

CHAPTER XV.

What was caught in the Traps that were set.

How Bradley Headstone had been racked and riven in his mind since the quiet evening when by the riverside he had risen, as it were, out of the ashes of the Bargeman, none but he could have told. Not even he could have told, for such misery can only be felt.

First, he had to bear the combined weight of the knowledge of what he had done, of that haunting reproach that he might have done it so much better, and of the dread of discovery. This was load enough to crush him, and he laboured under it day and night. It was as heavy on him in his scanty sleep, as in his red-eyed waking hours. It bore him down with a dread unchanging monotony, in which there was not a moment's variety. The overweighted beast of burden, or the overweighted slave, can for certain instants shift the physical load, and find some slight respite even in enforcing additional pain upon such a set of muscles or such a limb. Not even that poor mockery of relief could the wretched man obtain, under the steady pressure of the infernal atmosphere into which he had entered.

Time went by, and no visible suspicion dogged him; time went by, and in such public accounts of the attack as were renewed at intervals, he began to see Mr. Lightwood (who acted as lawyer for the injured man) straying further from the fact, going wider of

the issue, and evidently slackening in his zeal. By degrees, a glimmering of the cause of this began to break on Bradley's sight. Then came the chance encounter with Mr. Milvey at the railway station (where he often lingered in his leisure hours, as a place where any fresh news of his deed would be circulated, or any placard referring to it would be posted), and then he saw in the light what he had brought about.

For, then he saw that through his desperate attempt to separate those two for ever, he had been made the means of uniting them. That he had dipped his hands in blood, to mark himself a miserable fool and tool. That Eugene Wrayburn, for his wife's sake, set him aside and left him to crawl along his blasted course. He thought of Fate, or Providence, or be the directing Power what it might, as having put a fraud upon him — overreached him — and in his impotent mad rage bit, and tore, and had his fit.

New assurance of the truth came upon him in the next few following days, when it was put forth how the wounded man had been married on his bed, and to whom, and how, though always in a dangerous condition, he was a shade better. Bradley would far rather have been seized for his murder, than he would have read that passage, knowing himself spared, and knowing why.

But, not to be still further defrauded and overreached — which he would be, if implicated by Riderhood, and punished by the law for his abject failure, as though it had been a success — he kept close in his school during the day, ventured out warily at night, and went no more to the railway station. He examined the advertisements in the newspapers for any sign that

Riderhood acted on his hinted threat of so summoning him to renew their acquaintance, but found none. Having paid him handsomely for the support and accommodation he had had at the Lock House, and knowing him to be a very ignorant man who could not write, he began to doubt whether he was to be feared at all, or whether they need ever meet again.

All this time, his mind was never off the rack, and his raging sense of having been made to fling himself across the chasm which divided those two, and bridge it over for their coming together, never cooled down. This horrible condition brought on other fits. He could not have said how many, or when; but he saw in the faces of his pupils that they had seen him in that state, and that they were possessed by a dread of his relapsing.

One winter day when a slight fall of snow was feathering the sills and frames of the schoolroom windows, he stood at his black board, crayon in hand, about to commence with a class; when, reading in the countenances of those boys that there was something wrong, and that they seemed in alarm for him, he turned his eyes to the door towards which they faced. He then saw a slouching man of forbidding appearance standing in the midst of the school, with a bundle under his arm; and saw that it was Riderhood.

He sat down on a stool which one of his boys put for him, and he had a passing knowledge that he was in danger of falling, and that his face was becoming distorted. But, the fit went off for that time, and he wiped his mouth, and stood up again.

“Beg your pardon, governor! By your leave!” said

Riderhood, knuckling his forehead, with a chuckle and a leer. "What place may this be?"

"This is a school."

"Where young folks learns wot's right?" said Riderhood, gravely nodding. "Beg your pardon, governor! By your leave! But who teaches this school?"

"I do."

"You're the master, are you, learned governor?"

"Yes. I am the master."

"And a lovely thing it must be," said Riderhood, "fur to learn young folks wot's right, and fur to know wot *they* know wot you do it. Beg your pardon, learned governor! By your leave! — That there black board; wot's it for?"

"It is for drawing on, or writing on."

"Is it though!" said Riderhood. "Who'd have thought it, from the looks on it! *Would* you be so kind as write your name upon it, learned governor?" (In a wheedling tone.)

Bradley hesitated for a moment; but placed his usual signature, enlarged, upon the board.

"I ain't a learned character myself," said Riderhood, surveying the class, "but I do admire learning in others. I should dearly like to hear these here young folks read that there name off, from the writing."

The arms of the class went up. At the miserable master's nod, the shrill chorus arose: "Bradley Headstone!"

"No?" cried Riderhood. "You don't mean it? Headstone! Why, that's in a churchyard. Hooroar for another turn!"

Another tossing of arms, another nod, and another shrill chorus: "Bradley Headstone!"

"I've got it now!" said Riderhood, after attentively listening, and internally repeating: "Bradley. I see. Chris'en name, Bradley sim'lar to Roger which is my own. Eh? Fam'ly name, Headstone, sim'lar to Riderhood which is my own. Eh?"

Shrill chorus. "Yes!"

"Might you be acquainted, learned governor," said Riderhood, "with a person of about your own heighth and breadth, and wot 'ud pull down in a scale about your own weight, answering to a name sounding summat like Totherest?"

With a desperation in him that made him perfectly quiet, though his jaw was heavily squared; with his eyes upon Riderhood; and with traces of quickened breathing in his nostrils; the schoolmaster replied, in a suppressed voice, after a pause: "I think I know the man you mean."

"I thought you knowed the man I mean, learned governor. I want the man."

With a half glance around him at his pupils, Bradley returned: "Do you suppose he is here?"

"Begging your pardon, learned governor, and by your leave," said Riderhood, with a laugh, "how could I suppose he's here, when there's nobody here but you, and me, and these young lambs wot you're a learning on? But he is most excellent company, that man, and I want him to come and see me at my Lock, up the river."

"I'll tell him so."

"D'ye think he'll come?" asked Riderhood.

"I am sure he will."

"Having got your word for him," said Riderhood, "I shall count upon him. P'raps you'd so fur obleege

me, learned governor, as tell him that if he don't come precious soon, I'll look him up."

"He shall know it."

"Thankee. As I says a while ago," pursued Riderhood, changing his hoarse tone and leering round upon the class again, "though not a learned character my own self, I do admire learning in others, to be sure! Being here and having met with your kind attention, Master, might I, afore I go, ask a question of these here young lambs of yourn?"

"If it is in the way of school," said Bradley, always sustaining his dark look at the other, and speaking in his suppressed voice, "you may."

"Oh! It's in the way of school!" cried Riderhood. "I'll pound it, Master, to be in the way of school. Wot's the divisions of water, my lambs? Wot sorts of water is there on the land?"

Shrill chorus: "Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds."

"Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds," said Riderhood. "They've got all the lot, Master! Blowed if I shouldn't have left out lakes, never having clapped eyes upon one, to my knowledge. Seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds. Wot is it, lambs, as they ketches in seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds?"

Shrill chorus (with some contempt for the ease of the question): "Fish!"

"Good a-gin!" said Riderhood. "But wot else is it, my lambs, as they sometimes ketches in rivers?"

Chorus at a loss. One shrill voice: "Weed!"

"Good agin?" cried Riderhood. "But it ain't weed neither. You'll never guess, my dears. Wot is it, besides fish, as they sometimes ketches in rivers? Well! I'll tell you. It's suits o'clothes."

Bradley's face changed.

"Leastways, lambs," said Riderhood, observing him out of the corners of his eyes, "that's wot I my own self sometimes ketches in rivers. For strike me blind, my lambs, if I didn't ketch in a river the wery bundle under my arm!"

The class looked at the master, as if appealing from the irregular entrapment of this mode of examination. The master looked at the examiner, as if he would have torn him to pieces.

"I ask your pardon, learned governor," said Riderhood, smearing his sleeve across his mouth as he laughed with a relish, "tain't fair to the lambs, I know. It wos a bit of fun of mine. But upon my soul I drewed this here bundle out of a river! It's a Barge-man's suit of clothes. You see, it had been sunk there by the man as wore it, and I got it up."

"How do you know it was sunk by the man who wore it?" asked Bradley.

"'Cause I see him do it," said Riderhood.

They looked at each other. Bradley, slowly withdrawing his eyes, turned his face to the black board and slowly wiped his name out.

"A heap of thanks, Master," said Riderhood, "for bestowing so much of your time, and of the lambses' time, upon a man as hasn't got no other recommendation to you than being a honest man. Wishing to see at my Lock up the river, the person as we've spoke of, and as you've answered for, I takes my leave of the lambs and of their learned governor both."

With those words, he slouched out of the school, leaving the master to get through his weary work as he might, and leaving the whispering pupils to observe

the master's face until he fell into the fit which had been long impending.

The next day but one was Saturday, and a holiday. Bradley rose early, and set out on foot for Plashwater Weir Mill Lock. He rose so early that it was not yet light when he began his journey. Before extinguishing the candle by which he had dressed himself, he made a little parcel of his decent silver watch and its decent guard, and wrote inside the paper: "Kindly take care of these for me." He then addressed the parcel to Miss Peecher, and left it on the most protected corner of the little seat in her little porch.

It was a cold hard easterly morning when he latched the garden gate and turned away. The light snowfall which had feathered his schoolroom windows on the Thursday, still lingered in the air, and was falling white, while the wind blew black. The tardy day did not appear until he had been on foot two hours, and had traversed a great part of London from east to west. Such breakfast as he had, he took at the comfortless public-house where he had parted from Riderhood on the occasion of their night-walk. He took it, standing at the littered bar, and looked loweringly at a man who stood where Riderhood had stood that early morning.

He outwalked the short day, and was on the towing-path by the river, somewhat footsore, when the night closed in. Still two or three miles short of the Lock, he slackened his pace then, but went steadily on. The ground was now covered with snow, though thinly, and there were floating lumps of ice in the more exposed parts of the river, and broken sheets of ice under the shelter of the banks. He took heed of nothing but

the ice, the snow, and the distance, until he saw a light ahead, which he knew gleamed from the Lock House window. It arrested his steps, and he looked all around. The ice, and the snow, and he, and the one light, had absolute possession of the dreary scene. In the distance before him, lay the place where he had struck the worse than useless blows that mocked him with Lizzie's presence there as Eugene's wife. In the distance behind him, lay the place where the children with pointing arms had seemed to devote him to the demons in crying out his name. Within there, where the light was, was the man who as to both distances could give him up to ruin. To these limits had his world shrunk.

He mended his pace, keeping his eyes upon the light with a strange intensity, as if he were taking aim at it. When he approached it so nearly as that it parted into rays, they seemed to fasten themselves to him and draw him on. When he struck the door with his hand, his foot followed so quickly on his hand, that he was in the room before he was bidden to enter.

The light was the joint product of a fire and a candle. Between the two, with his feet on the iron fender, sat Riderhood, pipe in mouth.

He looked up with a surly nod when his visitor came in. His visitor looked down with a surly nod. His outer clothing removed, the visitor then took a seat on the opposite side of the fire.

"Not a smoker, I think?" said Riderhood, pushing a bottle to him across the table.

"No."

They both lapsed into silence, with their eyes upon the fire.

"You don't need to be told I am here," said Bradley at length. "Who is to begin?"

"I'll begin," said Riderhood, "when I've smoked this here pipe out."

He finished it with great deliberation, knocked out the ashes on the hob, and put it by.

"I'll begin," he then repeated, "Bradley Headstone, Master, if you wish it."

"Wish it? I wish to know what you want with me."

"And so you shall." Riderhood had looked hard at his hands and his pockets, apparently as a precautionary measure lest he should have any weapon about him. But, he now leaned forward, turning the collar of his waistcoat with an inquisitive finger, and asked, "Why, where's your watch?"

"I have left it behind."

"I want it. But it can be fetched. I've took a fancy to it."

Bradley answered with a contemptuous laugh.

"I want it," repeated Riderhood, in a louder voice, "and I mean to have it."

"That is what you want of me, is it?"

"No," said Riderhood, still louder; "it's on'y part of what I want of you. I want money of you."

"Anything else?"

"Everything else!" roared Riderhood, in a very loud and furious way. "Answer me like that, and I won't talk to you at all."

Bradley looked at him.

"Don't so much as look at me like that, or I won't

talk to you at all," vociferated Riderhood. "But, instead of talking, I'll bring my hand down upon you with all its weight," heavily smiting the table with great force, "and smash you!"

"Go on," said Bradley, after moistening his lips.

"O! I'm a going on. Don't you fear but I'll go on full-fast enough for you, and fur enough for you, without your telling. Look here, Bradley Headstone, Master. You might have split the T'other governor to chips and wedges, without my caring, except that I might have come upon you for a glass or so now and then. Else why have to do with you at all? But when you copied my clothes, and when you copied my neck-handkercher, and when you shook blood upon me after you had done the trick, you did wot I'll be paid for and paid heavy for. If it come to be throw'd upon you, you was to be ready to throw it upon me, was you? Where else but in Plashwater Weir Mill Lock was there a man dressed according as described? Where else but in Plashwater Weir Mill Lock was there a man as had had words with him coming through in his boat? Look at the Lock-keeper in Plashwater Weir Mill Lock, in them same answering clothes and with that same answering red neckhankercher, and see whether his clothes happens to be bloody or not. Yes, they do happen to be bloody. Ah, you sly devil!"

Bradley, very white, sat looking at him in silence.

"But two could play at your game," said Riderhood, snapping his fingers at him half a dozen times, "and I played it long ago; long afore you tried your clumsy hand at it; in days when you hadn't begun croaking your lecters or what not in your school. I know to a figure how you done it. Where you stole

away, I could steal away arter you, and do it knowinger than you. I know how you come away from London in your own clothes, and where you changed your clothes, and hid your clothes. I see you with my own eyes take your own clothes from their hiding-place among them felled trees, and take a dip in the river to account for your dressing yourself, to any one as might come by. I see you rise up Bradley Headstone, Master, where you sat down Bargeman. I see you pitch your Bargeman's bundle into the river. I hooked your Bargeman's bundle out of the river. I've got your Bargeman's clothes, tore this way and that way with the scuffle, stained green with the grass, and spattered all over with what bust from the blows. I've got them, and I've got you. I don't care a curse for the T'other governor, alive or dead, but I care a many curses for my own self. And as you laid your plots agin me and was a sly devil agin me, I'll be paid for it — I'll be paid for it — I'll be paid for it — till I've drained you dry!"

Bradley looked at the fire, with a working face, and was silent for a while. At last he said, with what seemed an inconsistent composure of voice and feature:

"You can't get blood out of a stone, Riderhood."

"I can get money out of a schoolmaster though."

"You can't get out of me what is not in me. You can't wrest from me what I have not got. Mine is but a poor calling. You have had more than two guineas from me, already. Do you know how long it has taken me (allowing for a long and arduous training) to earn such a sum?"

"I don't know, nor I don't care. Yours is a 'spec-

table calling. To save your 'spectability, it's worth your while to pawn every article of clothes you've got, sell every stick in your house, and beg and borrow every penny you can get trusted with. When you've done that and handed over, I'll leave you. Not afore."

"How do you mean, you'll leave me?"

"I mean as I'll keep you company, wherever you go, when you go away from here. Let the Lock take care of itself. I'll take care of you, once I've got you."

Bradley again looked at the fire. Eyeing him aside, Riderhood took up his pipe, refilled it, lighted it, and sat smoking. Bradley leaned his elbows on his knees, and his head upon his hands, and looked at the fire with a most intent abstraction.

"Riderhood," he said, raising himself in his chair, after a long silence, and drawing out his purse and putting it on the table. "Say I part with this, which is all the money I have; say I let you have my watch; say that every quarter, when I draw my salary, I pay you a certain portion of it."

"Say nothink of the sort," retorted Riderhood, shaking his head as he smoked. "You've got away once, and I won't run the chance agin. I've had trouble enough to find you, and shouldn't have found you, if I hadn't seen you slipping along the street over-night, and watched you till you was safe housed. I'll have one settlement with you for good and all."

"Riderhood, I am a man who has lived a retired life. I have no resources beyond myself. I have absolutely no friends."

"That's a lie," said Riderhood. "You've got one friend as I knows of; one as is good for a Savings-Bank book, or I'm a blue monkey!"

Bradley's face darkened, and his hand slowly closed on the purse and drew it back, as he sat listening for what the other should go on to say.

"I went into the wrong shop, fust, last Thursday," said Riderhood. "Found myself among the young ladies, by George! Over the young ladies, I see a Missis. That Missis is sweet enough upon you, Master, to sell herself up, slap, to get you out of trouble. Make her do it then."

Bradley stared at him so very suddenly that Riderhood, not quite knowing how to take it, affected to be occupied with the encircling smoke from his pipe; fanning it away with his hand, and blowing it off.

"You spoke to the mistress, did you?" inquired Bradley, with that former composure of voice and feature that seemed inconsistent, and with averted eyes.

"Poof! Yes," said Riderhood, withdrawing his attention from the smoke. "I spoke to her. I didn't say much to her. She was put in a fluster by my dropping in among the young ladies (I never did set up for a lady's man), and she took me into her parlour to hope as there was nothink wrong. I tells her, 'O no, nothink wrong. The master's my very good friend.' But I see how the land laid, and that she was comfortable off."

Bradley put the purse in his pocket, grasped his left wrist with his right hand, and sat rigidly contemplating the fire.

"She couldn't live more handy to you than she

does," said Riderhood, "and when I goes home with you (as of course I am a going), I recommend you to clean her out without loss of time. You can marry her, arter you and me have come to a settlement. She's nice-looking, and I know you can't be keeping company with no one else, having been so lately disapinted in another quarter."

Not one other word did Bradley utter all that night. Not once did he change his attitude, or loosen his hold upon his wrist. Rigid before the fire, as if it were a charmed flame that was turning him old, he sat, with the dark lines deepening in his face, its stare becoming more and more haggard, its surface turning whiter and whiter as if it were being overspread with ashes, and the very texture and colour of his hair degenerating.

Not until the late daylight made the window transparent, did this decaying statue move. Then it slowly arose, and sat in the window looking out.

Riderhood had kept his chair all night. In the earlier part of the night he had muttered twice or thrice that it was bitter cold; or that the fire burnt fast, when he got up to mend it; but, as he could elicit from his companion neither sound nor movement, he had afterwards held his peace. He was making some disorderly preparations for coffee, when Bradley came from the window and put on his outer coat and hat.

"Hadn't us better have a bit o' breakfast afore we start?" said Riderhood. "It ain't good to freeze a empty stomach, Master."

Without a sign to show that he heard, Bradley walked out of the Lock House. Catching up from the table a piece of bread, and taking his Bargeman's

bundle under his arm, Riderhood immediately followed him. Bradley turned towards London. Riderhood caught him up, and walked at his side.

The two men trudged on, side by side, in silence, full three miles. Suddenly, Bradley turned to retrace his course. Instantly, Riderhood turned likewise, and they went back side by side.

Bradley re-entered the Lock House. So did Riderhood. Bradley sat down in the window. Riderhood warmed himself at the fire. After an hour or more, Bradley abruptly got up again, and again went out, but this time turned the other way. Riderhood was close after him, caught him up in a few paces, and walked at his side.

This time, as before, when he found his attendant not to be shaken off, Bradley suddenly turned back. This time, as before, Riderhood turned back along with him. But, not this time, as before, did they go into the Lock House, for Bradley came to a stand on the snow-covered turf by the Lock, looking up the river and down the river. Navigation was impeded by the frost, and the scene was a mere white and yellow desert.

"Come, come, Master," urged Riderhood, at his side. "This is a dry game. And where's the good of it? You can't get rid of me, except by coming to a settlement. I am a going along with you wherever you go."

Without a word of reply, Bradley passed quickly from him over the wooden bridge on the lock gates. "Why, there's even less sense in this move than t'other," said Riderhood, following. "The Weir's there, and you'll have to come back, you know."

Without taking the least notice, Bradley leaned his body against a post, in a resting attitude, and there rested with his eyes cast down. "Being brought here," said Riderhood, gruffly, "I'll turn it to some use by changing my gates." With a rattle and a rush of water, he then swung to the lock gates that were standing open, before opening the others. So, both sets of gates were, for the moment, closed.

"You'd better by far be reasonable, Bradley Headstone, Master," said Riderhood, passing him, "or I'll drain you all the dryer for it, when we do settle. — Ah! Would you!"

Bradley had caught him round the body. He seemed to be girdled with an iron ring. They were on the brink of the Lock, about midway between the two sets of gates.

"Let go!" said Riderhood, "or I'll get my knife out and slash you wherever I can cut you. Let go!"

Bradley was drawing to the Lock-edge. Riderhood was drawing away from it. It was a strong grapple, and a fierce struggle, arm and leg. Bradley got him round, with his back to the Lock, and still worked him backward.

"Let go!" said Riderhood. "Stop! What are you trying at? You can't drown Me. Ain't I told you that the man as has come through drowning can never be drowned? I can't be drowned."

"I can be!" returned Bradley, in a desperate, clenched voice. "I am resolved to be. I'll hold you living, and I'll hold you dead. Come down!"

Riderhood went over into the smooth pit, backward, and Bradley Headstone upon him. When the two were found, lying under the ooze and scum behind one of

the rotting gates, Riderhood's hold had relaxed, probably in falling, and his eyes were staring upward. But, he was girdled still with Bradley's iron ring, and the rivets of the iron ring held tight.
