing, gay, but kind—oh, kind and generous, like a knight of old; he saw her, saw Caroline; was struck with her beauty—who wasn't?—got to speech of her, spoke her fair, won her heart; the old story—the old story! Love rules all. Hearts break; but fools fill up the places of those who perish. Ah! once—twice in September, twelve years ago—she came to me, and said 'Cousin Janet, do you think my father a forgiving man?'—Of course, my darling, I said. 'He is a Christian.'—But will he forgive a person for getting above him in the world, for leaving the rank he moves in? Ha, ha, she added, with a beautiful, wild laugh. What would he think if he had to stand with his hat off as he saw me going up the church path, and asked how my ladyship was? Wouldn't it be charming to be a lady? I told her no, or turned the talk, or gave her wise advice. I forgot what I did; it was so pretty to see her walking up and down the floor of the bedroom, flitting one of her slippers as if it were a fan, and swaying about as if it were a fan, and swaying about from side to side, as if she had a court train to her robe. And all that time she was only in her night gown, and showed her pretty naked feet. And what happened? Cold, eh? consumption?'

'No—eloquent—ruin—death! She was missing one morning that same month, and Philip Merriwood never held up his head. He seemed to know what had happened without being told. He never asked for her, and when a letter was put in his hands a few days after signed by Caroline, and telling him that she was about to be married—to be a lady—rich and grand but kind still, and loving to him; he tore the paper into twenty pieces and said 'fool! fool!'

'And so she was,' said Mr Benson. 'He didn't marry her?'

'No, and she never wrote again. So the house was dark and dismal; Philip Merriwood went into the bedroom that had been hers, and seized the little oak wardrobe where she had kept her clothes. He emptied the drawers on the floor, and ordered me to remove the frocks and stockings, and the blue silk jacket, and the pink satin slip, and all the things, and throw them into the fire. It was an old piece of furniture, and had belonged to his people for hundreds of years. It had once been the place where he kept his secret papers; his leases and bonds and parchments were all in the front drawer, but in the top one there is a false bottom; there, in the thickness of the wood—he kept the things he cherished most—the letters that had passed between him and Sophia Felton, his wife, before they were married; the last letter she wrote to him when she was dying; the first copy book of Caroline when she was learning to write; the little notes she sent him when she was at school. So when he had turned Caroline's clothes out of the drawers he opened the secret ledge; and how he read, and cried, and read again. We couldn't get him down to dinner, and when he came he ate nothing. A month passed, and a long time passed, and when half a year was come and gone, there came a letter one day with a great crest upon the seal—a marquis's crest they call it and when it was opened Farmer Merriwood saw it was from young Lord Rostock, whose father had just died and left him all the estates. Caroline, he said, was provided for,