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SEVENOAKS.

CHAPTER I.

WHICH TELLS ABOUT SEVENOAKS, AND HOW MISS BUTTERWORTH PASSED ONE OF HER EVENINGS.

EVERYBODY has seen Sevenoaks, or a hundred towns so much like it, in most particulars, that a description of any one of them would present it to the imagination—a town strung upon a stream, like beads upon a thread, or charms upon a chain. Sevenoaks was richer in chain than charms, for its abundant water-power was only partially used. It plunged, and roared, and played, and sparkled, because it had not half enough to do. It leaped down three or four cataracts in passing through the village; and, as it started from living springs far northward among the woods and mountains, it never failed in its supplies.

Few of the people of Sevenoaks—thoughtless workers, mainly—either knew or cared whence it came, or whither it went. They knew it as "The Branch;" but Sevenoaks was so far from the trunk, down to which it sent its sap, and from which it received no direct return, that no significance was attached to its name. But it roared all day, and roared all night, summer and winter alike, and the sound became a part of the atmosphere.

Resonance was one of the qualities of the oxygen which the people breathed, so that if, at any midnight moment, the roar had been suddenly hushed, they would have waked with a start and a sense of suffocation, and leaped from their beds.

Among the charms that dangled from this liquid chain—depending from the vest of a landscape which ended in a ruffle of woods toward the north, overtopped by the head of a mountain—was a huge factory that had been added to from time to time, as necessity demanded, until it had become an imposing and not uncomely pile. Below this were two or three dilapidated saw-mills, a grist-mill in daily use, and a fulling-mill—a remnant of the old times when homespun went its pilgrimage to town—to be fulled, colored, and dressed—from all the sparsely-settled country around.

On a little plateau by the side of The Branch was a row of stores and dram-shops and butchers' establishments. Each had a sort of square, false front, pierced by two staring windows and a door, that reminded one of a lion *couchant*—very large in the face and very thin in the flank. Then there were crowded in, near the mill, little rows of one-story houses, occupied entirely by operatives, and owned by the owner of the mill. All the inhabitants, not directly connected with the mill, were as far away from it as they could go. Their houses were set back upon either acclivity which rose from the gorge that the stream had worn, dotting the hill-sides in every direction. There was a clumsy town-hall, there were three or four churches, there was a high school and a low tavern. It was, on the whole, a village of importance, but the great mill was somehow its soul and centre. A fair farming and grazing country stretched back from it eastward and westward, and Sevenoaks was its only home market.

It is not proposed, in this history, to tell where Seven

oaks was, and is to-day. It may have been, or may be, in Maine, or New Hampshire, or Vermont, or New York. It was in the northern part of one of these States, and not far from the border of a wilderness almost as deep and silent as any that can be found beyond the western limit of settlement and civilization. The red man had left it forever, but the bear, the deer, and the moose remained. The streams and lakes were full of trout; otter and sable still attracted the trapper, and here and there a lumberman lingered alone in his cabin, enamored of the solitude and the wild pursuits to which a hardly gentler industry had introduced him. Such lumber as could be drifted down the streams had long been cut and driven out, and the woods were left to the hunter and his prey, and to the incursions of sportsmen and seekers for health, to whom the rude residents became guides, cooks, and servants of all work, for the sake of occasional society, and that ever-serviceable consideration—money.

There were two establishments in Sevenoaks which stood so far away from the stream that they could hardly be described as attached to it. Northward, on the top of the bleakest hill in the region, stood the Sevenoaks poor-house. In dimensions and population it was utterly out of proportion to the size of the town, for the people of Sevenoaks seemed to degenerate into paupers with wonderful facility. There was one man in the town who was known to be getting rich, while all the rest grew poor. Even the keepers of the dram-shops, though they seemed to do a thriving business, did not thrive. A great deal of work was done, but people were paid very little for it. If a man tried to leave the town for the purpose of improving his condition, there was always some mortgage on his property, or some impossibility of selling what he had for money, or his absolute dependence on each day's labor for each day's bread.

that stood in the way. One by one—sick, disabled, discouraged, dead-beaten—they drifted into the poor-house, which, as the years went on, grew into a shabby, double pile of buildings, between which ran a county road.

This establishment was a county as well as a town institution, and, theoretically, one group of its buildings was devoted to the reception of county paupers, while the other was assigned to the poor of Sevenoaks. Practically, the keeper of both mingled his boarders indiscriminately, to suit his personal convenience.

The hill, as it climbed somewhat abruptly from the western bank of the stream—it did this in the grand leisure of the old geologic centuries—apparently got out of breath and sat down when its task was half done. Where it sat it left a beautiful plateau of five or six acres, and from this it rose, and went on climbing, until it reached the summit of its effort, and descended the other side. On the brow of this plateau stood seven huge oaks which the chopper's axe, for some reason or another, had spared; and the locality, in all the early years of settlement, was known by the name of "The Seven Oaks." They formed a notable landmark, and, at last, the old designation having been worn by usage, the town was incorporated with the name of Sevenoaks, in a single word.

On this plateau the owner of the mill, Mr. Robert Belcher—himself an exceptional product of the village—had built his residence—a large, white, pretentious dwelling, surrounded and embellished by all the appointments of wealth. The house was a huge cube, ornamented at its corners and cornices with all possible flowers of a rude architecture, reminding one of an elephant that, in a fit of incontinent playfulness, had indulged in antics characteristic of its clumsy bulk and brawn. Outside were ample stables, a green-house, a Chinese pagoda that was called "the summer-house."

an exquisite garden and trees, among which latter were carefully cherished the seven ancient oaks that had given the town its name.

Robert Belcher was not a gentleman. He supposed himself to be one, but he was mistaken. Gentlemen of wealth usually built a fine house; so Mr. Belcher built one. Gentlemen kept horses, a groom and a coachman; Mr. Belcher did the same. Gentlemen of wealth built green-houses for themselves and kept a gardener; Mr. Belcher could do no less. He had no gentlemanly tastes, to be sure, but he could buy or hire these for money; so he bought and hired them; and when Robert Belcher walked through his stables and jested with his men, or sauntered into his green-house and about his grounds, he rubbed his heavy hands together, and fancied that the costly things by which he had surrounded himself were the insignia of a gentleman.

From his windows he could look down upon the village, all of which he either owned or controlled. He owned the great mill; he owned the water-privilege; he owned many of the dwellings, and held mortgages on many others; he owned the churches, for all purposes practical to himself; he owned the ministers—if not, then this was another mistake that he had made. So long as it was true that they could not live without him, he was content with his title. He patronized the church, and the church was too weak to decline his ostentatious courtesy. He humiliated every man who came into his presence, seeking a subscription for a religious or charitable purpose, but his subscription was always sought, and as regularly obtained. Humbly to seek his assistance for any high purpose was a concession to his power, and to grant the assistance sought was to establish an obligation. He was willing to pay for personal influence and personal glory, and he often paid right royally.

Of course Mr. Belcher's residence had a library; all gentlemen have libraries. Mr. Belcher's did not contain many books, but it contained a great deal of room for them. Here he spent his evenings, kept his papers in a huge safe built into the wall, smoked, looked down on the twinkling village and his huge mill, counted his gains, and constructed his schemes. Of Mrs. Belcher and the little Belchers, he saw but little. He fed and dressed them well, as he did his horses. All gentlemen feed and dress their dependents well. He was proud of his family as he saw them riding in their carriage. They looked gay and comfortable, and were, as he thought, objects of envy among the humbler folk of the town, all of which reflected pleasantly upon himself.

On a late April evening, of a late spring in 18—, he was sitting in his library, buried in a huge easy-chair, thinking, smoking, scheming. The shutters were closed, the lamps were lighted, and a hickory fire was blazing upon the hearth. Around the rich man were spread the luxuries which his wealth had bought—the velvet carpet, the elegant chairs, the heavy library table, covered with costly appointments, pictures in broad gold frames, and one article of furniture that he had not been accustomed to see in a gentleman's library—an article that sprang out of his own personal wants. This was an elegant pier-glass, into whose depths he was accustomed to gaze in self-admiration. He was flashily dressed in a heavy coat, buff waistcoat, and drab trousers. A gold chain of fabulous weight hung around his neck and held his Jurgensen repeater.

He rose and walked his room, and rubbed his hands, as was his habit; then paused before his mirror, admired his robust figure and large face, brushed his hair back from his big brow, and walked on again. Finally he paused before his glass, and indulged in another habit peculiar to himself.

"Robert Belcher," said he, addressing the image in the mirror, "you are a brick! Yes, sir, you are a brick! You, Robert Belcher, sir, are an almighty smart man. You've outwitted the whole of 'em. Look at me, sir! Dare you tell me, sir, that I am not master of the situation? Ah! you hesitate; it is well! They all come to me, every man of 'em. It is 'Mr. Belcher, will you be so good?' and 'Mr. Belcher, I hope you are very well,' and 'Mr. Belcher, I want you to do better by me.' Ha! ha! ha! ha! My name is Norval. It isn't? Say that again and I'll throttle you! Yes, sir, I'll shake your rascally head off your shoulders! Down, down in the dust, and beg my pardon! It is well; go! Get you gone, sir, and remember not to beard the lion in his den!"

Exactly what this performance meant, it would be difficult to say. Mr. Belcher, in his visits to the city, had frequented theatres and admired the villains of the plays he had seen represented. He had noticed figures upon the boards that reminded him of his own. His addresses to his mirror afforded him an opportunity to exercise his gifts of speech and action, and, at the same time, to give form to his self-gratulations. They amused him; they ministered to his preposterous vanity. He had no companions in the town, and the habit gave him a sense of society, and helped to pass away his evenings. At the close of his effort he sat down and lighted another cigar. Growing drowsy, he laid it down on a little stand at his side, and settled back in his chair for a nap. He had hardly shut his eyes when there came a rap upon his door.

"Come in!"

"Please, sir," said a scared-looking maid, opening the door just wide enough to make room for her face.

"Well?" in a voice so sharp and harsh that the girl cringed.

"Please, sir, Miss Butterworth is at the door, and would like to see you."

Now, Miss Butterworth was the one person in all Sevenoaks who was not afraid of Robert Belcher. She had been at the public school with him when they were children; she had known every circumstance of his history; she was not dependent on him in any way, and she carried in her head an honest and fearless tongue. She was an itinerant tailoress, and having worked, first and last, in nearly every family in the town, she knew the circumstances of them all, and knew too well the connection of Robert Belcher with their troubles and reverses. In Mr. Belcher's present condition of self-complacency and somnolency, she was not a welcome visitor. Belligerent as he had been toward his own image in the mirror, he shrank from meeting Keziah Butterworth, for he knew instinctively that she had come with some burden of complaint.

"Come in," said Mr. Belcher to his servant, "and shut the door behind you."

The girl came in, shut the door, and waited, leaning against it.

"Go," said her master in a low tone, "and tell Mrs. Belcher that I am busy, and that she must choke her off. I can't see her to-night. I can't see her."

The girl retired, and soon afterward Mrs. Belcher came, and reported that she could do nothing with Miss Butterworth—that Miss Butterworth was determined to see him before she left the house.

"Bring her in; I'll make short work with her."

As soon as Mrs. Belcher retired, her husband hurried to the mirror, brushed his hair back fiercely, and then sat down to a pile of papers that he always kept conveniently upon his library table.

"Come in," said Mr. Belcher, in his blandest tone, when Miss Butterworth was conducted to his room.

"Ah! Keziah?" said Mr. Belcher, looking up with a smile, as if an unexpected old friend had come to him.

"My name is Butterworth, and it's got a handle to it," said that bumptious lady, quickly.

"Well, but, Keziah, you know we used to——"

"My name is Butterworth, I tell you, and it's got a handle to it."

"Well, Miss Butterworth—happy to see you—hope you are well—take a chair."

"Humph," exclaimed Miss Butterworth, dropping down upon the edge of a large chair whose back felt no pressure from her own during the interview. The expression of Mr. Belcher's happiness in seeing her, and his kind suggestion concerning her health, had overspread Miss Butterworth's countenance with a derisive smile, and though she was evidently moved to tell him that he lied, she had reasons for restraining her tongue.

They formed a curious study, as they sat there together, during the first embarrassing moments. The man had spent his life in schemes for absorbing the products of the labor of others. He was cunning, brutal, vain, showy, and essentially vulgar, from his head to his feet, in every fibre of body and soul. The woman had earned with her own busy hands every dollar of money she had ever possessed. She would not have wronged a dog for her own personal advantage. Her black eyes, lean and spirited face, her prematurely whitening locks, as they were exposed by the backward fall of her old-fashioned, quilted hood, presented a physiognomy at once piquant and prepossessing.

Robert Belcher knew that the woman before him was fearless and incorruptible. He knew that she despised him—that bullying and brow-beating would have no influence with her, that this ready badinage would not avail, and that coaxing and soft words would be equally useless. In her presence he was shorn of all his weap-

ons, and he never felt so defenceless and ill at ease in his life.

As Miss Butterworth did not seem inclined to begin conversation, Mr. Belcher hem'd and haw'd with affected nonchalance, and said :

"Ah!—to—what am I indebted for this visit, Miss—ah—Butterworth?"

"I'm thinking!" she replied sharply, looking into the fire, and pressing her lips together.

There was nothing to be said to this, so Mr. Belcher looked doggedly at her, and waited.

"I'm thinking of a man, and-he-was-a-man-every-inch-of-him, if there ever was one, and a gentleman too, if-I-know-what-a-gentleman-is, who came to this town ten years ago, from-nobody-knows-where, with a wife that was an angel, if-there-is-any-such-thing-as-an-angel."

Here Miss Butterworth paused. She had laid her foundation, and proceeded at her leisure.

"He knew more than any man in Sevenoaks, but he didn't know how to take care of himself," she went on. "He was the most ingenious creature God ever made, I do think, and his name was Paul Benedict."

Mr. Belcher grew pale and fidgeted in his chair.

"And his name was Paul Benedict. He invented something, and then he took it to Robert Belcher, and he put it into his mill, and-paid-him-just-as-little-for-it-as-he-could. And then he invented something more, and-that-went-into-the-mill; and then something more, and the patent was used by Mr. Belcher for a song, and the man grew poorer and poorer, while-Mr.-Belcher-grew-richer-and-richer-all-the-time. And then he invented a gun, and then his little wife died, and what with the expenses of doctors and funerals and such things, and the money it took to get his patent, which-I-begged-him-for-conscience's-sake-to-keep-out-of-Robert-Belcher's-hands,

he almost starved with his little boy, and had to go to Robert Belcher for money."

"And got it," said Mr. Belcher.

"How much, now? A hundred little dollars for what was worth a hundred thousand, unless-everybody-lies. The whole went in a day, and then he went crazy."

"Well, you know I sent him to the asylum," responded Mr. Belcher.

"I know you did—yes, I know you did; and you tried to get him well enough to sign a paper, which the doctor never would let him sign, and which wouldn't have been worth a straw if he had signed it. The-idea-of-getting-a-crazy-man-to-sign-a-paper!"

"Well, but I wanted some security for the money I had advanced," said Mr. Belcher.

"No; you wanted legal possession of a property which would have made him rich; that's what it was, and you didn't get it, and you never will get it. He can't be cured, and he's been sent back, and is up at Tom Bufum's now, and I've seen him to-day."

Miss Butterworth expected that this intelligence would stun Mr. Belcher, but it did not.

The gratification of the man with the news was unmistakable. Paul Benedict had no relatives or friends that he knew of. All his dealings with him had been without witnesses. The only person living, besides Robert Belcher, who knew exactly what had passed between his victim and himself, was hopelessly insane. The difference, to him, between obtaining possession of a valuable invention of a sane or an insane man, was the difference between paying money and paying none. In what way, and with what profit, Mr. Belcher was availing himself of Paul Benedict's last invention, no one in Sevenoaks knew; but all the town knew that he was getting rich, apparently much faster than he ever was before, and

that, in a distant town, there was a manufactory of what was known as "The Belcher Rifle."

Mr. Belcher concluded that he was still "master of the situation." Benedict's testimony could not be taken in a court of justice. The town itself was in his hands, so that it would institute no suit on Benedict's behalf, now that he had come upon it for support; for the Tom Buffum, to whom Miss Butterworth had alluded, was the keeper of the poor-house, and was one of his own creatures.

Miss Butterworth had sufficient sagacity to comprehend the reasons for Mr. Belcher's change of look and manner, and saw that her evening's mission would prove fruitless; but her true woman's heart would not permit her to relinquish her project.

"Is poor Benedict comfortable?" he inquired, in his old, off-hand way.

"Comfortable—yes, in the way that pigs are."

"Pigs are very comfortable, I believe, as a general thing," said Mr. Belcher.

"Bob Belcher," said Miss Butterworth, the tears springing to her eyes in spite of herself, and forgetting all the proprieties she had determined to observe, "you are a brute. You know you are a brute. He is in a little cell, no larger than—than—a pig-pen. There isn't a bit of furniture in it. He sleeps on the straw, and in the straw, and under the straw, and his victuals are poked at him as if he were a beast. He is a poor, patient, emaciated wretch, and he sits on the floor all day, and weaves the most beautiful things out of the straw he sits on, and Tom Buffum's girls have got them in the house for ornaments. And he talks about his rifle, and explains it, and explains it, and explains it, when anybody will listen to him, and his clothes are all in rags, and that little boy of his that they have in the house, and treat no better than if he were a dog, knows he is there, and goes and looks at him, and calls to him, and cries

about him whenever he dares. And you sit here, in your great house, with your carpets and chairs, that half smother you, and your looking-glasses and your fine clothes, and don't start to your feet when I tell you this. I tell you if God doesn't damn everybody who is responsible for this wickedness, then there is no such thing as a God."

Miss Butterworth was angry, and had grown more and more angry with every word. She had brooded over the matter all the afternoon, and her pent-up indignation had overflowed beyond control. She felt that she had spoken truth which Robert Belcher ought to hear and to heed, yet she knew that she had lost her hold upon him. Mr. Belcher listened with the greatest coolness, while a half smile overspread his face.

"Don't you think I'm a pretty good-natured man to sit here," said he, "and hear myself abused in this way, without getting angry?"

"No, I think you are a bad-natured man. I think you are the hardest-hearted and worst man I ever saw. What in God's name has Paul Benedict done, that he should be treated in this way? There are a dozen there just like him, or worse. Is it a crime to lose one's reason? I wish you could spend one night in Paul Benedict's room."

"Thank you. I prefer my present quarters."

"Yes, you look around on your present quarters, as you call 'em, and think you'll always have 'em. You won't. Mark my words; you won't. Some time you'll overreach yourself, and cheat yourself out of 'em. See if you don't."

"It takes a smart man to cheat himself, Miss Butterworth," responded Mr. Belcher, rubbing his hands.

"There is just where you're mistaken. It takes a fool."

Mr. Belcher laughed outright. Then, in a patronizing

way, he said: "Miss Butterworth, I have given you considerable time, and perhaps you'll be kind enough to state your business. I'm a practical man, and I really don't see anything that particularly concerns me in all this talk. Of course I'm sorry for Benedict and the rest of 'em, but Sevenoaks isn't a very rich town, and it cannot afford to board its paupers at the hotel, or to give them many luxuries."

Miss Butterworth was calm again. She knew that she had done her cause no good, but was determined to finish her errand.

"Mr. Belcher, I'm a woman."

"I know it, Keziah."

"And my name is Butterworth."

"I know it."

"You do? Well, then, here is what I came to say to you. The town-meeting comes to-morrow, and the town's poor are to be sold at auction, and to pass into Tom Buffum's hands again, unless you prevent it. I can't make a speech, and I can't vote. I never wanted to until now. You can do both, and if you don't reform this business, and set Tom Buffum at doing something else, and treat God's poor more like human beings, I shall get out of Sevenoaks before it sinks; for sink it will if there is any hole big enough to hold it."

"Well, I'll think of it," said Mr. Belcher, deliberately.

"Tell me you'll do it."

"I'm not used to doing things in a hurry. Mr. Buffum is a friend of mine, and I've always regarded him as a very good man for the place. Of course, if there's anything wrong it ought to be righted, but I think you've exaggerated."

"No, you don't mean to do anything. I see it. Good-night," and she had swept out of the door before he could say another word, or rise from his chair.

She went down the hill into the village. The earth

was stiffening with the frost that lingered late in that latitude, and there were patches of ice, across which she picked her way. There was a great moon overhead, but just then all beautiful things, and all things that tended to lift her thoughts upward, seemed a mockery. She reached the quiet home of Rev. Solomon Snow.

"Who knows but he can be spurred up to do something?" she said to herself.

There was only one way to ascertain—so she knocked at the door, and was received so kindly by Mr. Snow and Mrs. Snow and the three Misses Snow, that she sat down and unburdened herself—first, of course, as regarded Mr. Robert Belcher, and second, as concerned the Benedicts, father and son.

The position of Mr. Belcher was one which inspired the minister with caution, but the atmosphere was freer in his house than in that of the proprietor. The vocal engine whose wheels had slipped upon the track with many a whirr, as she started her train in the great house on the hill, found a down grade, and went off easily. Mr. Snow sat in his arm-chair, his elbows resting on either support, the thumb and every finger of each hand touching its twin at the point, and forming a kind of gateway in front of his heart, which seemed to shut out or let in conviction at his will. Mrs. Snow and the girls, whose admiration of Miss Butterworth for having dared to invade Mr. Belcher's library was unbounded, dropped their work, and listened with eager attention. Mr. Snow opened the gate occasionally to let in a statement, but for the most part kept it closed. The judicial attitude, the imperturbable spectacles, the long, pale face and white cravat did not prevent Miss Butterworth from "freeing her mind;" and when she finished the task, a good deal had been made of the case of the insane paupers of Sevenoaks, and there was very little left of Mr. Robert Belcher and Mr. Thomas Buffum.

At the close of her account of what she had seen at the poor-house, and what had passed between her and the great proprietor, Mr. Snow cast his eyes up to the ceiling, pursed his lips, and somewhere in the profundities of his nature, or in some celestial laboratory, unseen by any eyes but his own, prepared his judgments.

"Cases of this kind," said he, at last, to his excited visitor, whose eyes glowed like coals as she looked into his impassive face, "are to be treated with great prudence. We are obliged to take things as they air. Personally (with a rising inflection and a benevolent smile), I should rejoice to see the insane poor clothed and in their right mind."

"Let us clothe 'em, then, anyway," interjected Miss Butterworth, impatiently. "And, as for being in their right mind, that's more than can be said of those that have the care of 'em."

"Personally—Miss Butterworth, excuse me—I should rejoice to see them clothed and in their right mind, but the age of miracles is past. We have to deal with the facts of to-day—with things as they air. It is possible, nay, for aught I know, it may be highly probable, that in other towns pauperism may fare better than it does with us. It is to be remembered that Sevenoaks is itself poor, and its poverty becomes one of the factors of the problem which you have propounded to us. The town of Buxton, our neighbor over here, pays taxes, let us say, of seven mills on the dollar; we pay seven mills on the dollar. Buxton is rich; we are poor. Buxton has few paupers; we have many. Consequently, Buxton may maintain its paupers in what may almost be regarded as a state of affluence. It may go as far as featherbeds and winter fires for the aged; nay, it may advance to some economical form of teeth-brushes, and still demand no more sacrifice from its people than is constantly demanded of us to maintain our poor in a humbler

way. Then there are certain prudential considerations—certain, I might almost say, moral considerations—which are to be taken into account. It will never do, in a town like ours, to make pauperism attractive—to make our pauper establishments comfortable asylums for idleness. It must, in some way, be made to seem a hardship to go to the poor-house."

"Well, Sevenoaks has taken care of that with a vengeance," burst out Miss Butterworth.

"Excuse me, Miss Butterworth; let me repeat, that it must be made to seem a hardship to go to the poor-house. Let us say that we have accomplished this very desirable result. So far, so good. Give our system whatever credit may belong to it, and still let us frankly acknowledge that we have suffering left that ought to be alleviated. How much? In what way? Here we come into contact with another class of facts. Paupers have less of sickness and death among them than any other class in the community. There are paupers in our establishment that have been there for twenty-five years—a fact which, if it proves anything, proves that a large proportion of the wants of our present civilization are not only artificial in their origin, but harmful in their gratifications. Our poor are compelled to go back nearer to nature—to old mother nature—and they certainly get a degree of compensation for it. It increases the expenses of the town, to be sure."

"Suppose we inquire of them," struck in Miss Butterworth again, "and find out whether they would not rather be treated better and die earlier."

"Paupers are hardly in a position to be consulted in that way," responded Mr. Snow, "and the alternative is one which, considering their moral condition, they would have no right to entertain."

Miss Butterworth had sat through this rather desultory disquisition with what patience she could command,

breaking in upon it impulsively at various points, and seen that it was drifting nowhere—at least, that it was not drifting toward the object of her wishes. Then she took up the burden of talk, and carried it on in her very direct way.

“All you say is well enough, I suppose,” she began, “but I don’t stop to reason about it, and I don’t wish to. Here is a lot of human beings that are treated like brutes—sold every year to the lowest bidder, to be kept. They go hungry, and naked, and cold. They are in the hands of a man who has no more blood in his heart than there is in a turnip, and we pretend to be Christians, and go to church, and coddle ourselves with comforts, and pay no more attention to them than we should if their souls had gone where their money went. I tell you it’s a sin and a shame, and I know it. I feel it. And there’s a gentleman among ’em, and his little boy, and they must be taken out of that place, or treated better in it. I’ve made up my mind to that, and if the men of Sevenoaks don’t straighten matters on that horrible old hill, then they’re just no men at all.”

Mr. Snow smiled a calm, self-respectful smile, that said, as plainly as words could say: “Oh! I know women: they are amiably impulsive, but impracticable.”

“Have you ever been there?” inquired Miss Butterworth, sharply.

“Yes, I’ve been there.”

“And conscience forbid!” broke in Mrs. Snow, “that he should go again, and bring home what he brought home that time. It took me the longest time to get them out of the house!”

“Mrs. Snow! my dear! You forget that we have a stranger present.”

“Well, I don’t forget those strangers, anyway!”

The three Misses Snow tittered, and looked at one

another, but were immediately solemnized by a glance from their father.

Mrs. Snow, having found her tongue—a characteristically lively and emphatic one—went on to say:

“I think Miss Butterworth is right. It’s a burning shame, and you ought to go to the meeting to-morrow, and put it down.”

“Easily said, my dear,” responded Mr. Snow, “but you forget that Mr. Belcher is Buffum’s friend, and that it is impossible to carry any measure against him in Sevenoaks. I grant that it ought not to be so. I wish it were otherwise; but we must take things as they air.”

“To take things as they air,” was a cardinal aphorism in Mr. Snow’s budget of wisdom. It was a good starting-point for any range of reasoning, and exceedingly useful to a man of limited intellect and little moral courage. The real truth of the case had dawned upon Miss Butterworth, and it had rankled in the breast of Mrs. Snow from the beginning of his pointless talk. He was afraid of offending Robert Belcher, for not only did his church need repairing, but his salary was in arrears, and the wolf that had chased so many up the long hill to what was popularly known as Tom Buffum’s Boarding House he had heard many a night, while his family was sleeping, howling with menace in the distance.

Mrs. Snow rebelled, in every part of her nature, against the power which had cowed her reverend companion. There is nothing that so goads a spirited woman to madness as the realization that any man controls her husband. He may be subservient to her—a cuckold even—but to be mated with a man whose soul is neither his own nor wholly hers, is to her the torment of torments.

“I wish Robert Belcher was hanged,” said Mrs. Snow, spitefully.

"Amen! and my name is Butterworth," responded that lady, making sure that there should be no mistake as to the responsibility for the utterance.

"Why, mother!" exclaimed the three Misses Snow, in wonder.

"And drawn and quartered!" added Mrs. Snow, emphatically.

"Amen, again!" responded Miss Butterworth.

"Mrs. Snow! my dear! You forget that you are a Christian pastor's wife, and that there is a stranger present."

"No, that is just what I don't forget," said Mrs. Snow. "I see a Christian pastor afraid of a man of the world, who cares no more about Christianity than he does about a pair of old shoes, and who patronizes it for the sake of shutting its mouth against him. It makes me angry, and makes me wish I were a man; and you ought to go to that meeting to-morrow, as a Christian pastor, and put down this shame and wickedness. You have influence, if you will use it. All the people want is a leader, and some one to tell them the truth."

"Yes, father, I'm sure you have a *great* deal of influence," said the elder Miss Snow.

"A *great deal* of influence," responded the next in years.

"Yes, indeed," echoed the youngest.

Mr. Snow established the bridge again, by bringing his fingers together—whether to keep out the flattery that thus came like a subtle balm to his heart, or to keep in the self-complacency which had been engendered, was not apparent.

He smiled, looking benevolently out upon the group, and said: "Oh, you women are so hasty, so hasty, so hasty! I had not said that I would not interfere. Indeed, I had pretty much made up my mind to do so. But I wanted you in advance to see things as they air. It

may be that something can be done, and it certainly will be a great satisfaction to me if I can be the humble instrument for the accomplishment of a reform."

"And you will go to the meeting? and you will speak?" said Miss Butterworth, eagerly.

"Yes!" and Mr. Snow looked straight into Miss Butterworth's tearful eyes, and smiled.

"The Lord add his blessing, and to his name be all the praise! Good-night!" said Miss Butterworth, rising and making for the door.

"Dear," said Mrs. Snow, springing and catching her by the arm, "don't you think you ought to put on something more? It's very chilly to-night."

"Not a rag. I'm hot. I believe I should roast if I had on a feather more."

"Wouldn't you like Mr. Snow to go home with you? He can go just as well as not," insisted Mrs. Snow.

"Certainly, just as well as not," repeated the elder Miss Snow, followed by the second with: "as well as not," and by the third with: "and be glad to do it."

"No—no—no—no"—to each. "I can get along better without him, and I don't mean to give him a chance to take back what he has said."

Miss Butterworth ran down the steps, the whole family standing in the open door, with Mr. Snow, in his glasses, behind his good-natured, cackling flock, thoroughly glad that his protective services were deemed of so small value by the brave little tailoress.

Then Miss Butterworth could see the moon and the stars. Then she could see how beautiful the night was. Then she became conscious of the everlasting roar of the cataracts, and of the wreaths of mist that they sent up into the crisp evening air. To the fear of anything in Sevenoaks, in the day or in the night, she was a stranger; so, with a light heart, talking and humming to herself, she went by the silent mill, the noisy dram-

shops, and, with her benevolent spirit full of hope and purpose, reached the house where, in a humble hired room, she had garnered all her treasures, including the bed and the linen which she had prepared years before for an event that never took place.

"The Lord add his blessing, and to his name be all the praise," she said, as she extinguished the candle, laughing in spite of herself, to think how she had blurted out the prayer and the ascription in the face of Solomon Snow.

"Well, he's a broken reed—a broken reed—but I hope Mrs. Snow will tie something to him—or starch him—or—something—to make him stand straight for once," and then she went to sleep, and dreamed of fighting with Robert Belcher all night.

CHAPTER II.

MR. BELCHER CARRIES HIS POINT AT THE TOWN-MEETING, AND THE POOR ARE KNOCKED DOWN TO THOMAS BUFFUM.

THE abrupt departure of Miss Butterworth left Mr. Belcher piqued and surprised. Although he regarded himself as still "master of the situation"—to use his own pet phrase—the visit of that spirited woman had in various ways humiliated him. To sit in his own library, with an intruding woman who not only was not afraid of him but despised him—to sit before her patiently and be called "Bob Belcher," and a brute, and not to have the privilege of kicking her out-of-doors, was the severest possible trial of his equanimity. She left him so suddenly that he had not had the opportunity to insult her, for he had fully intended to do this before she retired. He had determined, also, as a matter of

course, that in regard to the public poor of Sevenoaks he would give all his influence toward maintaining the existing state of things. The idea of being influenced by a woman, particularly by a woman over whom he had no influence, to change his policy with regard to anything, public or private, was one against which all the brute within him rebelled.

In this state of mind, angry with himself for having tolerated one who had so boldly and ruthlessly wounded his self-love, he had but one resort. He could not confess his humiliation to his wife; and there was no one in the world with whom he could hold conversation on the subject, except his old confidant who came into the mirror when wanted, and conveniently retired when the interview closed.

Rising from his chair, and approaching his mirror as if he had been whipped, he stood a full minute regarding his disgraced and speechless image. "Are you Robert Belcher, Esquire, of Sevenoaks?" he inquired, at length. "Are you the person who has been insulted by a woman? Look at me, sir! Turn not away! Have you any constitutional objections to telling me how you feel? Are you, sir, the proprietor of this house? Are you the owner of yonder mill? Are you the distinguished person who carries Sevenoaks in his pocket? How are the mighty fallen! And you, sir, who have been insulted by a tailoress, can stand here, and look me in the face, and still pretend to be a man! You are a scoundrel, sir—a low, mean-spirited scoundrel, sir. You are nicely dressed, but you are a puppy. Dare to tell me you are not, and I will grind you under my foot, as I would grind a worm. Don't give me a word—not a word! I am not in a mood to bear it!"

Having vented his indignation and disgust, with the fiercest facial expression and the most menacing gesticulations, he became calm, and proceeded: