school greeted Jim, whose irresistibly broad smile was full of welcome.

It was quickly arranged that Jim and Mike should go on that night with their load of stores; that Mr. Balfour and his boy should follow in the morning with a team to be hired for the occasion, and that Jim, reaching home first, should return and meet his guests with his boat at the landing.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH MR. BELCHER VISITS NEW YORK, AND BECOMES THE PROPRIETOR OF "PALGRAVE'S FOLLY."

THE shadow of a mystery hung over Sevenoaks for many months. Handbills advertising the fugitives were posted in all directions throughout the country, but nothing came of them but rumors. The newspapers, far and near, told the story, but it resulted in nothing save such an airing of the Sevenoaks poor-house, and the county establishment connected with the same, that Tom Buffum, who had lived for several years on the border-land of apoplexy, passed suddenly over, and went so far that he never returned to meet the official inquiry into his administration. The Augean stables were cleansed by the Hercules of public opinion; and with the satisfied conscience and restored self-complacency procured by this act, the people at last settled down upon the conviction that Benedict and his boy had shared the fate of old Tilden—that they had lost themselves in the distant forest, and met their death alike beyond help and discovery.

Mr. Belcher found himself without influence in the adjustment of the new administration. Sevenoaks turned the cold shoulder to him. Nobody went to him with the

reports that connected him with the flight and fate of the crazed inventor, yet he knew, through instincts which men of his nature often possess in a remarkable degree, that he was deeply blamed for the causes of Benedict's misfortunes. It has already been hinted that at first he was suspected of knowing guiltily more about the disappearance of the fugitives than he would be willing to tell, but there were only a few minds in which the suspicion was long permitted to linger. When the first excitement passed away and men began to think, it was impossible for them to imagine motives sufficiently powerful to induce the rich proprietor to pursue a lunatic pauper to his death.

Mr. Belcher never had encouraged the neighborly approaches which, in an emergency like this, might have given him comfort and companionship. Recognizing no equals in Sevenoaks—measuring his own social position by the depth of his purse and the reach of his power—he had been in the habit of dispensing his society as largess to the humble villagers. To recognize a man upon the street, and speak to him in a familiar way, was to him like the opening of his purse and throwing the surprise of a dollar into a beggar's hat. His courtesies were charities; his politeness was a boon; he tossed his jokes into a crowd of dirty employes as he would toss a handful of silver coin. Up to this time he had been sufficient unto himself. By money, by petty revenges, by personal assumption, he had managed to retain his throne for a long decade; and when he found his power partly ignored and partly defied, and learned that his personal courtesies were not accepted at their old value, he not only began to feel lonesome, but he grew angry. He held hot discussions with his image in the mirror night after night, in his lonely library, where a certain measure which had once seemed a distant possibility took shape more and more as a purpose. In some way he would

revenge himself upon the people of the town. Even at a personal sacrifice, he would pay them off for their slight upon him; and he knew there was no way in which he could so effectually do this as by leaving them. He had dreamed many times, as he rapidly accumulated his wealth, of arriving at a point where he could treat his splendid home as a summer resort, and take up his residence in the great city among those of his own kind. He had an uneasy desire for the splendors of city life, yet his interests had always held him to Sevenoaks, and he had contented himself there simply because he had his own way, and was accounted "the principal citizen." His village splendors were without competition. His will was law. His self-complacency, fed and flourishing in his country home, had taken the place of society; but this had ceased to be all-sufficient, even before the change occurred in the atmosphere around him.

It was six months after the reader's first introduction to him that, showily dressed as he always was, he took his place before his mirror for a conversation with the striking-looking person whom he saw reflected there.

"Robert Belcher, Esquire," said he, "are you played out? Who says played out? Did you address that question to me, sir? Am I the subject of that insulting remark? Do you dare to beard the lion in his den? Withdraw the dagger that you have aimed at my breast, or I will not hold myself responsible for the consequences. Played out, with a million dollars in your pocket? Played out, with wealth pouring in in mighty waves? Whose name is Norval still? Whose are these Grampian Hills? In yonder silent heavens the stars still shine, printing on boundless space the words of golden promise. Will you leave Sevenoaks? Will you go to yonder metropolis, and there reap, in honor and pleasure, the rewards of your enterprise? Will you leave Sevenoaks howling in pain? Will you leave these scurvy ministers to whine for their salaries and whine to empty air? Ye fresh fields and pastures new, I yield, I go, I reside! I spurn the dust of Sevenoaks from my feet. I hail the glories of the distant mart. I make my bow to you, sir. You ask my pardon? It is well! Go!"

The next morning, after a long examination of his affairs, in conference with his confidential agent, and the announcement to Mrs. Belcher that he was about to start for New York on business, Phipps took him and his trunk on a drive of twenty miles, to the northern terminus of a railroad line which, with its connections, would bear him to the city of his hopes.

It is astonishing how much room a richly dressed snob can occupy in a railway car without receiving a request to occupy less, or endangering the welfare of his arrogant eyes. Mr. Belcher occupied always two seats, and usually four. It was pitiful to see feeble women look at his abounding supply, then look at him, and then pass on. It was pitiful to see humbly dressed men do the same. It was pitiful to see gentlemen put themselves to inconvenience rather than dispute with him his right to all the space he could cover with his luggage and his feet. Mr. Belcher watched all these exhibitions with supreme satisfaction. They were a tribute to his commanding personal appearance. Even the conductors recognized the manner of man with whom they had to deal, and shunned him. He not only got the worth of his money in his ride, but the worth of the money of several other people.

Arriving at New York, he went directly to the Astor, then the leading hotel of the city. The clerk not only knew the kind of man who stood before him recording his name, but he knew him; and while he assigned to his betters, men and women, rooms at the top of the house, Mr. Belcher secured, without difficulty, a parlor

and bedroom on the second floor. The arrogant snob was not only at a premium on the railway train, but at the hotel. When he swaggered into the dining-room, the head waiter took his measure instinctively, and placed him as a figure-head at the top of the hall, where he easily won to himself the most careful and obsequious service, the choicest viands, and a large degree of quiet observation from the curious guests. In the office, waiters ran for him, hackmen took off their hats to him, his cards were delivered with great promptitude, and even the courtly principal deigned to inquire whether he found everything to his mind. In short, Mr. Belcher seemed to find that his name was as distinctly "Norval" in New York as in Sevenoaks, and that his "Grampian Hills" were movable eminences that stood around and smiled upon him wherever he went.

Retiring to his room to enjoy in quiet his morning cigar and to look over the papers, his eye was attracted, among the "personals," to an item which read as follows:

"Col. Robert Belcher, the rich and well-known manufacturer of Sevenoaks, and the maker of the celebrated Belcher rifle, has arrived in town, and occupies a suite of apartments at the Astor."

His title, he was aware, had been manufactured, in order to give the highest significance to the item, by the enterprising reporter, but it pleased him. The reporter, associating his name with fire-arms, had chosen a military title, in accordance with the custom which makes "commodores" of enterprising landsmen who build and manage lines of marine transportation and travel, and "bosses" of men who control election gangs, employed to dig the dirty channels to political success.

He read it again and again, and smoked, and walked to his glass, and coddled himself with complacent fancies. He felt that all doors opened themselves widely to the man who had money, and the skill to carry it in his

own magnificent way. In the midst of pleasant thoughts, there came a rap at the door, and he received from the waiter's little salver the card of his factor, "Mr. Benjamin Talbot." Mr. Talbot had read the "personal" which had so attracted and delighted himself, and had made haste to pay his respects to the principal from whose productions he was coining a fortune.

Mr. Talbot was the man of all others whom Mr. Belcher desired to see; so, with a glance at the card, he told the waiter promptly to show the gentleman up.

No man in the world understood Mr. Belcher better than the quick-witted and obsequious factor. He had been in the habit, during the ten years in which he had handled Mr. Belcher's goods, of devoting his whole time to the proprietor while that person was on his stated visits to the city. He took him to his club to dine; he introduced him to congenial spirits; he went to the theatre with him; he went with him to grosser resorts, which do not need to be named in these pages; he drove with him to the races; he took him to lunch at suburban hotels, frequented by fast men who drove fast horses; he ministered to every coarse taste and vulgar desire possessed by the man whose nature and graceless caprices he so carefully studied. He did all this at his own expense, and at the same time he kept his principal out of the clutches of gamblers and sharpers. It was for his interest to be of actual use to the man whose desires he aimed to gratify, and so to guard and shadow him that no deep harm would come to him. It was for his interest to keep Mr. Belcher to himself, while he gave him the gratifications that a coarse man living in the country so naturally seeks among the opportunities and excitements of the city.

There was one thing, however, that Mr. Talbot had never done. He had never taken Mr. Belcher to his home. Mrs. Talbot did not wish to see him, and Mr.

Talbot did not wish to have her see him. He knew that Mr. Belcher, after his business was completed, wanted something besides a quiet dinner with women and children. His leanings were not toward virtue, but toward safe and half-reputable vice; and exactly what he wanted consistent with his safety as a business man, Mr. Talbot wished to give him. To nurse his good-will, to make himself useful, and, as far as possible, essential to the proprietor, and to keep him sound and make him last, was Mr. Talbot's study and his most determined ambition.

Mr. Belcher was seated in a huge arm-chair, with his back to the door and his feet in another chair, when the second rap came, and Mr. Talbot, with a radiant smile, entered.

"Well, Toll, my boy," said the proprietor, keeping his seat without turning, and extending his left hand. "How are you? Glad to see you. Come round to pay your respects to the Colonel, eh? How's business, and how's your folks?"

Mr. Talbot was accustomed to this style of greeting from his principal, and, responding heartily to it and the inquiries accompanying it, he took a seat. With hat and cane in hand he sat on his little chair, showing his handsome teeth, twirling his light mustache, and looking at the proprietor with his keen gray eyes, his whole attitude and physiognomy expressing the words as plainly as if he had spoken them: "I'm your man; now, what are you up to?"

"Toll," said Mr. Belcher deliberately, "I'm going to surprise you."

"You usually do," responded the factor, laughing.

"I vow, I guess that's true! You fellows, without any blood, are apt to get waked up when the old boys come in from the country. Toll, lock the door."

Mr. Talbot locked the door and resumed his seat.

"Sevenoaks be hanged!" said Mr. Belcher.

"Certainly."

"It's a one-horse town."

"Certainly. Still, I have been under the impression that you owned the horse."

"Yes, I know, but the horse is played out."

"Hasn't he been a pretty good horse, and earned you all he cost you?"

"Well, I'm tired with living where there is so much infernal babble and meddling with other people's business. If I sneeze, the people think there's been an earthquake; and when I whistle, they call it a hurricane."

"But you're the king of the roost," said Talbot.

"Yes; but a man gets tired being king of the roost, and longs for some rooster to fight."

Mr. Talbot saw the point toward which Mr. Belcher was drifting, and prepared himself for it. He had measured his chances for losing his business, and when, at last, his principal came out with the frank statement that he had made up his mind to come to New York to live, he was all ready with his overjoyed "No!" and with his smooth little hand to bestow upon Mr. Belcher's heavy fist the expression of his gladness and his congratulations.

"Good thing, isn't it, Toll?"

"Excellent."

"And you'll stand by me, Toll?"

"Of course I will; but we can't do just the old things, you know. We must be highly respectable citizens, and keep ourselves straight."

"Don't you undertake to teach your grandmother how to suck eggs," responded the proprietor with a huge laugh, in which the factor joined. Then he added, thoughtfully: "I haven't said a word to the woman about it, and she may make a fuss; but she knows me

pretty well, and there'll be the biggest kind of a row in the town ; but the fact is, Toll, I'm at the end of my rope there. I'm making money hand over hand, and I've nothing to show for it. I've spent about everything I can up there, and nobody sees it. I might just as well be buried ; and if a fellow can't show what he gets, what's the use of having it ? I haven't but one life to live, and I'm going to spread, and I'm going to do it right here in New York ; and if I don't make some of your nabobs open their eyes, my name isn't Robert Belcher."

Mr. Belcher had exposed motives in this little speech that he had not even alluded to in his addresses to his image in the mirror. Talbot saw that something had gone wrong in the town, that he was playing off a bit of revenge, and, above all, that the vulgar desire for display was more prominent among Mr. Belcher's motives for removal than that person suspected.

" I have a few affairs to attend to," said Mr. Talbot, rising, " but after twelve o'clock I will be at your service while you remain in the city. We shall have no difficulty in finding a house to suit you, I am sure, and you can get everything done in the matter of furniture at the shortest notice. I will hunt houses with you for a week, if you wish."

" Well, by-by, Toll," said Mr. Belcher, giving him his left hand again. " I'll be 'round at twelve."

Mr. Talbot went out, but instead of going to his office, went straight home, and surprised Mrs. Talbot by his sudden reappearance.

" What on earth ! "—said she, looking up from a bit of embroidery on which she was dawdling away her morning.

" Kate, who do you suppose is coming to New York to live ? "

" The Great Mogul."

" Yes, the Great Mogul—otherwise, Colonel Robert Belcher."

" Heaven help us ! " exclaimed the lady.

" Well, and what's to be done ? "

" Oh, my ! my ! my ! my ! " exclaimed Mrs. Talbot, her possessive pronoun stumbling and fainting away without reaching its object. " *Must* we have that bear in the house ? Does it pay ?"

" Yes, Kate, it pays," said Mr. Talbot.

" Well, I suppose that settles it."

The factor and his wife were very quick to comprehend the truth that a principal out of town, and away from his wife and family, was a very different person to deal with from one in the town and in the occupation of a grand establishment, with his dependants. They saw that they must make themselves essential to him in the establishment of his social position, and that they must introduce him and his wife to their friends. Moreover, they had heard good reports of Mrs. Belcher, and had the impression that she would be either an inoffensive or a valuable acquisition to their circle of friends.

There was nothing to do, therefore, but to make a dinner-party in Mr. Belcher's honor. The guests were carefully selected, and Mrs. Talbot laid aside her embroidery and wrote her invitations, while Mr. Talbot made his next errand at the office of the leading real estate broker, with whom he concluded a private arrangement to share in the commission of any sale that might be made to the customer whom he proposed to bring to him in the course of the day. Half an hour before twelve, he was in his own office, and in the thirty minutes that lay between his arrival and the visit of the proprietor, he had arranged his affairs for any absence that would be necessary.

When Mr. Belcher came in, looking from side to side, with the air of a man who owned all he saw, even the

clerks who respectfully bowed to him as he passed, he found Mr. Talbot waiting ; also, a bunch of the costliest cigars.

" I remembered your weakness, you see," said Talbot.

" Toll, you're a jewel," said Mr. Belcher, drawing out one of the fragrant rolls and lighting it.

" Now, before we go a step," said Talbot, " you must agree to come to my house to-morrow night to dinner, and meet some of my friends. When you come to New York, you'll want to know somebody."

" Toll, I tell you you're a jewel."

" And you'll come ? "

" Well, you know I'm not rigged exactly for that sort of thing, and, faith, I'm not up to it, but I suppose all a man has to do is to put on a stiff upper lip, and take it as it comes."

" I'll risk you anywhere."

" All right ! I'll be there."

" Six o'clock, sharp ; and now let's go and find a broker. I know the best one in the city, and I'll show you the inside of more fine houses before night than you have ever seen."

Talbot took the proprietor's arm and led him to a carriage in waiting. Then he took him to Pine street, and introduced him, in the most deferential manner, to the broker who held half of New York at his disposal, and knew the city as he knew his alphabet.

The broker took the pair of house-hunters to a private room, and unfolded a map of the city before them. On this he traced, with a well-kept finger-nail, a series of lines,—like those fanciful isothermal definitions that embrace the regions of perennial summer on the range of the Northern Pacific Railroad,—within which social respectability made its home. Within certain avenues and certain streets, he explained that it was a respectable thing to live. Outside of these arbitrary boundaries, nobody who made any pretence to respectability should buy a house. The remainder of the city was for the vulgar—craftsmen, petty shopkeepers, salaried men, and the shabby-genteel. He insisted that a wealthy man, making an entrance upon New York life, should be careful to locate himself somewhere upon the charmed territory which he defined. He felt in duty bound to say this to Mr. Belcher, as he was a stranger ; and Mr. Belcher was, of course, grateful for the information.

Then he armed Mr. Talbot, as Mr. Belcher's city friend and helper, with a bundle of permits, with which they set off upon their quest.

They visited a dozen houses in the course of the afternoon, carefully chosen in their succession by Mr. Talbot, who was as sure of Mr. Belcher's tastes as he was of his own. One street was too quiet, one was too dark ; one house was too small, and one was too tame ; one house had no stable, another had too small a stable. At last, they came out upon Fifth Avenue, and drove up to a double front, with a stable almost as ample and as richly appointed as the house itself. It had been built, and occupied for a year or two, by an exploded millionnaire, and was an elephant upon the hands of his creditors. Robert Belcher was happy at once. The marvellous mirrors, the plate glass, the gilded cornices, the grand staircase, the glittering chandeliers, the evidences of lavish expenditure in every fixture and in all the finish, excited him like wine.

" Now you talk ! " said he to the smiling factor ; and as he went to the window, and saw the life of the street, rolling by in costly carriages, or sweeping the sidewalks with shining silks and mellow velvets, he felt that he was at home. Here he could see and be seen. Here his splendors could be advertised. Here he could find an expression for his wealth, by the side of which his

establishment at Sevenoaks seemed too mean to be thought of without humiliation and disgust. Here was a house that gratified his sensuous nature through and through, and appealed irresistibly to his egregious vanity. He did not know that the grand and gaudy establishment bore the name of "Palgrave's Folly," and, probably, it would have made no difference with him if he had. It suited him, and would, in his hands, become Belcher's Glory.

The sum demanded for the place, though very large, did not cover its original cost, and in this fact Mr. Belcher took great comfort. To enjoy fifty thousand dollars, which somebody else had made, was a charming consideration with him, and one that did much to reconcile him to an expenditure far beyond his original purpose.

When he had finished his examination of the house, he returned to his hotel, as business hours were past, and he could make no further headway that day in his negotiations. The more he thought of the house, the more uneasy he became. Somebody might have seen him looking at it, and so reached the broker first, and snatched it from his grasp. He did not know that it had been in the market for two years, waiting for just such a man as himself.

Talbot was fully aware of the state of Mr. Belcher's mind, and knew that if he did not reach him early the next morning, the proprietor would arrive at the broker's before him. Accordingly, when Mr. Belcher finished his breakfast that morning, he found his factor waiting for him, with the information that the broker would not be in his office for an hour and a half, and that there was time to look further, if further search were desirable. He hoped that Mr. Belcher would not be in a hurry, or take any step that he would ultimately regret. Mr. Belcher assured him that he knew what he wanted when

he saw it, and had no fears about the matter, except that somebody might anticipate him.

"You have determined, then, to buy the house at the price?" said Talbot.

"Yes; I shall just shut my eyes and swallow the whole thing."

"Would you like to get it cheaper?"

"Of course!"

"Then, perhaps, you had better leave the talking to me," said Talbot. "These fellows all have a price that they ask, and a smaller one that they will take."

"That's one of the tricks, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then go ahead."

They had a long talk about business, and then Talbot went out, and, after an extended interview with the broker, sent a messenger for Mr. Belcher. When that gentleman came in, he found that Talbot had bought the house for ten thousand dollars less than the price originally demanded. Mr. Belcher deposited a handsome sum as a guaranty of his good faith, and ordered the papers to be made out at once.

After their return to the hotel, Mr. Talbot sat down to a table, and went through a long calculation.

"It will cost you, Mr. Belcher," said the factor deliberately, "at least twenty-five thousand dollars to furnish that house satisfactorily."

Mr. Belcher gave a long whistle.

"At least twenty-five thousand dollars, and I doubt whether you get off for less than thirty thousand."

"Well, I'm in for it, and I'm going through," said Mr. Belcher.

"Very well," responded Talbot, "now let's go to the best furnisher we can find. I happen to know the man who is at the top of the style, and I suppose the best thing—as you and I don't know much about the matter—

is to let him have his own way, and hold him responsible for the results."

"All right," said Belcher; "show me the man."

They found the arbiter of style in his counting-room. Mr. Talbot approached him first, and held a long private conversation with him. Mr. Belcher, in his self-complacency, waited, fancying that Talbot was representing his own importance and the desirableness of so rare a customer, and endeavoring to secure reasonable prices on a large bill. In reality, he was arranging to get a commission out of the job for himself.

If it be objected to Mr. Talbot's mode of giving assistance to his country friends, that it savored of mercenariness amounting to villany, it is to be said, on his behalf, that he was simply practising the morals that Mr. Belcher had taught him. Mr. Belcher had not failed to debauch or debase the moral standard of every man over whom he had any direct influence. If Talbot had practised his little game upon any other man, Mr. Belcher would have patted his shoulder and told him he was a "jewel." So much of Mr. Belcher's wealth had been won by sharp and more than doubtful practices, that that wealth itself stood before the world as a premium on rascality, and thus became, far and wide, a demoralizing influence upon the feverishly ambitious and the young. Besides, Mr. Talbot quieted what little conscience he had in the matter by the consideration that his commissions were drawn, not from Mr. Belcher, but from the profits which others would make out of him, and the further consideration that it was no more than right for him to get the money back that he had spent, and was spending, for his principal's benefit.

Mr. Belcher was introduced, and the arbiter of style conversed learnedly of Tuscan, Pompeiian, Elizabethan, Louis Quatorze, buhl, *marqueterie*, etc., etc., till the head of the proprietor, to whom all these words were

strangers, and all his talk Greek, was thrown into a hopeless muddle.

Mr. Belcher listened to him as long as he could do so with patience, and then brought him to a conclusion by a slap upon his knee.

"Come, now!" said he, "you understand your business, and I understand mine. If you were to take up guns and gutta-percha, I could probably talk your head off, but I don't know anything about these things. What I want is something right. Do the whole thing up brown. Do you understand that?"

The arbiter of style smiled pityingly, and admitted that he comprehended his customer.

It was at last arranged that the latter should make a study of the house, and furnish it according to his best ability, within a specified sum of expenditure and a specified period of time; and then the proprietor took his leave.

Mr. Belcher had accomplished a large amount of business within two days, but he had worked according to his habit. The dinner party remained, and this was the most difficult business that he had ever undertaken, yet he had a strong desire to see how it was done. He learned quickly what he undertook, and he had already "discounted," to use his own word, a certain amount of mortification connected with the affair.