

CHAPTER XIII.

TRACKING THE BIRD OF PREY.

THE two lime merchants, with their escort, entered the dominions of Miss Abbey Potterson, to whom their escort (presenting them and their pretended business over the half-door of the bar, in a confidential way) preferred his figurative request that "a mouthful of fire" might be lighted in *Cosy*. Always well disposed to assist the constituted authorities, Miss Abbey bade Bob Glidderly attend the gentlemen to that retreat, and promptly enliven it with fire and gaslight. Of this commission the bare-armed Bob, leading the way with a flaming wisp of paper, so speedily acquitted himself, that *Cosy* seemed to leap out of a dark sleep and embrace them warmly, the moment they passed the lintels of its hospitable door.

"They burn sherry very well here," said Mr. Inspector, as a piece of local intelligence. "Perhaps you gentlemen might like a bottle?"

The answer being by all means, Bob Glidderly received his instructions from Mr. Inspector, and departed in a becoming state of alacrity engendered by reverence for the majesty of the law.

"It's a certain fact," said Mr. Inspector, "that this man we have received our information from," indicating *Riderhood* with his thumb over his shoulder, "has for some time past given the other man a bad name arising out of your lime barges, and that the other man has been avoided in consequence. I don't say what it means or proves, but it's a certain fact. I had it first from one of the opposite sex of my acquaintance," vaguely indicating Miss Abbey with his thumb over his shoulder, "down away at a distance, over yonder."

Then probably Mr. Inspector was not quite unprepared for their visit that evening? *Lightwood* hinted.

"Well you see," said Mr. Inspector, "it was a question of making a move. It's of no use moving if you don't know what your move is. You had better by far keep still. In the matter of this lime, I certainly had an idea that it might lie betwixt the two men; I always had that idea. Still I was forced to wait for a start, and I wasn't so lucky as to get a start. This man that we have received our information from, has got a start, and if he don't meet with a check he may make the running and come in first. There may turn out to be something considerable for him that comes in second, and I don't mention who may or who may not try for that place. There's duty to do, and I shall do it, under any circumstances, to the best of my judgment and ability."

"Speaking as a shipper of lime—" began Eugene.

"Which no man has a better right to do than yourself, you know," said Mr. Inspector.

"I hope not," said Eugene; "my father having been a shipper of lime before me, and my grandfather before him—in fact we have been a family immersed to the crowns of our heads in lime during several generations—I beg to observe that if this missing lime could be got hold of without any young female relative of any distinguished gentleman engaged in the lime trade (which I cherish next to my life) being present, I think it might be a more agreeable proceeding to the assisting bystanders, that is to say, lime-burners."

"I also," said *Lightwood*, pushing his friend aside with a laugh, "should much prefer that."

"It shall be done, gentlemen, if it can be done conveniently," said Mr. Inspector, with coolness. "There is no wish on my part to cause any distress in that quarter. Indeed, I am sorry for that quarter."

"There was a boy in that quarter," remarked Eugene. "He is still there?"

"No," said Mr. Inspector. "He has quitted those works. He is otherwise disposed of."

"Will she be left alone then?" asked Eugene.

"She will be left," said Mr. Inspector, "alone."

Bob's reappearance with a steaming jug broke off the conversation. But although the jug steamed forth a delicious perfume, its contents had not received that last happy touch which the surpassing finish of the *Six Jolly Fellowship Portes* imparted on such momentous occasions. Bob carried in his left hand one of those iron models of sugar-loaf hats before mentioned, into which he emptied the jug, and the pointed end of which he thrust deep down into the fire, so leaving it for a few moments while he disappeared and reappeared with three bright drinking-glasses. Placing these on the table and bending over the fire, meritoriously sensible of the trying nature of his duty, he watched the wreaths of steam, until at the special instant of projection he caught up the iron vessel and gave it one delicate twirl, causing it to send forth one gentle hiss. Then he restored the contents to the jug; held over the steam of the jug, each of the three bright glasses in succession; finally filled them all, and with a clear conscience awaited the applause of his fellow-creatures.

It was bestowed (Mr. Inspector having proposed as an appropriate sentiment "The lime trade!"), and Bob withdrew to report the commendations of the guests to Miss Abbey in the bar. It may be here in confidence admitted that, the room being close shut in his absence, there had not appeared to be the slightest reason for the elaborate maintenance of this same lime fiction. Only it had been regarded by Mr. Inspector as so uncommonly satisfactory, and so fraught with mysterious virtues, that neither of his clients had presumed to question it.

Two taps were now heard on the outside of the window. Mr. Inspector, hastily fortifying himself with another glass, strolled out with a noiseless foot and an unoccupied countenance. As one might go to survey the weather and the general aspect of the heavenly bodies.

"This is becoming grim, Mortimer," said Eugene in a low voice. "I don't like this."

"Nor I," said *Lightwood*. "Shall we go?"

"Being here, let us stay. You ought to see it out, and I won't leave you. Besides, that lonely girl with the dark hair runs in my head. It was little more than a glimpse we had of her that last time, and yet I almost see her waiting by the fire to-night. Do you feel like a dark combination of traitor and pickpocket when you think of that girl?"

"Rather," returned *Lightwood*. "Do you?"

"Very much so."

Their escort strolled back again, and reported. Divested of its various lime-lights and shadows, his report went to the effect that *Gaffer* was away in his boat, supposed to be on his old look-out; that he had been expected last high-water; that having missed it for some reason or other, he was not, according to his usual habits at night, to be couched on before next high-water, or it might be an hour or so later; that his daughter, surveyed through the window, would seem to be so expecting him, for the supper was not cooking, but set out ready to be cooked; that it would be high-water at about one, and that it was now barely ten; that there was nothing to be done but watch and wait; that the informer was keeping watch at the instant of the present reporting, but that two heads were better than one (especially when the second was Mr. Inspector's); and that the reporter meant to share the watch. And inasmuch as crouching under the lee of a hauled-up boat on a night when it blew cold and strong, and when the weather was varied with

blasts of hail at times, might be wearisome to amateurs, the reporter closed with the recommendation that the two gentlemen should remain, for awhile at any rate, in their present quarters, which were weather-tight and warm.

They were not inclined to dispute this recommendation, but they wanted to know where they could join the watchers when so disposed. Rather than trust to a verbal description of the place, which might mislead, Eugene (with a less weighty sense of personal trouble on him than he usually had) would go out with Mr. Inspector, note the spot, and come back.

On the shelving bank of the river, among the slimy stones of a causeway—not the special causeway of the Six Jolly Fellowships, which had a landing-place of its own, but another, a little removed, and very near to the old windmill which was the denounced man's dwelling-place—were a few boats; some, moored and already beginning to float; others, hauled up above the reach of the tide. Under one of these latter Eugene's companion disappeared. And when Eugene had observed its position with reference to the other boats, and had made sure that he could not miss it, he turned his eyes upon the building where, as he had been told, the lonely girl with the dark hair sat by the fire.

He could see the light of the fire shining through the window. Perhaps it drew him on to look in. Perhaps he had come out with the express intention. That part of the bank having rank grass growing on it, there was no difficulty in getting close, without any noise of footsteps: it was but to scramble up a ragged face of pretty hard mud some three or four feet high and come upon the grass and to the window. He came to the window by that means.

She had no other light than the light of the fire. The unkindled lamp stood on the table. She sat on the ground, looking at the brazier, with her face leaning on her hand. There was a kind of film or flicker on her face, which at first he took to be the fitful firelight; but, on a second look, he saw that she was weeping. A sad and solitary spectacle, as shown him by the rising and the falling of the fire.

It was a little window of but four pieces of glass, and was not curtained; he chose it because the larger window near it was. It showed him the room, and the bills upon the wall respecting the drowned people starting out and receding by turns. But he glanced slightly at them, though he looked long and steadily at her. A deep rich piece of colour, with the brown flush of her cheek and the shining lustre of her hair, though sad and solitary, weeping by the rising and the falling of the fire.

She started up. He had been so very still, that he felt sure it was not he who had disturbed her, so merely withdrew from the window and stood near it in the shadow of the wall. She opened the door, and said in an alarmed tone, "Father, was that you calling me?" And again, "Father!" And once again, after listening, "Father! I thought I heard you call me twice before!"

No response. As she re-entered at the door, he dropped over the bank and made his way back, among the ooze and near the hiding-place, to Mortimer Lightwood: to whom he told what he had seen of the girl, and how this was becoming very grim indeed.

"If the real man feels as guilty as I do," said Eugene, "he is remarkably uncomfortable."

"Influence of secrecy," suggested Lightwood.

"I am not at all obliged to it for making me Gu Fawkes in the vault and a Sneak in the area both at once," said Eugene. "Give me some more of that stuff."

Lightwood helped him to some more of that stuff, but it had been cooling, and didn't answer now.

"Pooh," said Eugene, spitting it out among the ashes. "Tastes like the wash of the river."



WAITING FOR FATHER.

"Are you so familiar with the flavour of the wash of the river?"
 "I seem to be to-night. I feel as if I had been half drowned, and swallowing a gallon of it."

"Influence of locality," suggested Lightwood.
 "You are mighty learned to-night, you and your influences," returned Eugene.
 "How long shall we stay here?"

"How long do you think?"
 "If I could choose, I should say a minute," replied Eugene, "for the Jolly Fellowship Porters are not the jolliest dogs I have known. But I suppose we are best here till they turn us out with the other suspicious characters, at midnight."

Thereupon he stirred the fire, and sat down on one side of it. It struck eleven, and he made believe to compose himself patiently. But gradually he took the fidgets in one leg, and then in the other leg, and then in one arm, and then in the other arm, and then in his chin, and then in his back, and then in his forehead, and then in his hair, and then in his nose; and then he stretched himself recumbent on two chairs, and groaned; and then he started up.

"Invisible insects of diabolical activity swarm in this place. I am tickled and twitched all over. Mentally, I have now committed a burglary under the meanest circumstances, and the myrmidons of justice are at my heels."

"I am quite as bad," said Lightwood, sitting up facing him, with a tumbled head, after going through some wonderful evolutions, in which his head had been the lowest part of him. "This restlessness began, with me, long ago. All the time you were out, I felt like Gulliver with the Lilliputians firing upon him."

"It won't do, Mortimer. We must get into the air; we must join our dear friend and brother, Riderhood. And let us tranquillize ourselves by making a compact. Next time (with a view to our peace of mind) we'll commit the crime, instead of taking the criminal. You swear it?"

"Certainly."

"Sworn! Let Tippins look to it. Her life's in danger."

Mortimer rang the bell to pay the score, and Bob appeared to transact that business with him: whom Eugene, in his careless extravagance, asked if he would like a situation in the lime-trade?

"Thankee sir, no sir," said Bob. "I've a good situation here, sir."

"If you change your mind at any time," returned Eugene, "come to me at my works, and you'll always find an opening in the lime-kiln."

"Thankee sir," said Bob.

"This is my partner," said Eugene, "who keeps the books and attends to the wages. A fair day's wages for a fair day's work is ever my partner's motto."

"And a very good 'un it is, gentlemen," said Bob, receiving his fee, and drawing a bow out of his head with his right hand, very much as he would have drawn a pint of beer out of the beer engine.

"Eugene," Mortimer apostrophized him, laughing quite heartily when they were alone again, "how *can* you be so ridiculous?"

"I am in a ridiculous humour," quoth Eugene; "I am a ridiculous fellow. Everything is ridiculous. Come along!"

It passed into Mortimer Lightwood's mind that a change of some sort, best expressed perhaps as an intensification of all that was wildest and most negligent and reckless in his friend, had come upon him in the last half-hour or so. Thoroughly used to him as he was, he found something new and strained in him that was for the moment perplexing. This passed into his mind, and passed out again; but he remembered it afterwards.

"There's where she sits, you see," said Eugene, when they were standing under the bank, roared and riven at by the wind. "There's the light of her fire."

"I'll take a peep through the window," said Mortimer.

"No, don't!" Eugene caught him by the arm. "Best not make a show of her. Come to our honest friend."

He led him to the post of watch, and they both dropped down and crept under the lee of the boat; a better shelter than it had seemed before, being directly contrasted with the blowing wind and the bare night.

"Mr. Inspector at home?" whispered Eugene.

"Here I am, sir."

"And our friend of the perspiring brow is at the far corner there? Good. Anything happened?"

"His daughter has been out, thinking she heard him calling, unless it was a sign to him to keep out of the way. It might have been."

"It might have been Rule Britannia," muttered Eugene, "but it wasn't. Mortimer!"

"Here!" (On the other side of Mr. Inspector.)

"Two burglaries now, and a forgery!"

With this indication of his depressed state of mind, Eugene fell silent.

They were all silent for a long while. As it got to be flood-tide, and the water came nearer to them, noises on the river became more frequent, and they listened more. To the turning of steam-paddles, to the clinking of iron chain, to the creaking of blocks, to the measured working of oars, to the occasional violent barking of some passing dog on ship-board, who seemed to scent them lying in their hiding-place. The night was not so dark but that, besides the lights at bows and mastheads gliding to and fro, they could discern some shadowy bulk attached; and now and then a ghostly lighter with a large dark sail, like a warning arm, would start up very near them, pass on, and vanish. At this time of their watch, the water close to them would be often agitated by some impulsion given it from a distance. Often they believed this beat and splash to be the boat they lay in wait for, running in ashore; and again and again they would have started up, but for the immobility with which the informer, well used to the river, kept quiet in his place.

The wind carried away the striking of the great multitude of city church clocks, for those lay to leeward of them; but there were bells to windward that told them of its being One—Two—Three. Without that aid they would have known how the night wore, by the falling of the tide, recorded in the appearance of an ever-widening black wet strip of shore, and the emergence of the paved causeway from the river, foot by foot.

As the time so passed, this slinking business became a more and more precarious one. It would seem as if the man had had some intimation of what was in hand against him, or had taken fright. His movements might have been planned to gain for him, in getting beyond their reach, twelve hours' advantage. The honest man who had expended the sweat of his brow became uneasy, and began to complain with bitterness of the proneness of mankind to cheat him—him invested with the dignity of Labour!

Their retreat was so chosen that while they could watch the river, they could watch the house. No one had passed in or out, since the daughter thought she heard the father calling. No one could pass in or out without being seen.

"But it will be light at five," said Mr. Inspector, "and then we shall be seen."

"Look here," said Riderhood, "what do you say to this? He may have been larking in and out, and just holding his own betwixt two or three bridges, for hours back."

"What do you make of that?" said Mr. Inspector. Stoical, but contradictory. "He may be doing so at this present time."

"What do you make of that?" said Mr. Inspector.

"My boat's among them boats here at the causeway."

"And what do you make of your boat?" said Mr. Inspector.

"What if I put off in her and take a look round? I know his ways, and the likely nooks he favours. I know where he'd be at such a time of the tide, and where he'd be at such another time. Ain't I been his pardner? None of you need show. None of you need stir. I can shove her off without help; and as to me being seen, I'm about at all times."

"You might have given a worse opinion," said Mr. Inspector, after brief consideration. "Try it."

"Stop a bit. Let's work it out. If I want you, I'll drop round under the Fellowships and tip you a whistle."

"If I might so far presume as to offer a suggestion to my honourable and gallant friend, whose knowledge of naval matters far be it from me to impeach," Eugene struck in with great deliberation, "it would be, that to tip a whistle is to advertise mystery and invite speculation. My honourable and gallant friend will, I trust, excuse me, as an independent member, for throwing out a remark which I feel to be due to this house and the country."

"Was that the T'other Governor, or Lawyer Lightwood?" asked Riderhood. For they spoke as they crouched or lay, without seeing one another's faces.

"In reply to the question put by my honourable and gallant friend," said Eugene, who was lying on his back with his hat on his face, as an attitude highly expressive of watchfulness, "I can have no hesitation in replying (it not being inconsistent with the public service) that those accents were the accents of the T'other Governor."

"You've tolerable good eyes, ain't you, Governor? You've all tolerable good eyes, ain't you?" demanded the informer.

All.

"Then if I row up under the Fellowships and lay there, no need to whistle. You'll make out that there's a speck of something or another there, and you'll know it's me, and you'll come down that causeway to me. Understood all?"

Understood all.

"Off she goes then!"

In a moment, with the wind cutting keenly at him sideways, he was staggering down to his boat; in a few moments he was clear, and creeping up the river under their own shore.

Eugene had raised himself on his elbow to look into the darkness after him. "I wish the boat of my honourable and gallant friend," he murmured, lying down again and speaking into his hat, "may be endowed with philanthropy enough to turn bottom-upward and extinguish him!—Mortimer."

"My honourable friend."

"Three burglaries, two forgeries, and a midnight assassination."

Yet in spite of having those weights on his conscience, Eugene was somewhat enlivened by the late slight change in the circumstances of affairs. So were his two companions. Its being a change was everything. The suspense seemed to have taken a new lease, and to have begun afresh from a recent date. There was something additional to look for. They were all three more sharply on the alert, and less deadened by the miserable influences of the place and time.

More than an hour had passed, and they were even dozing, when one of the three—each said it was he, and he had *not* dozed—made out Riderhood in his boat at the spot agreed on. They sprang up, came out from their shelter, and went

down to him. When he saw them coming, he dropped alongside the causeway; so that they, standing on the causeway, could speak with him in whispers, under the shadowy mass of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters fast asleep.

"Blest if I can make it out!" said he, staring at them.

"Make what out? Have you seen him?"

"No."

"What *have* you seen?" asked Lightwood. For he was staring at them in the strangest way.

"I've seen his boat."

"Not empty?"

"Yes, empty. And what's more,—adrift. And what's more,—with one scull gone. And what's more,—with t'other scull jammed in the thowels and broke short off. And what's more,—the boat's drove tight by the tide 'atwixt two tiers of barges. And what's more,—he's in luck again, by George if he ain't!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BIRD OF PREY BROUGHT DOWN.

COLD on the shore, in the raw cold of that leaden crisis in the four-and-twenty hours when the vital force of all the noblest and prettiest things that live is at its lowest, the three watchers looked each at the blank faces of the other two, and all at the blank face of Riderhood in his boat.

"Gaffer's boat, Gaffer in luck again, and yet no Gaffer!" So spake Riderhood, staring disconsolate.

As if with one accord, they all turned their eyes towards the light of the fire shining through the window. It was fainter and duller. Perhaps fire, like the higher animal and vegetable life it helps to sustain, has its greatest tendency towards death, when the night is dying and the day is not yet born.

"If it was me that had the law of this here job in hand," growled Riderhood with a threatening shake of his head, "blest if I wouldn't lay hold of *her*, at any rate!"

"Ay, but it is not you," said Eugene. With something so suddenly fierce in him that the informer returned submissively; "Well, well, well, T'other Governor, I didn't say it was. A man may speak."

"And vermin may be silent," said Eugene. "Hold your tongue, you water-rat!"

Astonished by his friend's unusual heat, Lightwood stared too, and then said: "What can have become of this man?"

"Can't imagine. Unless he dived overboard." The informer wiped his brow ruefully as he said it, sitting in his boat and always staring disconsolate.

"Did you make his boat fast?"

"She's fast enough till the tide runs back. I couldn't make her faster than she is. Come aboard of mine, and see for your own selves."

There was a little backwardness in complying, for the freight looked too much for the boat; but on Riderhood's protesting "that he had had half-a-dozen, dead and alive, in her afore now, and she was nothing deep in the water nor down in the stern even then, to speak of," they carefully took their places, and trimmed the crazy thing. While they were doing so, Riderhood still sat staring disconsolate.

"All right. Give way!" said Lightwood.